Family Instability and the Home Environment

Shannon Cavanagh

University of Texas

E. Michael Foster

University of North Carolina

Accumulating evidence suggests that family instability shapes young people's lives. Theory that motivates much of this work posits that family transitions set in motion changes in the home that are stressful and increase the likelihood that children's development is disrupted. Data limitations, however, have precluded scholars from mapping out the link between family transitions, especially multiple transitions, and changes in the home environment. This paper explores this dynamic association. Using latent growth modeling, we examine how changes in family structure factor into trajectories of parental stress and investments, parent-child closeness, and household organization over time. We do this with SECCYD, a prospective study that follows children from birth though 5th grade, contains 25 reports of family structure, and includes gold standard measures of the home environment over time. This research can inform theory development in this emerging field and improve our operationalization of family instability.

Family Instability and the Home Environment

As the living arrangements of American children become more dynamic, family scholars have established a link between experiences of parents' partner instability and the contours of their children's lives (e.g., Cavanagh & Huston, 2006, 2008; Fomby & Cherlin, 2007; Osborne & McLanahan, 2007). The theory that motivates much of this work posits that family transitions set into motion changes in the home environment that are stressful to children and increase the likelihood that their development is disrupted (Wu & Martinson, 1993). And while differences in the home environment and child outcomes across family structure *type* has been established, data limitations have precluded scholars from mapping out the pathways linking family transitions, especially multiple transitions, and changes in the home environment. The general goal of this paper is to explore how multiple family transitions factor into residential instability and the development of parental stress, parent-child relationships, parental investments, and the organization of the home in the first decade of children's life.

The Instability of American Families

Over the past 60 years, the structure and stability of American families have changed dramatically. In 1950, nearly all children were born into "traditional" nuclear families, and about three quarters remained in them through adolescence (Furstenberg, 2007). Today, the family structure histories of American children are far more complex. Declines in marriage and remarriage combined with increases in non-marital births, cohabitation and divorce have translated into more dynamic relationship histories for adults and more complex living arrangements for their children. This complexity is evident in the SECCYD sample (see Table 1).

The instability and change perspective provides a useful framework for understanding this instability. This perspective emphasizes family transitions, not statuses, as a key dimension of children's family structure history (Wu & Martinson, 1993). Combining insights from stress theory with evidence of the negative effects of residential mobility, this perspective posits that changes in a parent's romantic history constitute a major stressor in a child's life, one that accumulates with each transition. A family transition represents the loss or addition of a parental figure in the home, which may disrupt a child's sense of security and create ambiguity in household rules, family relationships, and parental investments in children (Amato, 2000). It may also create changes in family income (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). At the same time, residential moves, which often accompany family transitions, can exacerbate stress by breaking

neighborhood ties, extended family relationships, and children's friendships (Astone & McLanahan, 1994). Thus, a family transition is stressful and, because transitions are repeatable across a child's life, the stress can accumulate over time.

A Model of Family Structure Transition Effects on the Home Environment

The linchpin of this perspective is change in family life. Drawing on research that explores mediating processes between family structure and poverty and child development, we play special attention to interplay between family instability, material hardships, and parental stress (see Figure 1; Table 2). Here, parental stress refers to the parent's experience of mental strain resulting from external stressors like divorce, repartnering, or material hardships (Gershoff et al., 2007). Regardless of transition type, changes in family structure can produce feelings of depression and financial stress as resident parents juggle a host of new demands, including the emotional needs of household members and changes in parenting and other responsibilities (Amato, 2000). Residential moves and economic uncertainty triggered by a transition can disrupt key social ties, alter work schedules, and further exacerbate feelings of stress. How a parent responds to this stress is essential to understanding changes in the home environment and children's adjustment (Conger & Elder, 1994). Consistent with the parental investment perspective, stress can affect a parent's decision about how to allocate limited resources like time, money, energy, and support to their children (Becker, 1991). Thus, stress may reduce the amount of time parents invest in their relationships with children. It may also inform parents' decisions about enforcing bedtime rules or curfews, reduce parents' involvement in children's schooling or the money they spend on educational resources.

