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# Is Living in a Stepfamily Related to Positive Outcomes for African American Adolescents?

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## Introduction

A general finding in most research examining the well-being of children and adolescents in stepfamily households is that these youth do not function as well as children who have lived with two biological parents for their entire lives (Chase-Lansdale and Hetherington, 1990; Furstenberg 1987; Amato and Keith, 1991). The evidence is less clear when comparing their outcomes to those of children in divorced households, with some studies reporting significant differences in psychological well-being for children reared in stepfamilies compared to youth in divorced households (Hetherington and Clingempeel, 1992; Chase-Lansdale, Cherlin and Kiernan, 1995; Amato 1994), and more recent work finding that living in a remarried household compared to a divorced household is a consistent predictor of good adjustment (Buchanan, Maccoby and Dornbusch, 1996; Newcomer and Udry, 1987). Most agree that multiple family transitions increase the likelihood of problem behavior (Cherlin and Fustenberg, 1994; Wu and Martinson 1993; Hetherington, Cox and Cox, 1982).

To date, the literature on the effects of family structure on children's outcomes has been framed with assumptions about the definition and nature of stepfamilies and single-parent families that may not be warranted for African-American and socioeconomically disadvantaged families, groups that have been systematically underrepresented in this area of research. Indeed, the limited number of studies that have incorporated these groups into their research designs have been inconsistent in their results, with some studies finding no negative effect of living in a stepfamily for African-American children, and some work pointing to more positive outcomes for black youth in stepfamilies. These race differences have not been adequately highlighted or explained, and as a result we know little about the well-being of children in African-American stepfamily households.

Below I discuss some of the shortcomings in this line of research, focusing on papers that address differences in the risk of early sexual activity and non-marital birth for black and white youth living with a stepparent. These findings have been overlooked by researchers who have used studies with Caucasian or middle-class samples as a basis for theories about the negative influence of stepfamilies, inadvertently generalizing the outcomes of white children to represent the outcomes of all youth. I con-

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clude with directions for future research.

### **The Framing of the Literature on Outcomes for Adolescents in Stepfamilies**

One of the biggest assumptions made in the framing of research on children in stepfamilies is that the children in these families have lived for a time in a married household that subsequently experienced a disruption and remarriage to a non-biological parent. The literature has been framed in this way because until the early 1970s, the stepfamily was largely the result of a marriage following the death of a spouse (Coleman and Ganong, 1992). In the last 30 years we have focused on stepfamilies as a product of divorce and remarriage, so stepparent households now tend to be defined as those families that have experienced a marital disruption and remarriage to a non-biological parent (Coleman and Ganong, 1992; Amato, 1994). The behavioral outcomes of children in these household structures are most often compared to those of children in divorced households and in continuously married households containing two biological parents.

Hetherington's studies of divorce and remarriage have become classics in this area of research (Hetherington, 1972; 1981; 1987; Hetherington and Arasteh, 1988). Her arguments about the deleterious effects of stepfamilies are based on a crisis model of divorce, which assumes a period of disorganization following divorce, followed by recovery, reorganization, and the eventual restoration of equilibrium. This equilibrium is then disrupted again with a remarriage, from which girls have a more difficult time recovering in terms of family relations and adjustment (Hetherington, 1987; Chase-Lansdale and Hetherington, 1990). It is believed that children in stepfamilies do worse than children living continuously with two biological parents because the multiple transitions and upheaval in the household negatively affect their psychological and social development. This disequilibrium may also lead to differences in the quality of parenting, as well as an increasing uncertainty in the dependability felt by the child from the parent (Hetherington and Clingempeel, 1992; Hetherington, Cox and Cox, 1982). The instability in the household may also contribute to a hastening by the youth to assume adult roles, including that of adolescent mother (Chase-Lansdale and Hetherington, 1990; Coleman and Ganong, 1992). Hetherington's research is based on longitudinal data from white middle-class families. Others have tested these theories with larger samples and samples that are more representative of the national population, finding that as a whole, children and adolescents in stepfamilies perform similarly to youth in divorced households, and both groups perform worse than children in traditional nuclear parent families (Zill, 1988), though the magnitude of these differences continues to be fiercely debated (Kurdek, 1994; Amato 1994).<sup>1</sup>

We should use caution when generalizing these conclusions as adequate representations of stepfamily functioning in nonwhite or non middle-class populations because

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the arguments used to frame this literature assume a period with a father present in the household, followed by a marital disruption and the father's subsequent irregularity or absence in the child's life. This assumption may not be warranted in families where a marriage to a stepparent is a first marriage rather than a remarriage. This type of marital transition is an experience both theoretically and empirically distinct from the transition to a divorced single-parent family or remarried stepfamily, though families formed in this way can be difficult to detect in standard research designs (Moore, 1998; Burton and Jayakody, 1997). In stepfamilies where the first marriage occurs after a non-marital birth to someone who is not the child's biological father, this new parent may not be replacing a biological parent in the household because the previous household structure may never have included two biological parents. Likewise, the instability associated with a marital divorce might not have occurred prior to the marriage, particularly if the biological father was never a member of that household. In the absence of this type of family instability prior to the creation of the stepfamily, many of the assumptions regarding the problematic nature of a stepparent household may not be warranted.

