1994

The impact of marital discord and parenting practices on adolescent adjustment in intact and step families

Meei-ying Kao

Iowa State University

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The impact of marital discord and parenting practices on adolescent adjustment in intact and step families

Kao, Meei-ying, Ph.D.
Iowa State University, 1994

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The impact of marital discord and parenting practices on adolescent adjustment in intact and step families

by

Meei-ying Kao

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department: Sociology Major: Sociology

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In Charge of Major's Work

Signature was redacted for privacy.

For the Major Department

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For the Graduate College

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa

1994
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The incidence of remarriage today is the highest in the United States ever, where about 40% of marriages involve at least one spouse who has been married previously. In 1979, 32% of American marriages involved a previously married woman and 33% of marriages involved a previously married man. These figures represented significant increases from the beginning of the decade (Spanier and Furstenberg, 1987). While the divorce rate was rising during the 1960s, so was the remarriage rate. The increasing propensity to divorce in the United States has forced social scientists to reconsider their notions about the permanence of individual marriages. The majority of marriages are now terminated by divorce. Marriages of single parents and remarriages of divorced parents lead to blended families with stepparents and stepchildren. Glick and Norton (1979) developed early analyses and projections of long-term trends in the parental living arrangements of children under 18 years of age. An estimated 1.2 million children are involved in divorce each year (Spanier and Glick, 1980). It is conservatively estimated that, in 1978, 6.6 million children under 18 were living with a biological parent and a stepparent, representing about 10% of all children under age 18. By 1990, it has been estimated that the number grew to seven million and the percentage to 11% (Glick, 1980). Based on the situation described above, the living arrangements of American children have shifted dramatically during recent decades due to major demographic and socioeconomic changes.
Statement of the Problem

There has been little investigation of the effect of living in a stepfamily on a child’s mental health and behavior (Ganong and Coleman, 1984). Even less has been written about the effect on children of marital conflict in stepfamilies. Studies of remarriages generally have ignored marital conflict (Albrecht Bahr and Goodman, 1983; Furstenberg and Spanier, 1984), but evidence from clinically oriented writers suggests compelling arguments for high rates of marital disagreement in remarrriages. Not only do remarried couples have normative marital issues on which to disagree, but there are many issues specific to stepfamilies that are potentially conflictual (Coleman and Ganong, 1988). For example, remarried couples show greater depression as they became increasing exposed to the challenges and stresses involved in the establishment of a new stepfamily. Also, because remarried spouses were establishing or modifying parent-child relationships while simultaneously establishing their marital bond, conflict over child-rearing issues was expected to play a more prominent role in their relationship than in that of nondivorced couples, particularly as the children entered adolescence (Walker and Messinger, 1979). It is impossible to understand certain aspects of the dynamics of stepfamilies without understanding their context, including the dynamics of the larger family in which the stepfamily is embedded. Not only research but clinical work and program planning need to take the dynamics of these larger family units into account. Little progress is likely to be initiated in the knowledge concerning the causal mechanisms between parent-child relationships and child’s behavior.
problems until the multigenerational dynamics of these families are dealt with constructively dealt with.

In general, the family is a group of two or more individuals; therefore, an adequate understanding of the family also requires an understanding of the individuals within the family. Most people have their longest and most intimate contacts with others in the family setting. The length of family and marital contact may be extended because of increased longevity and frequency of marriage (Settles, 1987). The family serves as the primary initial context within which children learn appropriate and inappropriate interaction styles. Relations and behavior patterns in the home presumably set the stage for those that occur outside the home. However, the quality of parental relationship has been implicated increasingly over the past two decades as a factor contributing to the social and emotional development of children and adolescents. It is widely held both in the public and in the professional domain that marital turmoil (i.e., discord and divorce) leads to a variety of behavior problems.

The role of marital conflict in children and adolescent functioning has received substantial attention in recent years. Attention is put on the divorced family due to the dramatic rise in the divorce rate in the United States over the past 15 years. Emery (1982) presented a comprehensive assessment of the association between such conflict and child functioning and concluded that the relationship is strong. It has been reported that children whose parents' marriage have been disrupted or are characterized by high conflict are more likely to have mental health and behavior problems (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). Peterson and Zill (1986) indicated that marital disruption was associated
with a range of negative behavioral outcomes for children. After summarizing the literature on marital conflict, Emery (1982) concluded that every investigation, whether of questionable or sound methodology, found marital turmoil to be related to some form of under controlled behaviors in children. However, because not every discordant marriage is dissolved, these increased number of children of divorce omit a significant and largely unknown number of children who are exposed to serious marital conflict (Emery, 1982).

