

Parenting Practices in Diverse Family Structures: Examination of Adolescents' Development and  
Adjustment

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## Abstract

This paper explored the implications of diverse family structures on adolescents' adjustment, with an emphasis on whether, and if so, how diverse family structures influence and predict developmental outcomes. Family relationships within the family unit is a stronger predictor of adolescents' development than the particular family structure. Transitions in families that result in notable reductions in effective parenting practices and economic well-being will negatively affect youth, regardless of family structure. Family processes that promote optimal growth and development among youth in traditional two-parent, heterosexual households work similarly for those growing up in non-traditional family structures. A conceptual model to advance this field of research is offered and implications for research and policy are discussed.

## Parenting Practices in Diverse Family Structures: Examination of Adolescents' Development and Adjustment

The 21st century can be characterized as an explosion of diversity in our society. Increased population diversity has facilitated an emergence of a hybrid America that includes peoples of many nationalities, ethnicities, and cultures (Murry, Hill, Witherspoon, Berkel, & Bartoz, 2015). Several patterns have been associated with the drastic population shift, including increased immigration and noticeable shifts in family formations. For example, in 2010, the number of immigrants in the United States reached a record 40 million; consequently, one out of every three Americans is a person of color (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Another obvious shift in our society over the past decade is the expansion of family structures. Family structure is a complex construct that involves not only with whom a child resides, but also the marital status of their parents, biological relatedness of adults in the home to each other and to the child, parents' gender identity, as well as transition and mobility patterns of caregivers in and out of the home. Children's living arrangements are diverse, varying in the presence or absence of mothers and fathers in the household and reflecting residence patterns that in addition to biological parents and siblings, can also include stepparents, stepsiblings, grandparents, and other extended kin. From ecological and ecodevelopmental perspectives, family structure may best be understood within the current historical context and societal norms. As detailed by Pearce, Hayward, Chassin, & Curran (2017 in this issue), current demographic trends suggest that families are becoming increasingly diverse. For example, marriage rates are declining and cohabitation rates and rates of non-marital childbirth are increasing, which has led to an increasing number of children growing up in single parent homes. In addition, family structure diversity has been

associated with increases in the number of same-sex couple households, with a current estimate of 690,000 families (Gates, 2011). Increases in same-sex, married-like, and cohabiting parents as well as foster, adoptive, multigenerational, and living apart/together families also create diverse family structures and compositions (Cherlin, 2010; see Pearce et al., 2017 in this issue for a review). Many same-sex couples form families and become parents through donor insemination, in vitro fertilization, surrogacy, foster care, or adoption (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010; Riskind & Patterson, 2010). Adding to diverse family formations is the number of grandparents raising children, with current estimates of 2.7 million grandparents raising children in the U.S. (Ellis & Simmons, 2014). Taken together, these changes in family composition illustrate an array of family households where children live, grow, and develop (Stacey, 1996; Vespa, Lewis, & Kreider, 2013). Each of these circumstances has potential consequences for how families manage, organize, and socialize their children.

Yet social norms and inherent values about what constitutes family is often relegated to two-parent biological, heterosexual married adults raising children, characterized as the “ideal family”, at the exclusion of other family formations. In fact, most conceptual models used to guide empirical studies of family structure have focused on the consequences of household composition, used interchangeably with marital status of the parent, for families’ economic viability and resources to optimize family members’ well-being. Often examined are ways in which transitions in families cause structures and relationships to change, such as divorce, remarriage, and cohabitation, targeting differential effects on a variety of family and youth outcomes. Consequently, there are a plethora of studies documenting differences in the well-being of children growing up in two-parent, married households to those raised with divorced, cohabiting, or single parents (see Waldfogel, Craigie, & Brooks-Gunn, 2010 for a recent review).

A common conclusion from comparative studies of diverse family structures is that children in two-parent, married households fare better than those in other family structures on behavioral, educational, and social emotional developmental outcomes, with greater deleterious consequences for children residing in cohabiting, divorced, and stepfamilies (Haskins, 2015; Moore, Jekielek, & Emig, 2002). For example, studies exploring associations between family structure and child adjustment have found that children who live with no biological parent or in single parent households are more likely to be exposed to harsh, inconsistent parenting. These youths exhibited more behavioral control problems, had higher teen pregnancy rates, and had more academic problems than children residing with two biological parents. Further, outcomes for children in stepfamilies are often similar to children growing up in single parent families and those whose parents are divorced. Children growing up in each of these households fare worse than those in two parent families (biological or adoptive parents) on dimensions of academic performance, social achievement, and psychological adjustment (Moore, et al., 2002). Is it structure in and of itself that matters for youth development or is the effect of family structure on youth outcomes more complex than parents' marital status and number of adults in the household?

To address this question, we conducted a comprehensive systematic review of extant studies to determine if, how, and under what conditions family structures matter for youth adjustment. Specific consideration was given to identifying crucial contextual processes that may affect and influence family processes, parenting, family relationship quality, and resources, all of which collectively impact a child's home environment. These factors and processes intersect with family social economic status, parental characteristics (e.g., race/ethnicity, parenting practices), family conflict, and other adults in children's lives, such as grandparents (Biblarz & Raftery,

1999; Carlson & Corcoran, 2001). Our systematic review was informed and guided by perspectives that are proposed to reflect relevance and sensitivity to critical contextual processes that impact adolescents and their families, including Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (1986), economic theory (Coleman, 1988; Schultz, 1974), and family systems' theory (Coleman, Ganong, & Russell, 2013; Weaver & Coleman, 2010; Greef & Du Toit, 2009; Burton, 2007). Relying on these theories, we sought to gain insights on if, how, and under what conditions family types matter for adolescent development and adjustment.