As compelling as such a model is, the instability and change perspective is more dynamic, aimed at understanding how parents' romantic trajectories shape the home environment *over time* in ways that inform child *development*. Conceptualizing the dimensions of the home environment as trajectories, we will use a latent growth curve approach that maps out how patterns of family processes unfold as children age in general and then identify how family transitions contribute to and alter these patterns. Retaining the dynamic nature of the data, this approach elucidates how the timing and accumulation of family change factors into the development of family processes that are linked to child development.

Overall, we expect that the associations between cumulative family instability and the dimensions of the home environment—parenting parental stress, parent-child relationship, parental investments in the child, and the organization of the home—are not additive. Rather,

lower order (first and second) transitions will likely produce greater "shocks" to each family process/environment trajectory than will later ones. That is, following the first transition, parental stress will increase and household organization will decline, but, after three transitions, for example, changes will be modest as the parent becomes resilient, learning how to cope with the changes that family transitions can introduce (Rutter, 1985). As for longer-term implications of change, I do not expect that levels of parental stress will remain elevated but, over time, will approach predisruption levels. The parenting dimensions of the home environment, however, will not return to predisruption levels, but will remain compromised over time.

By unpacking the black box that links family instability to child development, this study hopes to expand our understanding of family instability in two ways. First, by mapping out the link between family instability and the home, it can elucidate how behaviors and relationships in the home serve as conduits by which parents' romantic lives affect children's well-being. Second, by exploring these links with dynamic, prospective data, it can improve our conceptualization and measurement of family instability by adjudicating between the type, timing, and accumulation of family transitions as tools for understanding family life.

Research Design and Methods

SECCYD families were recruited from hospitals located in 10 U.S. communities. During selected 24-hour sampling periods in 1991, 8,986 women were visited in the hospital shortly after giving birth. Of the 5,265 women—who were at least 18, healthy, and conversant in English, and had a healthy singleton child—agreed to be contacted when they returned home from the hospital. A month later, 1,364 families with healthy newborns were enrolled in the study. The study consists of three phases: Phase I (1991-1994) followed the children from birth to age 3, Phase II (1995-1999) from age 3 through 1st grade, Phase III (2000-2004) from 2nd through 6th grades. This study was originally designed to examine the development significance of child care but has evolved into a study of general youth development.

Measures of *family structure, family transitions,* and *residential moves* are based on telephone interviews (at 3, 9, 12, 18, 21, 27, 30, 33, 42, 46, 50, 60, 66 months, fall, spring Kindergarten, grades 2 and 4) and home interviews (at 1, 6, 15, 24, 36, 54 months, grades 1 and 3) in which the mother (typically) completed a household roster listing each household member and that person's relationship to her and the study child; she also reported residential moves between contacts. Family structure was coded into nine mutually exclusive categories: 1) two biological parents (married); 2) two biological parents (cohabiting); 3) biological mother and

stepfather (married); 4) biological father/stepmother (married); 5) biological mom and cohabiting partner; 6) biological father/cohabiting partner; 7) biological mother-only; 8) biological father-only; 9) all other family types (Cavanagh & Huston, 2006; 2008). From these data, 24 binary variables indicating a family transition between a contact and the one that preceded it will be created. Family structure at birth and a time-varying count of transitions will also be included.

Income-to-needs ratio, based on maternal reports of her earnings, her partner's earnings, and public assistance or other sources collected during home interviews (1, 6, 15, 24, 36, 54 months, Grades 1, 3, and 5), was created by dividing the family income by the poverty threshold for that family size. Income-to-needs in the period following a transition will be used in analyses.

Dimensions of the home environment will be captured with longitudinal measures collected at home or lab visits. Most children continually coresided with their biological mothers. In other cases, reports and observations were collected from fathers or, rarely, grandmothers. A control will be included to account for reporter. Care was taken to ensure consistency in measuring constructs over time, but changes in child development necessarily introduced changes in measurement.

Parent stress will be captured with maternal reports of depressive symptoms, measured with the CES-D (Radloff 1977) and of financial stress, based on 3 items (scale from 1 to 4) that tap mother's feeling about the family's current financial situation (Conger & Elder, 1994).

The *organization of the home* will be captured with two scales drawn from *Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment* (HOME), an instrument designed to capture what the home environment offers the child (Caldwell & Bradley, 1984). The first subscale consists of 6 items that measure physical environment (e.g., building is safe, home is uncluttered). The second is based on a set of items that measure rules related to bedtimes, eating as a family, TV viewing, and the overall consistency of family rules.