The other important source of conflict between parents involves discrepant value systems (Gerber, 1976; Bogel and Bell, 1968); child-rearing orientations represent one area where the values of the parents may or may not converge. Parental disagreement about child-rearing values, if extreme, is presumed to contribute to marital discord and would be expected to affect the psychological functioning of the child. Contradictory, confusing messages from disagreeing parents stress the child’s loyalties and complicate attempts to discern order and predictability in the family (Block, Block, and Morrison, 1981). Thus, the importance of parental relationship has increasingly been implicated as a factor contributing to the social and emotional development of the child. Various studies suggest that parental relationship is associated with the development of aggressive and antisocial behaviors and other types of emotional disturbances in children (McCord, 1979; Patterson, 1975; Rutter, 1979). However, aside from clinical studies where parental conflict is often extreme and pervasive (Hetherington, Cox, and Cox, 1976; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1974), nonclinical empirical studies seldom focus on specific parental conflict in essentially normal families.
Can the results of empirical research on the impact of parents' marital disagreement on children be extended to include the effects of remarital disagreement on stepchildren's behavior problems? There are at least two perspectives that can be considered in response to this question. From a social exchange perspective, children may have far less invested in their new family and may be resentful of the time their biological parent spends with the stepparent. Thus, they may be relatively unaffected by disagreement between the biological parent and stepparent. This would be especially true if the parent-child bond was a close one. From a family systems perspective, the marital subsystem is a critical one for family functioning (Haley, 1976; Minuchin, 1974). Disagreement in this particular subsystem will have a disruptive influence on the functioning of other family subsystems (such as children, parent-child relations etc.). Because most stepfamily research only examine of the effect of marital disagreement on stepchildren's behavior problems without controlling for other potentially intervening variables, it is necessary to investigate the complexity of stepfamily systems more thoroughly.

Objectives of the Study

Despite the fact that the knowledge about the psychological functioning of children and adolescents associated with parents' marital discord and parenting practices has greatly increased, especially in the past twenty years, and despite the surge of studies in the fields of sociology, psychology, and child development etc., research on the conduct problems of children remains largely diffuse and
uncordinated. The present study will analyze national survey data to investigate the issues discussed in the previous sections. The purposes of this study are: 1) to disentangle the effects of inconsistent empirical findings about the associations among family structure, marital discord, parenting practices, and adolescent's adjustment problems; 2) to identify the potential causal mechanisms which illustrate the relationships among the variables demonstrated above, and 3) to integrate diverse perspectives and research findings into a more extensive and systematic explanation for interpreting the complexity of the impact of marital discord and parenting practices on adolescent adjustment in different family structures.

Significance of the Study

Remarriage and reconstituted families are becoming an increasingly prevalent family form in the contemporary United States. It has been projected that approximately half of all marriages formed in the 1970s and 1980s end in divorce, about 75 percent of all divorced persons remarry, and about half of these who divorce will have at least one child under eighteen at the time of divorce (Beer, 1988). Thus, almost half the children born in the last decade will experience the divorce of their parents, and many of these children will go through the changes associated with their custodial parent's remarriage. Most children initially experience their parents' marital rearrangements as stressful; however, children's responses to their parents' marital transitions are diverse and likely to vary with the age and gender of the child, and to change over time.
as family members adjust to their new circumstances (Hetherington and Clingempeel, 1992). The majority of American children who entered their adolescence in the last decade will have experienced a difficult and problematic period during the transitions of their parents' marital relationship. However, the existing research on child development in intact and step families has given scant attention to the relations between family process variables (e.g., the quality of family relationships) and child outcomes (Clingempeel and Segal, 1986). Further, the interdependencies of these relationships within differential family structures and their impact on children may depend on children’s gender. Similarly, the gender of children has also been given scant attention by the researchers. Recently, a few studies have shown that girls have more difficulty in relationships with stepparents than do boys (Clingempeel, Brand, and Ievoli, 1984; Clingempeel, Ievoli, and Brand, 1984). However, investigators have not examined the relations between qualitative dimensions of stepparent-stepchild relationships and child outcomes for stepparents with male and female stepchildren. It is impossible for the clinicians and program planners to offer an effective treatment or program for helping the troubled families with problematic adolescents if the mechanisms of the associations between parent-child relationships and child outcomes cannot be clarified.

The purpose of this study is to fill the voids in current literature. The primary focus of this study is to investigate the effects of the quality of family relationships (e.g., marital relationship and parenting) on adolescent behavior problems while controlling on family structure. Furthermore, the study tests the
differences of dynamics of family relationships based on differences in family structures (i.e., intact vs. step family).