### Scope and Overview

The current review provides an overview of the empirical findings wherein scholars have sought to understand and explain ways in which family households, marital status, family formation, and family structures influence and affect youth development. Given our interest in the studies of diverse family structures, we conducted an initial set of searches in PsycINFO, a database with an extensive collection of nearly 4 million records of psychology, sociology, human development, economics, and behavioral, and social science literatures. Our search included combinations of the following key words: adolescents and family structure, family formation, single-parent families, stepfamilies, gay and lesbian families, two-parent families, grandparents, and divorced families. From this comprehensive literature search, we selected relevant studies to address the following questions: (1) Do families whose structure are characterized as "non-traditional" experience additional stressors, due to social structural and political stigmatization, that warrant unique parenting practices and approaches to prepare their children to negotiate experiences of diversity? and (2) Under what conditions does family structure matter for parenting practices and child outcomes?

Before delving into summarizing relevant studies that address our guiding questions, we briefly discuss the nature of socio-historical factors and processes that have influenced the field of family studies and our understanding of the effects of family structure on youth development. Drawing on relevant theoretical frameworks to guide our review, we then discuss micro-level processes within diverse family structures, such as family interactions and specific parenting behaviors, culminating with the proposal of a conceptual model that illuminates ways in which society, historical time and culture are fused together to form systems that affect definitions, social norms and values regarding family structures, how families function, and in turn their linkages to youth outcomes.

#### Socio-historical and Sociocultural Influences on Family Formation and Family Structures

Historically, normality with regards to what constitutes “family” is a term coined from an “ideal” model for North America - middle-class, first marriage, nuclear family, consisting of a mother and father and their genetic or adopted children residing together in a household (Coontz, 1997; Scanzoni, 2004). The continuing decline in the number of two-parent families and marked increase in the other family formations has resulted in a “refashioning of what was traditionally considered “normal” family composition” (Mundy & Wofsy, 2017, pp. 337). While married, two-parent heterosexual families are now the minority, families that are diverse, as described earlier, continue to be characterized as “alternative”, non-traditional, and not ideal. What is more, heterosexual, married, nuclear, two-parent households continue to be held as the referent family structure by which all other family forms are compared. Consequently, how well or less well other families are functioning, parenting, and the extent to which family members are faring is often based on the extent to which what goes on inside “non-traditional families” is similar to the patterns and processes that occur in traditional family structures. The main prediction of

sociological perspectives is that the two-biological-parent family is generally the optimal form for the successful socialization of children in modern society and that children from any kind of alternative family will, on average, do less well (Amato, 2005).

We contend that family structure in and of itself is not the driving force for understanding or explaining how family formation affects families and adolescents. That is, according to the ecological model, proximal and distal processes affect and influence how families organize, interact, and function. Acknowledged in this theory is the importance of considering human development [and responses] as products of dynamic relational interactions that are inextricably linked with and infused into multiple interlocking contextual systems. This theory further emphasizes that, although humans are influenced by their environments, they are also active agents in their environment with capacities to influence, as well as be influenced by, their environment (e.g., Tudge, Mokrova, Hatfield, & Karnik, 2009). Thus, although family structure is one aspect that may affect youth development, its effects likely vary based on other contextual factors.

Our review found a paucity of studies undertaken to disentangle the role of contextual processes and family structure on adolescents' outcomes. Although very few studies were found that addressed contextual factors, several key findings emerged. First, given the continued perpetuation of an ideal image of normality with regards to family structure, youth whose family structures are characterized as alternative, non-traditional, not ideal or typical may experience feelings of marginalization as a consequence of being perceived as "different." Thus, such youth may experience social stigma because their family does not resemble the referent family - two-parent, heterosexual households - and their "different" family structure is conjectured to be associated with numerous negative outcomes.



Feelings of “otherness” also may elevate parents’ awareness of the need to socialize their children on ways to manage social stigma and their lives as socially marginalized families. This process of parental socialization - that is, transmitting values, norms, information, and social perspectives to their children to instill a sense of self-pride and to help them prepare for potential barriers and biases that they may encounter (Murry et al., 2015; see Stein, & Coard, Kiang, Smith, & Mejia, 2017 in this issue) - is often associated with parenting among families of color and African Americans specifically. In diverse family structures, parents may also help their children develop strategies for countering negative experiences associated with social labeling of differences as a function of the structure of their family as well as build resilience and empowerment to navigate and reject negative messages about their family form (Brega & Coleman, 1999; Knight, Bernal, Garza, Cota, & O’Campo, 1993; Phinney & Chavira, 1995). While cultural/racial socialization is common among African American families regardless of family structure, its examination in terms of family structure, such as single, divorced, stepfamily, and same-sex families is seldom studied (Bowman & Howard, 1985). Little is known about how stigma and societal norms regarding varying family structures influence parenting and family communication patterns. We contend that families whose structure is more highly stigmatized in our society, such as stepfamilies and same-sex families, must also teach their children how to manage their lives and interpret their experiences in a society in which both the parents and children are often devalued (Berkel et al., 2009; Murry, Berkel, Miller, Chen, & Brody, 2009). Some evidence of such socialization has merged in studies of stepfamilies. Emerging from these studies is that some stepfamilies report feeling stigmatized, including feeling caught between conflicting media messages of the “evil” stepparent and the unattainable ease of integration into a new family depicted by shows such as