The *parent-child relationships* will be captured with three indicators. Two scales will be drawn from semi-structured videotaped observations of mother and child (Vandell, 1979). First, maternal sensitivity reflects the degree to which mothers were supportive, displayed low levels of hostility, and respected the child's autonomy. Second, the child/dyadic score represents a composite of items that capture the child's affection towards the parent, reflected child negativity toward the parent, and the dyadic measure of security between the parent and child. Third, a 7 item scale drawn from the HOME measures parental responsitivity to the child during the visit.

Parental investments in their children will be measured with 3 indicators. Two subscales from the HOME will be used. The first is based on 11 items that measure the presence of age-appropriate and cognitively stimulating learning materials (e.g., toys, books for children and adults, puzzles) in the home. The second is based on 14 items that capture parent-child activities outside the home and extracurricular activities that a child participates in that are likely facilitated by the parent (Gershoff et al., 2007). Finally, a scale of maternal stimulation, drawn from the mother-child observations described above, will be included.

Analytical Design

The first step in these analyses will involve extensive descriptive analyses of key analytic variables. Next, we will use latent growth curve (LGC) modeling to map out the association between partner instability and the home environment. The complexity of the modeling requires that we separate out the different family factors and examine independent trajectories of the parent-child relationships, item by item. LGC modeling will estimate the best-fitting line for the nine time-specific measures of maternal sensitivity, for example (Willet & Sayer, 1994). This line can then be characterized by three latent factors: intercept (the average starting point), slope (the average rate of change over time), and quadratic slope (non-linear change). Independent variables predict these three latent factors.

Controlling for relevant variables, time-varying measures of a family transition plus a count of prior transitions will predict time-specific measures of maternal sensitivity that make up the growth curve (Curran, Muthen, & Harford, 1998). In other words, family structure at birth will predict the intercept, slope, and quadratic of the overall maternal sensitivity curve, but each family structure transition will predict subsequent assessments of maternal sensitivity within the trajectory. This strategy allows us to determine how family transitions ‘shock’ or alter the maternal sensitivity trajectory and whether the number of transitions (the first, second) matter.

Other factors may also determine family instability, material hardships, parental stress, and important family processes. SECCYD has detailed about parents (e.g., PPVT scores, maternal age, education) and the child (e.g., race, gender) that co-determine family instability and the home environment. We will control for these in all analyses.

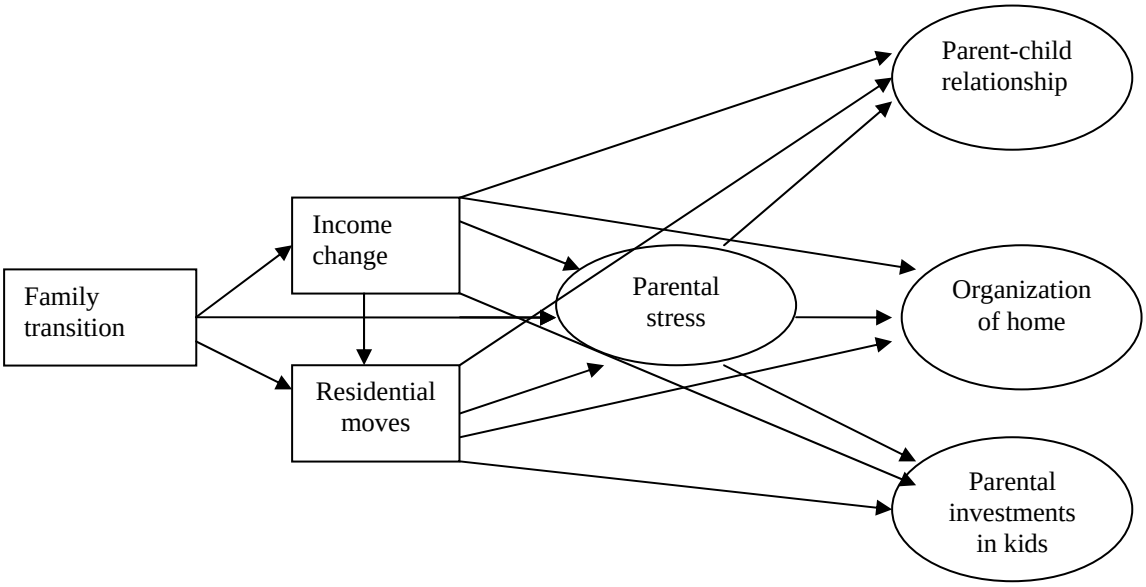
Table 1. Family Structure History for Children in SECCYD