Overview

This dissertation is divided into six chapters, each reflecting a step in the research procedure. Chapter two reviews previous findings and theories which have examined issues related to marital discord, parenting practices, and children's adjustment problems. The theoretical background and research findings are discussed in detail to provide the beginning base for this study. Literature from both clinical and nonclinical empirical studies is reviewed in Chapter two. Chapter three proposes the hypotheses to be evaluated in this study. Chapter four outlines the procedures of the present study which includes the strategy and methods employed in data collection and analysis. It contains descriptions of the data, sample characteristics and operational measures of concepts. The empirical data analysis is reported in Chapter five. The primary method of analysis is structural equation modeling (SEM). Chapter six discusses and summarizes the findings and their implications.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

During the last several decades, change has typified American families. As American society changed, the structure and functions of American families also have changed. For instance, most families have changed to accommodate two earners, many children live with one parent, and remarriage has resulted in a array of stepfamily relationships. The increased diversity of family forms has led to predictions of the subsequent demise of the American family (Brubaker and Kimberly, 1993). Demographic changes within the American family have produced the wide range of family forms. According to Jaynes and Williams (1989, p.571), demographic trends for American families over the past three decades include "declining rates of marriage, later ages at first marriage, higher divorce rates, an increase in female-headed households, and larger proportion of children living in female-headed households." These demographic trends suggest the genesis of stresses associated with divergent family forms. As the diversity among American families increases, a greater number and diversity of problems have appeared.

According to the United States Bureau of the Census (1989a), marriages averaged 1.5 million annually from 1950s through the 1960s. The 1970s showed a decline in the number of first marriages for women, while the rate of first marriages for women in the 1980s remained relatively constant at a rate of 2.4 million annually. Interestingly, the decrease in rates of first marriage has begun again in the 1990s. It is estimated that the rate of first marriage per 100 single
women aged 14 to 44 is 8.2 (USBC, 1989b), a rate matched only by the all-time low of the depression years. Although marriages continue to be the primary source of family formation, this family type, after fluctuating considerably, has also declined steadily over the last two decades. It is estimated that married-couple families dropped from 87% of family households in 1970 to 82% in 1980 and 79% in 1990 (O'Connell and Bachu, 1990).

It should also be noted that while the first marriage rate has been declining, the divorce rate has been increasing to almost double the rates of 1950s and 60s and almost tripled since the 1920s and 30s (USBC, 1989b). Remarriage after divorce was a relatively uncommon phenomenon until the 1970s (Coleman and Ganong, 1990). Currently, the majority of remarriages occur after divorce, with almost 40% of marriages being remarriages for one or both partners (Coleman and Ganong, 1990). The time interval between divorce and remarriage has also decreased, to around three years (Pasley and Ihinger-Tallman, 1989). With remarriage, as with divorce and marriage, demographic along with economic and social trends serve as contributing factors in family formation decisions. The majority of persons remarrying after divorce indicates that membership in a family is an important element in most people's vision of a quality life. However, the impact of remarrying on individual development is deep and lasting through individual life-course, especially on the development of young children.

As mentioned earlier, family dissolution and reconstruction were not uncommon experiences for American people in the 1970s. Approximately 50% of first marriages now end in divorce, and 59% of these divorces involve
children under 18 (Glick, 1984). Nonetheless, divorce and the following period of single parenthood is usually transitional (Furstenberg, 1979). It is estimated that 70%-75% of divorced individuals remarry, and the majority of these remarriages occur within 5 years of the parental divorce (Clingempeel and Segal, 1986). Furthermore, Americans today are divorcing at younger ages and are decreasing the time between first and second marriages (Furstenberg and Spanier, 1984). An estimated 35% of children born in America in the early 1980s will spend part of their lives living in a stepfamily (Glick, 1984).

The majority of studies of stepfamilies have compared children living in stepfamilies, nuclear families, and/or single parent families on global measures of psychological adjustment (Chapman, 1977; Oshman and Manosevitz, 1976; Santrock, Warshak, Lindbergh, and Meadows, 1982). Although studies have found that children in stepfamilies are more poorly adjusted than those in first-marriage families (Bray, 1988; Dawson, 1991; Hetherington and Clingempeel, 1992; Peterson and Zill, 1986; Steinberg, 1987; Zill, 1988), the family structure differences are generally small, are not always found (Kurdek and Sinclair, 1988), are sometimes present for girls only (Santrock, Warshak, Lindbergh, and Meadows, 1982), and vary by source of information (Hetherington and Clingempeel, 1992). Overall, these studies have found negligible differences in psychological outcomes for children living in stepfamilies and nuclear families (Ganong and Coleman, 1984).