the Brady Bunch. (Claxton-Oldfield, O'Neill, Thompson, & Gallant, 2005; Coleman et al., 2013). In similar vein, studies of stigma in gay and lesbian families revealed that they are particularly likely to face marginalization and discrimination. Same-sex families confront internal and enacted forms of sexual-orientation related stigma (Goldberg & Smith, 2011), that overlap, in many ways, to the experiences of racial/ethnic parents with regards to racial/ethnic race-related challenges. To examine this phenomenon, Oakley, Farr, and Scherer (2017) adapted the racial socialization measure (Hughes & Chen, 1997) to determine whether and how gay and lesbian parents engage in cultural socialization around being a same-sex parent family. Results revealed that most parents engaged in practices to promote children's awareness of diverse family structures and emphasized messages to celebrate gay and lesbian culture and heritage. Proactive parenting about ways in which their family structure was similar to and different from other family structures was also emphasized. Parents also reported having regular talks that prepared their children for experiencing bias around issues related to heterosexism and sexual stigma, thereby promoting their children's awareness of their diverse family structure and preparing them for potential stigma-related barriers. These socialization practices were similar in both gay fathers' and lesbian mothers' families. The line of inquiry needs to be expanded to examine how such socialization impacts youth development and adjustment and to determine if messages and strategies change over time as a function of their children's developmental stage. As Oakley and colleagues (2017, pp.16) note "... open dialogue about issues of heterosexism and stigmatization of the LGBTQ community may be more developmentally relevant for older children whose engagement with a broader social context might have important implications for identity and psychosocial development".

There are several ways that marginalization may affect families. One way is through increased likelihood of exposure to discrimination and prejudices as a consequence of structure, including elevated stress. Such elevations in stress can evoke mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression, leading to other psychological and physical health problems. Discrimination may also spillover and impact family relationships, employment, housing, and educational opportunities (Murry & Liu, 2014).

Despite the potentially deleterious effects of marginalization, stigma, and cultural norms on families whose structure do not reflect the “ideal” family, regardless of race and ethnicity, it is surprising that so little research has been conducted on the marginalization of families based on family structure. We contend the need for greater consideration to be undertaken to explain how discrimination, oppression, and segregation are manifested in the lives of parents and youth across diverse family structures. In fact, an obvious omission in studies of cultural socialization practices in families of color is the lack of consideration given to the extent that family structure also matters in terms of messages and strategies employed to prepare youth for potential bias and discrimination. A more detailed discussion of ethnic-racial socialization has been provided in this issue by Stein and colleagues (2017). Despite this void, our summary thus far highlights that, depending on historical time and cultural norms, family structure may lead to marginalization or stigma for youth, which may affect their development over the life course. The extent to which parents are able to successfully socialize youth around issues of marginalization may depend on the degree to which their family structure is socially labeled in a manner that negatively affects youth well-being. Although the complexities of marginalization due to family structure have not been adequately studied, several studies have focused on the

economic impact of changes in family structure. Economic theories provide an important lens by which to examine their spillover effects on families and adolescent well-being.

### The Role of Economics and Poverty

Parental resources are important pathways by which family structure may affect child development (Waldfogel et al., 2010). Applying economic theories to explain how family structure influences youth outcomes is guided by two areas of foci: (1) the effects that resources, such as income and social capital, have on parenting and youth adjustment and (2) how financial strain may affect parenting practices and subsequently, affect youth outcomes.

The first area of foci suggests that from an economic perspective, youth in families with high economic resources may be more likely to succeed than those with less. However, in addition to income level, families' economic status is partly a function of human and social capital, such as the family's capacities to extend their resources through connections with broader social networks (Coleman, 1988; Schultz, 1974). Greater human and social capital has been associated with increased parenting competence and positive family functioning (Belcher, Peckuonius, & Deforge, 2011). Research has documented that children are better able to develop the necessary knowledge and skills needed for reaching educational and employment goals when their parents have access to or have effective marketing skills to provide youth with financial resources (Davis-Kean, 2005).

Studies of economics and family structure are often studies of single-parent families and consistently conclude that youth who reside in this family structure are more at risk for growing up in poverty than their counterparts in other types of family households (Bisceglia, Cheung, Swinkin, & Jenkins, 2010). Several reasons have been offered to explain why single-parent families are more likely to be poor. First, single mothers tend to be younger at childbirth, less

likely to complete education, and if employed, have low-waged positions. Consequently, they are less prepared to economically support their children. Second, the negative consequences of growing up in single-parent economically poor families also include lack of having enough adults in one's home to provide care for children. Thus, father-absence not only takes a toll on mothers raising children solo, but also reduces children's access to male role models, creating a void in the socialization of sons on ways men may successfully achieve in market activity (Powell & Parcel, 1997; McLanahan, 1994).