The transition from never married to stepfamily household is proportionately more likely to occur in socioeconomically disadvantaged and African-American populations, as children in these households have a lower likelihood of being born into a household with two married parents (Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan, 1996; Taylor, et al., 1997; Bumpass and McLanahan, 1989; Wojtkiewicz, 1992). For example, Mott (1990) reports that for the children in the National Longitudinal Study of Youth (NLSY) born between 1979 and 1983, only 32% of black children compared to 87% of non-black children were living with two biological parents at the time of birth. Never married households, which are more likely to be poor, may actually benefit from the increased social and economic stability a stepfather (and his income) can bring to the home. Though the presence of a new parental figure might contribute to a temporary imbalance in the home, as individuals adjust to new roles and relationships the additional adult may actually have a positive effect on child and family well-being.

### **What is Known about Racial Differences in the Relationship Between Living in a Stepfamily and Adolescent Outcomes?**

Studies that have incorporated non-white racial and ethnic groups into their research designs have not paid enough attention to the differences in behavioral outcomes for black and white adolescents living in stepparent families, particularly as these outcomes relate to teenage sexual behavior. Several studies report either null effects or negative effects for black women living in a stepfamily during adolescence on the risk of non-marital sexual activity or parenthood, but these findings tend not to be highlighted or adequately explained, particularly when the findings for black women go in the opposite direction of findings for white women.

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Some research examining comparisons by race have found no difference between black and white youth in stepfamilies and the risk of early sexual activity. For example, Michael and Tuma (1985) examine respondents living with two biological parents, a stepparent, a single-parent or no parent at age 14 and report a positive effect of living in a stepfamily household during adolescence and early childbearing for black, white and Hispanic female youth in the 1979 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY). Living in a stepfamily household at age 14 also predicted early parenthood for white and Hispanic males, but was not related to early parenthood for black males. The authors do not compare the effect of living in a stepfamily with living in a single-parent household on rates of early parenthood.

The majority of work in this area has found differential effects of living in a stepfamily on subsequent adolescent and premarital sexual behavior for black and white women. McLanahan and Bumpass (1988), analyzing the 1982 National Survey of Family Growth, find that living in a stepfamily at age 14 is positively related to having a teen or premarital birth for white women, and is negatively correlated with early parenthood for black women, although neither relationship is statistically significant.

Wu and Martinson (1993) analyze data from the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) to test several hypotheses regarding the effects of dynamic measures of family structure between birth and age 19 on the risk of a premarital birth. Using continuous time-hazard models, they report zero-order estimates for the risk of a premarital birth between ages 13-19 and find that living in a stepfamily is associated with a 51% higher relative risk of non-marital birth for white women and an 8% lower relative risk for black women. Only the coefficient for white women is significant (1993: 220, Table 5). More stringent tests of household structure that control for other family variables report effects of living in a stepfamily that are weak and not significant for white and black women, although the coefficient signs indicate a positive effect for white women and a negative effect for black women.

In a study examining the relationship between family structure and early sexual debut and pregnancy among African American adolescent girls living in high-poverty neighborhoods, Moore and Chase-Lansdale (1999) report that the probability of sexual debut is significantly lower for girls living in a stepfamily compared to girls in any other household structure. The odds of a pregnancy are also significantly lower for adolescents living in a stepparent household.

McLanahan and Sandefur's 1994 work has produced the strongest findings thus far regarding differential effects of living in a stepfamily household on subsequent problem behavior among black and white female adolescents. The authors analyze data from several nationally representative longitudinal and cross-sectional datasets, including the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), NSFH, NLSY, and the High

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School and Beyond Study. They conclude that living in a stepfamily during adolescence is advantageous for black and white youth. For white adolescents, any type of marital disruption, including remarriage, increases the likelihood of several negative outcomes, including teen parenthood for young women. However, the risk of a teenage birth is the same for young black women in stepfamilies and young black women living with two married biological parents (1994: 76-78). Subsequent analyses using the PSID reveal race differences in median family income and poverty rates for black and white two biological parent families, stepfamilies and single-parent families. While white single-parent and stepparent families earned less than white two biological parent families, black stepfamilies earned almost \$30,000 more than black single-parent families and over \$10,000 more than black two biological parent families (in 1992 dollars, p. 81). Black stepfamilies also had a poverty rate that was 41% lower than that of single-parent families and 11% lower than that of black two biological parent families.