	Family structure at birth	Family structure at 5th grade
Married, two-biological parents	76.6	58.9
Cohabiting, two-biological parents	8.4	3.2
Married, stepfather family	--	8.5
Cohabiting, stepfather family	0.5	9.8
Single mother only	14.5	15.2
Single father only	--	2.9
Stepmother family	--	1.2
No biological parent	--	0.4
Cumulative instability by 5th grade	Percent	
0	65.3	
1	13.8	
2	10.8	
3	4.7	
4+	3.2	

Table 2. Family Instability by Key Home Environment Measures

	Stable family structure		One family transition		Two family transitions		Three or more family transitions		
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
Family Environment in Early Childhood									
Maternal depression									
Intercept	8.46	(5.11)	10.08	(4.96)	12.86	(6.39)	13.23	(6.15)	***
Linear slope	0.18	(0.56)	0.22	(0.83)	0.18	(0.88)	0.31	(0.90)	+
Maternal sensitivity									
Intercept	0.10	(0.63)	-0.12	(0.67)	-0.42	(0.72)	-0.46	(0.69)	***
Linear slope	0.00	(0.02)	0.00	(0.02)	0.00	(0.02)	0.00	(0.02)	
HOME score									
Intercept	0.14	(0.62)	-0.28	(0.77)	-0.53	(0.71)	-0.59	(0.61)	***
Linear slope	0.00	(0.01)	0.00	(0.01)	0.00	(0.01)	0.00	(0.01)	
Income-to-needs									
Intercept	4.05	(2.76)	2.81	(2.00)	2.19	(1.48)	2.01	(1.59)	***
Linear slope	0.00	(0.01)	0.00	(0.01)	0.00	(0.01)	0.00	(0.01)	

Figure 1. Conceptual Model



Literature Cited

Amato, PR. 2000. The consequences of divorce for adults and children. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 62,* 1269-1287.

Astone, N.M. & McLanahan, S.S. (1994). Family structure, residential mobility, and school dropout: A research note. *Demography,* 31, 575-584.

Becker, G. S. (1991). *A treatise on the family.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Caldwell, B. M. & Bradley, R. H. (1984). Home observation for measures of the environment. Little Rock. AR: University of Arkansas.

Cavanagh, S.E. & Huston, A. (2006). Family instability and children's early problem behavior. *Social Forces* 85: 575-605.

Conger, R. D. & Elder, G. H., Jr. (1994). *Families in troubled times: Adapting to change in rural America.* Hillsdale, NJ: Aldine.

Fomby, P. & Cherlin, A. J. (2007). Family instability and child well-being. *American Sociological Review, 72,* 181-204.

Gershoff, E. T., Aber, J. L., Raver, C. C., & Lennon, M.C. (2007). Income is not enough: Incorporating material hardship into models of income associations with parenting and child development. *Child Development,* 78, 70-95.

McLanahan, S. & Sandefur, G. (1994). *Growing up with a single parent: What hurts, what helps*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Muthen, L.K. & Muthen, B.O. (1999). *Mplus user's guide.* Los Angeles: Authors.

Radloff, LS. (1977). The CES-D scale: A self-report depression scale for research in the general population. *Applied Psychological Measurement* 1, 385-401.

Rutter, M. (1985). Resilience in the face of adversity: protective factors and resistance to psychiatric disorder. *British Journal of Psychiatry,* 147**,** 598- 611.

Vandell, D. L. (1979). Effects of a playgroup experience on mother-son and father-son interaction. *Developmental Psychology, 15,* 379-385.

Willet J.B. & Sayer, A. G. (1994). Using covariance structure analysis to detect correlates and predictors of individual change over time. *Psychological Bulletin,* 116, 363-381.

Wu, L.L. & Martinson, B.C. (1993). Family structure and the risk of a premarital birth. *American Sociological Review, 58,* 210-32.