These explanations have been met with numerous critical reviews, including difficulty disentangling the effects of single parent status from the deleterious effects of poverty itself (e.g., raising children in low resource neighborhoods with low performing schools) on child outcomes. Moreover, studies of single-parent households often assume that parents are "parenting solo" without other adults' assistance (Murry, Bynum, Brody, Willert, & Stephens, 2001)—yet single parents may rely on others such as grandparents, other relatives, and friends. However, socioeconomic status, in and of itself, does not fully explain how children will fare as a function of family structure (Amato, 2005). Studies are clearly warranted that disentangle and address the intersectionality of economic stress, family structure, and parenting behavior. Addressing this issue is of great importance as it is unknown whether the perpetuated portrayal about single-parenthood having a negative impact on child outcomes can be applied across diverse populations and SES levels (Bloome, 2014; Murry et al., 2001). It is family structure or economic status that matters for youth growing up in single-parent households or is it other critical factors and processes?

Notwithstanding, it has been well documented that any change in the family that impacts income and causes economic hardship can create instability with detrimental consequences for children's

well-being that last over their life course (Brown, Stykes, & Manning, 2016). It is important, however, to recognize that transitions are not the same in all kinds of family structures. Equally important are findings suggesting that some changes in family structures may improve economic circumstances. For example, remarriage after a divorce may increase economic well-being and increased family income (Coleman et al., 2013). Youth born to unmarried mothers who then marry fare better than those whose mothers remained unmarried (Auginbaugh, Pierret, & Robinstein, 2005). Further, the creation of a stepfamily also may be associated with increases in economic well-being and human capital (Coleman et al., 2013). The extent to which family structure is equated with reduced well-being may depend on a family's ability to pool resources. In a study on military families, Arnold and colleagues (2017) found that differential outcomes across family structure were attributed to the present-parent's ability and capacity to pool economic and social resources that may otherwise be unlikely available in other family structures.

Although not explicitly stated, economic theories imply that two-parent households are ideal in modern capitalist society, as two-parent households may be more likely to have access to, accumulate, and provide income and human and social capital. Parents in two-parent families may be able to provide complementary resources, distributing and sharing household services and economic resources to foster the highest attainment for their children. From this perspective, children from alternative families, especially single parent families, may have access to fewer economic and social resources, raising the risk for adolescent maladjustment. However, these theories do not specify the specific composition of the two-parent family, thus one can assume that two-parent families, regardless of structured circumstance, same-sex parent, remarried, and stepfamilies, will foster positive developmental outcomes for children.

A second research focus are studies examining ways in which economic well-being may affect youth outcomes through its effects on caregiver strain and stress (see Jones, Loisel, & Highlander, 2017 in this issue for a review), which may subsequently affect their parenting practices. Parents who experience more financial strain and stress may be more likely to experience depression and family conflict, and subsequently less likely to engage in effective parenting practices (Conger et al., 1990; Conger et al., 1992; Conger, Ge, Elder, Lorenz, & Simons, 1994; Murry et al., 2009). Parents in some types of family structures, in particular single parent homes, may be more likely to experience financial strain and stress due to poverty, which may have negative implications for parenting quality, as highly stressed parents also report elevated depression, anxiety and low-positive affect, which have been directly linked with ineffective parenting (Murry et al., 2001). For example, Amato (2005) found that the risk for children in single parent families was associated with a lack of resources, which caused parental stress, lowered parent's psychological functioning, creating a stressful household, and had a negative impact on children's development throughout adulthood. In contrast, married two-parent families may have increased access to resources to meet the demands of stressful life events and this reduced stress increases the likelihood of effective parenting. Thus, given the central role that effective parenting may play in mediating the effects of family structure on youth outcomes, we next review theories on family relationships and specific parenting practices that may be critical to ensure the positive adjustment and development of adolescents.

### Effective Parenting Practices

Several theories suggest that parents are important influences on youth regardless of family structure, and that effective parenting practices are likely to be important for adolescents across a wide variety of family structures. The prominent theory by which parents affect adolescent

development is socialization theory (Baumrind, 1978; Parcel & Menaghan 1994). The essence of socialization theory is that parents engage in practices to help children internalize the values, attitudes, and behavioral standards of the family and the broader culture, equipping youth to become productive members of a defined society or group and develop emotional security (See Jones et al., 2017 in this issue).

Research and theory have identified several specific parenting practices and behaviors that are critical to promoting child and adolescent adjustment. For example, general tools or dimensions of parenting include behavioral control or demandingness as well as warmth and responsiveness (Baumrind, 1978; Maccoby & Martin, 1983; see Lansford et al., 2017 in this issue for a review). Thus, the extent to which a parent successfully monitors their child and engages in effective discipline practices, as well as their ability to maintain a warm, close relationship may both be critical to promote child adjustment (Greenberg & Lippold, 2013; Lippold & Jensen, 2017).