### **Why Might Living in a Stepfamily Have Positive Effects for African Americans?**

In both the Wu and Martinson (1993) paper and the McLanahan and Sandefur (1994) study, the ratio of single-parent households to stepfamily households was about 2 to 1. In the Chase-Lansdale study of disadvantaged black families, that ratio was much higher (Moore and Chase-Lansdale, 1999). Given the lower rates of marriage and remarriage among black women (Smock, 1990; Taylor, et al., 1997), and their lower rates of rediorce (Coleman and Ganong, 1992), the lower incidence of sexual outcomes among daughters in stepfamilies could suggest that black women who remarry are qualitatively different or more advantaged than women in other single-parent households, and this is what accounts for their children's higher rates of success. The positive influence of living in a stepfamily for African American children could also suggest that black women who marry or remarry only do so if they perceive a high rate of return for marriage. They may only choose to marry if they believe that the benefits of incorporating this new adult into the household and of introducing a new parental figure to the child, greatly outweigh any potential costs. They may only select someone for a marriage partner if he possesses some skill or asset that will contribute significantly to the household.

The lower likelihood of sexual activity for girls in stepfamilies could also mean that black stepfathers are bringing important social resources to the family by acting with the mother as models of marital child bearing. As McLanahan and Sandefur (1994) suggest, the stepfather's presence might also serve as an additional source of supervision and monitoring, which could be more important for black youth, since African Americans of any class status are more likely to live in communities with fewer resources and less social control when compared to whites (1994: 77).

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In Chase-Lansdale's study of 300 African American families living in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods, it was shown that women who remarried or who created stepfamily households through a first marriage had higher levels of education and higher family incomes compared to mothers in traditional nuclear families, cohabiting households or single-parent households (Moore and Chase-Lansdale, 1999). In this same study, adolescents living in stepfamilies had significantly lower rates of sexual debut and reported grades that were statistically higher than the grades of daughters in all other household structures. This would support the theory that women who marry or remarry are more advantaged than women who do not marry. It could also mean that men who choose to marry into pre-existing single-parent families only do so if they perceive higher levels of competence already established in those families.

### **Thoughts for Future Research**

More work needs to be done to create a better understanding of the relationship between family structure and child well-being, particularly for disadvantaged groups. Some of the research examined in this paper suggests differential effects of living in a stepfamily household on the risk of early sexual behavior for black and white female adolescents, but more research is needed to strengthen this hypothesis. To the extent that there are positive effects for black youth, we need to know whether these effects are relative to the effects of living with two biological parents, a divorced biological parent, or living in a household that has experienced multiple marital or relationship transitions. In addition, more research on black stepfamilies, with their higher family incomes and lower rates of divorce, could provide information that might help us better understand how stepfamilies function for different groups. Qualitative and ethnographic research that incorporates repeated observations and in-depth, detailed descriptions of familial interactions, relationships, and functioning in black stepfamilies would provide much needed insight into the relative success of children in this family type, as Burton and Jayakody (1997) have noted.

Future studies comparing racial differences in child well-being by family structure should make an effort to obtain samples that are as similar in social class background as possible prior to the introduction of statistical controls in a given model of effects. National datasets oversample socioeconomically disadvantaged families in order to permit statistically reliable racial and socioeconomic comparisons, and this automatically results in comparisons across social class that are hard to remedy, even with statistical controls. Comparisons of adolescent outcomes within a similar social class can help us tease out true "race effects" from differences due to socioeconomic background. For example, when Kalil examined academic competence, delinquency and depression among a sample of middle class black and white youth in Maryland, she found no significant differences by race in minor or major delinquent acts (Kalil,

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1999). In understanding the relationship between living in a stepfamily and adolescent outcomes, we can benefit from models that test for these effects for male adolescents. Most studies report few differences in adjustment between boys and girls in stepfamily households (Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1994). However, McLanahan and Sandefur (1994) found that young black men living in stepfamilies had dropout rates that were comparable to black adolescents living with two biological parents. Their findings did not discuss how their rates of school completion differed for black and white males in stepfamilies. Michael and Tuma (1985) found positive and significant effects of living in a stepfamily on the risk of early parenthood for white males, and positive but nonsignificant effects for black male youth. None of their household structure variables were significantly associated with early parenthood for young black men.

Finally, future research should make more of an effort to incorporate alternative family structures into their research designs, including first marriages that become stepfamilies for the children involved, never married single-parent households, and extended kin households. Establishing cohabiting households as a group that is distinct from married or single-parent families will also improve on what we know about the way household structure influences children's behavior and well-being. In order to effectively improve what we know about the role of family structure on children's outcomes, there needs to be a clearer identification of the theoretical assumptions guiding our research. These assumptions should go hand in hand with well-defined sampling criteria, detailed measurement of the complexity of family structures, and a willingness to venture outside of the prevailing wisdom on how we define and understand families.

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