Family Structure and Child Well-Being:
Examining the Role of Parental Social Networks

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Using longitudinal data from the NLSY79, this paper examines whether parental social support mediates or moderates the influence of single-parenthood and cohabitation on children. Two measures of social support are used: how often a family spends time with friends or relatives, and whether a child's grandparent is living in the household. Our analyses focus on two important sub-groups of children: African-Americans and families receiving public assistance. African-Americans are an important sub-group because of the higher prevalence of single-parenthood in African-American families, and because our previous work found significant race differences in the influence of single-parenthood and cohabitation on children. Families receiving public assistance are examined because they are the target of public policies aimed at increasing marriage. Within these sub-groups, social support was examined as a mediator explaining any differences between subgroups, and as a modifying factor that may change the way that family structure influences child well-being.

Extended Abstract

Using data from the merged mother-child files of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 sample (spanning the years 1979-2000), this paper examines the role of parental social support in mediating and moderating the influence of family structure on children. In doing so, this paper makes several contributions to the literature in this area: first, this paper examines the influence of single-parenthood and cohabitation separately, as our previous work found differences in the ways that these living arrangements are associated with child outcomes. Second, to address issues of selection into family living arrangements, we estimate child-specific fixed-effects models. This method controls for all child- and parent-specific time-invariant factors that may be associated both with the family structure in which a child lives and with that child's well-being. Finally, this paper seeks to understand important, but understudied, sub-group differences in the influence of family living arrangements on children by examining the role of social support. For example, our previous work found that white, but not black, children were negatively influenced by living in a single-parent family. This paper examines whether parental social support networks mediate or moderate the influence of family structure on child well-being for specific sub-groups of children.

Data and Measures

We use data from the 2000 and earlier survey rounds of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79), a nationally representative survey designed by the U.S. Department of Labor to study variations in labor market behavior and experiences.

Family Structure. To measure family structure, we sum the total number of years from birth to an assessment point that a child lived with: the mother and no spouse or

cohabiting partner (single parent); the mother and her spouse (married parent); the mother and her non-married cohabiting partner (cohabiting). In our multivariate analyses we estimate coefficients on the single and cohabiting parent variables; the reference category is the amount of time spent in a married-parent family.

Social Support. Social support is measured with two indicator variables. The first is a measure of whether the child lives with his or her grandparent or great-grandparent in the household, taken at each wave. The second is a measure of whether the child's mother reports that their family visits friends or relatives once a week or more (corresponding to the top quartile of this measure).

Method

Estimating the associations between family structure and children's outcomes raises the concern that children living in various family structures differ in unobservable ways. Without being able to control fully for all of the ways in which children in single-parent families, for example, differ from those in married-couple families, Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regressions of child outcomes on family structure may be biased. To address this, we use within-child fixed-effect regressions, relying on repeated observations of family structure and the outcomes of interest for each child. As a result of this method all time-invariant measured and unmeasured characteristics for a specific child drop out of the model. This includes any persistent components of the error term that are correlated across time.

Preliminary Results

Table 1 presents means and standard deviations for the key variables of interest in this paper. The data are stacked so that each child contributes multiple observations.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics: Means and Standard Deviations (unweighted)	*Mean*	*SD*	*N*
Lives with grandparents	.09	.28	134,460
Visits friends and relatives weekly or more	.32	.47	11,301
Child is black	.28	.45	168,075
Child's family receives welfare	.15	.36	66,461
Single-parent family	.30	.46	25,430
Cohabiting family	.07	.26	112,688
Married-couple family	.62	.48	25,444

Before conducting fixed-effects analyses, we begin with some descriptive analyses of potential sub-group differences in our measures of social support. Two theoretically important sub-groups were examined: African-Americans and families receiving public assistance. African-Americans are an important sub-group because of the higher prevalence of single-parenthood in African-American families, and because our previous work found significant race differences in the influence of single-parenthood and cohabitation on children. Families receiving public assistance were examined because they are the target of public policies aimed at increasing marriage; therefore, it is important to understand the interplay between social support, family structure and child outcomes for such families. Within these sub-groups, social support was examined separately for single-parent, married, and cohabiting families. The results are presented below. These descriptive results were obtained by regressing the social support variables on indicators for race and welfare status separately by family structure. Because each child is in the data more than once, robust standard errors were calculated.

Table 2: Child lives with grandparents (N = 31,890)

	White Mean	Black Mean	Significance of difference white vs. black
Single-parent families	.13	.17	p = .02
Cohabiting families	.03	.03	n.s.
Married couple families	.04	.06	p = .02

Table 3: Visits friends and relatives weekly or more (N = 4,873)

	White Mean	Black Mean	Significance of difference white vs. black
Single-parent families	.31	.33	n.s.
Cohabiting families	.29	.31	n.s.
Married couple families	.32	.32	n.s.

Table 4.: Child lives with grandparents (N = 21,377)

	Non-welfare Mean	Welfare Mean	Significance of difference non-welfare vs. welfare
Single-parent families	.12	.15	p = .09
Cohabiting families	.02	.04	p = .01
Married couple families	.04	.11	p = .00

Table 5: Visits friends and relatives weekly or more (N = 4,746)

	Non-welfare Mean	Welfare Mean	Significance of difference non-welfare vs. welfare
Single-parent families	.32	.33	n.s.
Cohabiting families	.28	.33	n.s.
Married couple families	.32	.33	n.s.

These descriptive analyses reveal some interesting patterns. Black children in single-parent families are more likely to live with a grandparent than are white children in such families. Additionally, welfare-receiving children in cohabiting families are more likely to be living with grandparents than are non-welfare-receiving children in such families. Interestingly, the measure of how often the family visits friends and relatives does not vary across race or welfare status in a significant way.

These analyses lay the groundwork for our multivariate fixed-effects models, described above. Based on the descriptive results, we hypothesize that living with grandparents may play a key role in accounting for sub-group differences in the influence of family structure on children. For example, our previous work has shown that single-parenthood is associated with reduced well-being for white, but not African-American, children. We hypothesize that the increased likelihood of living with grandparents among African-American single-mother families may partially account for this racial difference. Additionally, our preliminary multivariate analyses indicate that cohabitation is associated with increased delinquency for non-welfare-receiving children, but not those receiving welfare. We will test whether the greater likelihood of living with a grand parent among welfare-receiving children accounts for this difference. Finally, we will examine whether social support serves to moderate the influence of family structure on children. That is, we will test whether the negative impact of single-parenthood is reduced when a child has a higher level of social support. Several dependent variables representing a broad set of indicators of child well-being, including delinquency, test scores, emotional health, and physical health, will be examined.