Research has found that parent-child relationships have important implications for adolescent well-being in diverse family structures and that relationship quality is critical for promoting child and adolescent well-being. For example, positive relationships with both biological parents and stepparents have been associated with reductions in internalizing and externalizing problems for youth (Jensen, Lippold et al., 2017). Parental involvement of the non-resident parent has been linked to elevated self-esteem in children residing in both never-married and post-divorced family structures (Bastaitis & Mortelmans, 2016). Loss of contact with fathers is an important risk factor after changes in family structure and has been associated with maladjustment for youth (Carlson, 2006; Coleman et al, 2013).

Another critical aspect of effective parenting is parental involvement and is sometimes expanded to include parental monitoring. Studies examining connections between parental involvement



and adolescent outcomes are often embedded in theories of social learning (Patterson, DeBaryshe, & Ramsey, 1989), problem behavior (Jessor & Jessor, 1977), and various sociological accounts of delinquency. Emerging from these studies are findings that propose that disruptions in parental involvement and support, the use of punitive parenting practices, and low levels of parental monitoring compromise youths' development of prosocial skills and self-regulatory abilities that protect them from engagement in risky behavior. The mechanisms through which parental involvement affect youth outcomes have been further clarified. A few studies have shown that parental monitoring may be closely tied to parental warmth and the extent to which youth are comfortable sharing information about their activities with their parents (Lippold, Greenberg, Graham, & Feinberg, 2014; Racz & McMahon, 2011). Given this, it seems important to recognize that family structures and transitions can affect levels and degree of parenting quality and consistency, including parental involvement, monitoring, and warmth, which are likely to influence adolescent development, adjustment, and well-being. Moreover, the effects of family structure on children's well-being may not be limited to what parents do or do not do. Broader interactions within the family system may also play a critical role in whether and how family structure affects child adjustment.

#### A Family Systems Perspective

Family structure also may affect youth outcomes via its effects on the interactions between multiple family members, which in turn may ripple throughout the family system. Family systems theory (Cox & Paley, 1997; Minuchin, 1985) posits that families form multi-level, adaptive, and regulatory systems. Family patterns of interaction, such as roles, boundaries, and rules become stable over time as family systems seek equilibrium. Yet, transitions, such as

changes in family structure, can disrupt family systems, causing family systems to reorganize and adapt to new circumstances.

Transitions to new family structures, such as relationship dissolution, changes in caregivers, and/or the integration of new family members into a family may affect family processes in numerous ways. First, the structure of the family itself may change—as after a change in family structure, some individuals may be considered within or outside of family boundaries (Coleman, et al., 2013; Jensen, 2017). New patterns of who is “in” and “out” of the family may create new challenges for family relationships, especially if youth become triangulated between different family members or coalitions form between some members who are in versus outside of the new family. Family conflict and triangulation between family members has been associated with negative outcomes across diverse family structures, such as stepfamilies (Coleman et al., 2013; Jensen et al., in press)

Second, family rules, roles and boundaries may shift. Some studies suggest that some family structures may place children at risk for role diffusion. For example, in single-parent families where mother/child relations may become more peer-like, and in stepfamilies, where stepparent/child relations may be defined more as friends than as parent/child, children may not learn how to interact appropriately with authority figures, placing them at risk for a sundry of negative outcomes (Nock, 1988). Studies on single parents have also found that roles in families can shift, with children taking on more adult like roles, and such adultification has been associated with negative outcomes for youth (Ackerman, D’Eramo et al., 2001; Burton, 2007). Children growing up in a household in which the parent is absent due to death or divorce may experience heightened emotional stress, coupled with responsibility overload, as children may mature in ways inappropriate for their age (Weinstein & Thornton, 1989). Parent roles may also

change, as in the case of stepfamilies, resident parents may be required to take on more caregiving responsibilities (Coleman et al., 2013). Family structural changes, such as the transition to a stepfamily may also create role ambiguity, where specific roles of the family become unclear (Coleman et al., 2013). For example, during the creation of a stepfamily, mothers may take on new roles in the such as mediator, gatekeeper, or defender of either the child or stepparent (Weaver & Coleman, 2010). Role ambiguity can be stressful for families, as there are often no clear role models or guidelines for the stepparent role (Coleman et al., 2013). Third, the quality of relationships in the family may change as a result of the structural transition and changes in the quality of one relationship in the family may spillover to affect other relationships in the family as well (Coleman, et al., 2013; Jensen et al., in press). For example, the integration of new members into the family, such as a stepparent, may cause increased conflict or strain in the stepparent-child relationship, but also in other relationships, such as between the resident and non-resident biological parents. Relationships between stepchildren and adults may be affected by the couple relationships in the family (e.g., between the stepparent and resident biological parent, as well as the relationship between the resident and non-resident biological parents). Consistent with a family systems perspective, relationships in families can be linked. Children who have better relationships with their parents are more likely to accept and have a better relationship with their stepparent (Coleman et al., 2013; Marsiglio, 1992). Further, positive relationships between stepparent's children are associated not only with better child outcomes, but also with better mental-health and marital satisfaction for both the parent and stepparent (Coleman et al., 2013; Greef & Du Toit, 2009). In contrast, exposure to family situations in which there is conflict between adults that compromise effective co-parenting and

cause youth to be triangulated between adults has been associated with maladjustment for youth (Coleman et al., 2013; Jensen, 2017).

From a family systems perspective, after a change in family structure, the extent to which a family can successfully transition to a new, healthy family system with multiple high-quality relationships may have important implications for youth adjustment (Lippold & Jensen, 2017; Jensen, 2017; Jensen, Lippold, Mils-Koonce, & Fosco, in press). Families in which family structural changes are accompanied by triangulation or conflict between family members, poor-quality relationships, and role diffusion may place youth at risk for maladjustment. Further, this perspective suggests that transitions may place strain on families, and that multiple family transitions may be an important risk factor for family maladjustment. Thus, it is important to not only consider pathways by which family structure may affect youth outcomes, but also the effect of the transition itself.

### The Effects of Transitions

The effects of family structure on youth outcomes may depend in a large part on whether or not the change in structure disrupts effective parenting practices (Waldfogel et al., 2010). The dynamic effect of transitions has additionally been less studied than the static effect of structure. Examining the mechanisms through which transitions in families affect youth is important because differences in family structure and transitions may influence parenting, namely monitoring and attachment, as well as shifts in residential mobility and family income, as they may offer insights on differential outcomes of adolescents, often associated with family structure. In this regard, Astone and McLanahan (1991) and others (Thomson, Hanson, & McLanahan, 1994) found that while the majority of single-headed families are low income, a child's development may be compromised in single-mother families only if parents are unable to

provide optimal amounts of support and capacity to monitor and control the child. Further, these mechanisms appear to operate differently for White and African American youth, and may partially explain differences in youth adjustment. Results from a nationally representative sample of more than 2,000 adolescents aged 12 to 13 assessed across 3 waves revealed that living in non-two-parent family structures was consistently associated with higher concurrent levels of substance initiation, lower parental monitoring and relationship quality, lower income, and higher residential mobility (Mays, 2012). While the effects of family disruptions/transitions on substance initiation and parenting were less robust than hypothesized, the effects did reinforce previous studies that have consistently shown that living outside a two-parent family, or consistently living in a single-parent family, is negatively associated with parenting, income, and residential stability over time. These authors found that changes in parenting, residential mobility, and income demonstrated greater significance compromised adjustment for White but not African American youth. Race differences were attributed to variability in risk factors that may lead to differential outcomes. Specifically, African American youth growing up in single-parent families are more likely to be exposed to contextual risk factors, such as economic deprivation and neighborhood characteristics which are associated with academic problems; whereas White youth are more likely to be exposed to individual and peer-level risks (Mays, 2012; Wallace & Muroff, 2002). From these studies, it can be surmised that regardless of family structure and the fact that some families confront a myriad of stressors, parental monitoring and exposure to emotionally connected, warm, and supportive family environments are pivotal leveraging points for positive youth outcomes across all social classes, regardless of the diversity of family structure. These findings suggest the need to examine with greater specificity the

contributions of race in understanding how family transitions and family structure differentially impact youth outcomes.

It is important to note that some studies suggest that the transition itself into a new family structure may pose risk for adolescent maladjustment, and that this transition itself may underlie much of the risk associated with particular family structure, rather than the structure itself (Lee & McLanahan, 2015). For example, results from a community-based study comparing behavioral outcomes of children growing up in different types of households (including single, married, and cohabiting families as well as those residing with grandparents, aunts/uncles, other extended family members, and non-related adults) revealed that change in family composition has a more significant effect on children than the particular type of family structure. For example, children raised in cohabiting families experience more transitions than those in any other family structure due to their mother's transitions into and out of cohabitation, and some studies suggest that youth in cohabitating families may be at risk for negative outcomes (Raley & Wildsmith, 2004). The high number of transitions associated with cohabitation may also increase the risk of parental separation; parental separation, regardless of race and ethnicity, is higher among cohabitating couples than those born to married parents (Brown, 2010; Osborn, Manning, & Smock, 2007). Results from a systematic review of studies using the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study made a similar conclusion that the number of family transitions may be critical for youth development (Waldfoegel et al., 2010). These authors concluded that "children raised by stable single or cohabiting parents are at less risk than those in unstable single or cohabiting parents" (pp. 87).

In fact, Arnold and colleagues (2017) examined the role of family transitions on parenting and youth well-being in military families across various family structures. Military families often

experience frequent transitions to new living environments and multiple stressors associated with extended periods where parents(s) are deployed. In their comparison of variability of military adolescents' adjustment, Arnold and colleagues (2017) found a significant relationship between family structure (biologically married, single-parent, and stepfamily) and adolescent's academic performance and depressive symptoms. Those growing up in biologically married households reported more favorable outcomes compared to adolescents in other family structures.

Differential outcomes, however, were attributed to increased stability in two-parent households and a lower number of transitions.

It is worth noting that a consistent finding that emerged across studies included in our systematic studies is -- growing up in a stable family with few transitions may be what matters, regardless of family structure. We also contend that, while all families regardless of structure, are influenced by larger social cultural, ecological, historical contextual factors and processes, these macro-level systems are seldom included in studies linking family structure to adolescent development and adjustment. Further, there is a need for models of theoretic frameworks to guide such studies. Given this, we propose a sociocultural ecological model illustrate the pathways through which society and culture are fused together to form systems that affect definitions and social norms regarding family structures. Family mechanisms, such as parenting practices, family relationships and resources, and family transitions, are pivotal mediators and moderators to explain how and why some family structures matter for youth development. (see Figure 1).

## Discussion

The diversity explosion of the United States over the past decade has also witnessed an expansion of family structures beyond the traditional two-parent, heterosexual households with children (Frey, 2013). In fact, the "traditional family structure" is now atypical in many

populations, as other never-married, single, stepfamilies, extended, and gay and lesbian families have increased substantially (see Pearce et al., 2017 in this issue). Yet, studies of family structure continue to rely on the “traditional family structure” as the referent group to which other family structures are compared. Inherent in many of these comparison studies is the assumption that children fare much better in families headed by a biological mother and father.

Results from comparison studies clearly demonstrate that the effects of family structure on youth outcomes varies depending on a number of contextual factors such as cultural stigma, family relationships, and whether or not the family structural transition results in less effective parenting practices and decreased income. These findings suggest that family structure is not what matters per se, but that rather changes in other aspects of family functioning are what impact youth adjustment. Although there are a plethora of studies suggesting that on average, youth in two-parent homes fare better than those in single family homes or stepfamilies (Berger & McLanahan, 2015), a growing body of research suggests these relationships are not universal. Given the above theoretical frameworks, it is of no surprise that the effects of family structure on youth adjustment are complex.

Further, while the impact of family structure is not inconsequential, the majority of youth who live in non-traditional family structures or experience transitions in family type also adjust well. What is more, when family structure difference does occur, effects are quite small in magnitude and clinical significance (Demo & Acock, 1996). Further, several scholars contend that differences in family functioning, parenting practices, and youth outcomes demonstrate greater differences within than between family structures (Blackwell, 2010; Manning & Lamb, 2002). In sum, composition of the family does not change what is important to the child about being a member of a family. In fact, “children’s optimal development seems to be influenced more by



the nature of the relationships and interactions within the family unit than by the particular structural form it takes” (Perrin, 2002, pp. 341).

#### Limitations and Future Research Directions

Although much attention has been given to family structure, there are notable gaps in our knowledge about its effects, especially during adolescence, which highlight important future research directions. An unexpected finding was that most papers focused on examining the implications of family structure on families of young to middle age children, with few papers targeting adolescents. This is a notable gap in the literature, considering that the parent-child relationship changes substantially during the adolescent transition.

Further, much of the research attention is on comparing what goes on inside nuclear, intact, or traditional families to processes in stepfamilies, single-parent/mother families and other non-traditional family structures. To address this gap, in addition to studies that compare outcomes between different family structures, more studies are needed that study variation within specific family structures (e.g., studying process that explain variation among stepfamilies or another specific group). Within-group comparisons are essential to understanding family processes that may promote resilience and successful adaptation among families who face similar challenges and have similar resources (Jensen, Lippold, et al., 2017; Jensen, 2017). Understanding factors that promote adaption within as well as across family structures will help the field identify common effective parenting practices, as well as parenting practices that may be particularly salient in certain family structures.

Studies also rarely study issues of culture as well as the role of social norms and stigma on the effects of family structure, and how these may affect parenting behaviors. While studies have consistently demonstrated the protective nature of racial-ethnic socialization in buffering youth

from negative societal messages about their race/ethnicity (Brody, Kim, Murry, & Brown, 2005; Murry et al., 2009; Stein et al., 2017 in this issue), little is known about the extent to which parenting is uniquely tailored based as a function of family structure. In addition, the nuances experienced by families whose structure elevates their risk for exposure to discrimination and marginalization needs to be examined, as such experiences affect not only youths' social interactions but also their development over the life course. The negative consequences of institutionalized discrimination and oppression for people of color have been well-documented. However, the manifestations of these incidences as a function of family structure with regards to work force, legal, housing, education, and health care systems, all of which have potential consequences for children's developmental outcomes, have been ignored in studies of family structure. In this regard, realms of competencies for adolescents growing up in traditional and new family configurations may include adaptive coping with marginalization as a consequence of "non-traditional" family types (Cherlin, 2010).

While it has been well-documented that these constructs serve a major role in the development of youth, particularly those who are marginalized in the United States because of their social positions and socioeconomic status, this issue remains under-explored in studies of family structure. Not considering the important moderating effects of ancestral heritage, immigration history, religion, and traditions of normative and maladaptive development across and within different family structures dilutes and obscures the experiences of children growing up in these families (Lin & Kelsey, 2000). An important future direction is to more explicitly test how culture affects family structure, including studies that identify how parenting practices within specific family structures differ based on culture. Given this, future studies of family structure

need to give greater consideration to ways in which cultural and environmental factors across and within diverse family structures impact youth development and adjustment.

Finally, several methodological gaps have forestalled the advancement of studies of family structures on adolescent development. For example, much of our work on parenting relies on global measures of family relationships that occur over a long time (e.g., year to year). Yet in the case of changes in families, there may be many short-term changes, along with fluctuations in parent-child relationships and interactions that are not captured using global measures over long time scales. The use of longitudinal data and methods that can capture shorter-term, dynamic family processes may be critical to fully understanding how parenting changes across different family structures, especially when a structural transition occurs. (Lippold, Hussong, Fosco, & Ram, in press). We may also need for more qualitative studies to more fully capture information not sufficiently conveyed in quantitative methods, including ways in which beliefs, attitudes, values, feelings, and motivations underlie what goes on inside families within and between family structures. Further, as most studies include only parent reports, there is a need for more studies with a multi-informant study design, that capture the perspectives of children as well as the multitude of different roles adults can take in the family.

## Conclusion

Although one of the traditional hallmarks of science is to be objective and value free, it would be naive to assume that social science researchers are not influenced by cultural ideologies and belief systems about family life. Studies of family structure continue to be nested in frameworks that perpetuate values, opinions, and beliefs about what constitutes “a normal, traditional family”. This perspective has likely influenced every aspect of research, including the types of issues addressed, the way hypotheses and research questions are worded, the selection of

samples and measurement instruments, and interpretations of the meaning of data (see Cherlin, 2010 and Amato, 2005 for excellent discussions of the roles played by values in family research in general). Most notable is a lack of progress in identifying the unique normative processes of development among children growing up in new familial configurations. Thus, the field continues to grapple with identifying critical aspects of adolescents' social environmental contexts that are influenced by family structure and, in turn, impact their growth and development.

The authors charge the field to give greater consideration to refining the conceptualization of family structure. This endeavor may require refining measures of household composition so that measures of family structure are more reflective of the roles and relationships of members of the household, rather than assuming how members are related to each other and function as a family based on adults' relationship/marital status and/or "headship". Such work will require the field to develop new methods of inquiry to capture the experiences of adolescents growing up in diverse family structures, including greater use of multi-methodological approaches that capture the perspective of many different family members, to more accurately capture the experiences and nuances of adolescents growing up in diverse family structures.

In closing, there is a need to update family policies to include family structures beyond two-parent heterosexual families. Nearly all family policies in the U.S. are based on nuclear family models, including the parental rights doctrine. Thus, family law and policies, as well as legal traditions regarding parenthood, are nested in the context that the referent family structure is two-parent, heterosexual, same resident structures, which is sometimes referred to as the natural family. The majority of family policies are designed to promote or enhance marriage, regulate reproduction, protect children, and legislate parents' obligations to provide financial support for

their children, with some attention to ways in which physical and legal custody of children affect adjustment and development. Yet, the protective nature of these policies is not necessarily applying to all families. For example, the rights of same-sex families, including marriage, adoption, and parental rights differ from state to state (Polikoff, 2013). Critical to development of policy that addresses the legal protection and rights of all families regardless of family structure is the need for research that can inform policy and practice (Cancian & Haskins, 2014). This research should also provide empirical evidence to guide culturally-informed and relevant preventive interventions and services that are applicable to diverse family structures.

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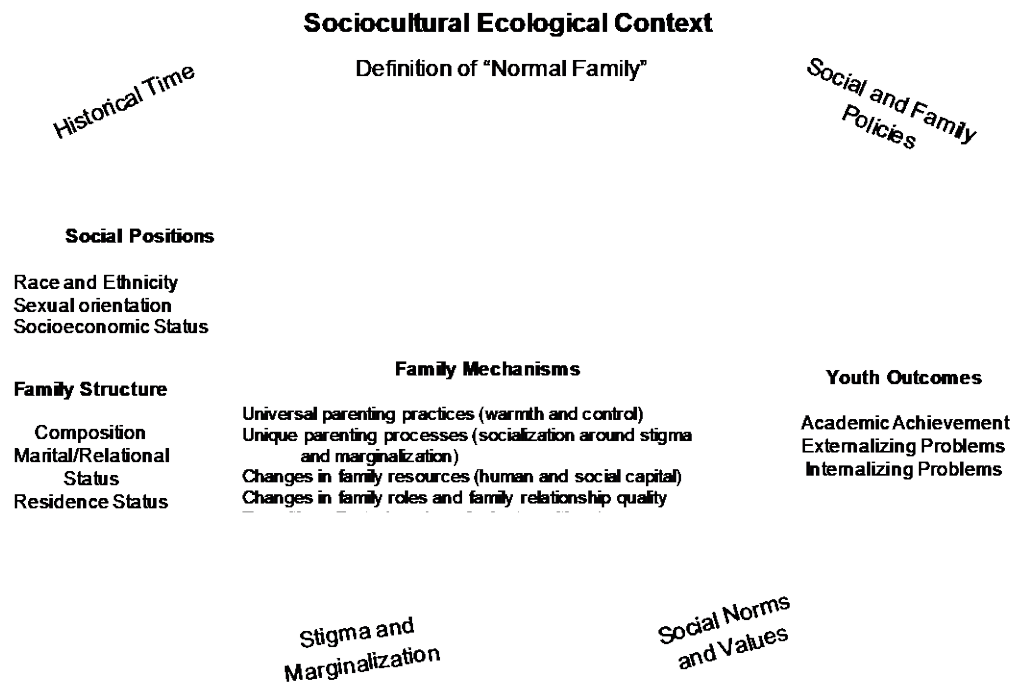
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**Figure 1. Conceptual Model.** Society and culture are fused together to form systems that affect definitions and social norms regarding family structures. How family structure affects youth outcomes may depend on family mechanisms such as parenting practices, family relationships and resources, and family transitions. More research is needed as to how sociocultural ecological contextual processes and social position may interact with various family mechanisms to collectively influence how family structure affects youth outcomes.