However, studies of nuclear families do find that more positive marital relationships are related to more competent parenting practices (Belsky, 1979; Olweus, 1980) which, in turn, are related to better adjustments among children
The positive effects of higher marital quality on parent-child relationship which, in turn, affects children's psychological adjustment in nuclear families may not apply to stepfamilies. From a family systems perspective (Minuchin, 1985), remarriage of the resident parent requires a reallocation of the personal resources of family members. Some of the resident parent's time and affection previously given to the child may be reallocated to the new spouse (Visher and Visher, 1978). That is, the resident parent may have a finite amount of time and affection to give such that when more is given to the new spouse (i.e., an event potentially associated with greater marital quality), less is available for his/her children. Thus, the developmental need of the stepparent couple for romantic bonding may conflict with the children's need for continuity in the parent-child relationship (Brand and Clingempeel, 1987) which may negatively affect the psychological adjustment of children.

In summary, the existence of a strong relation between ongoing family processes and childhood adjustment has been well documented. High levels of interparental conflict have been shown to be related to increases in the behavior problems of young adolescents (Long, Forehand, Fauber, and Brody, 1987). While a number of researchers have documented the existence of a relation between family processes and children adjustment problems (Emery, 1982; Long and Forehand, 1987; O'Leary and Emery, 1984; Rutter, 1971), some fundamental questions concerning this relation remain to be addressed: 1) What are the mechanisms by which family processes (i.e., interparental conflict and parenting practices) exert their influence on children's adjustment? 2) Are the
mechanisms operating the same ways in different family structures (i.e., stepfamily vs. nuclear family)?

The purposes of the study are to disentangle the complicated relationships among family structure, marital discord, parenting practices and children's outcomes, and to investigate the casual mechanisms among these relationships.

Family Structure

The role of family in adolescent functioning has received increasing attention in recent years. Conventionally, adolescence has been viewed as a time when family becomes less important and peers become more important. However, some researchers (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi and Larson, 1984) among others have noted that the family continues to serve a critical role during adolescence. That is, the family provides a safe environment for adolescents to rest and rejuvenation. When the family is disrupted, there can be detrimental outcomes for the adolescent. In contemporary American society divorce touches most people, either directly, through their own marital breakup, or indirectly, through the dissolution of marriages of parents, friends, and relatives.

Despite the high divorce rate in the United States, the rising remarriage rate "vetoes" the notion that the American family is obsolete. It is estimated that each day, 1,300 stepfamilies are formed out of previous marriages dissolved through death or divorce (Visher and Visher, 1986). Stepfamilies have become relatively common in modern society. In 1987 there were 4.3 million stepfamilies in the United States with 5.85 million stepchildren. In that year,
stepfamilies constituted 17.4% of all married couple families with young children, and it has been projected that 40% of married couple families will become stepfamilies before the youngest child is 18 years old (Orleans, Pails, and Caddell, 1989). This trend seems to indicate a desire on the part of singles to reap the benefits of a healthy marital state and to participate in a family life-style (Whitsett and Land, 1992). These new families, however, often experience a great deal of tension and strain, challenging even their most resourceful members and the coping capacity of the system as a whole.

A stepfamily faces several difficulties from its beginning. Satir (1972) declared that all blended families start out with great handicaps; Juroe and Juroe (1983) argued that one of the greatest handicaps these families experience is the common myth that stepparenting is just like parenting in the intact family. However, a key difference is that a stepparent has assumed the responsibility for helping to raise another individual's offspring. Remarriage formally establishes multiple family relationships in the stepfamily that have not yet developed interpersonally. Although the remarried couple has voluntarily formalized their relationship, their children usually have not developed the same kind of positive bonds with the stepparent or with stepsiblings. Thus, the intact family might be an inappropriate model for stepfamilies. A number of researchers (e.g., Esses and Campbell, 1984; Kompara, 1980; Mills, 1984; Papernow, 1984; Visher and Visher, 1988; Walker and Messinger, 1979) have noted that the stepfamilies are unique and needs to be considered separately from the intact families.

As the proportion of stepfamilies has grown, there is a growing need to have both background information and specific guidelines in working with these
families. The unique challenges of stepfamily living have appropriately become
the focus of a significant body of clinical and research literature. An important
research question is what is the effect of a parent's remarriage on children. In the
past, it was popularly assumed that parental remarriage had a detrimental effect
on children. This assumption, perhaps fueled by portrayals of wicked
stepmothers and abusive stepparents in fairy tales, held that stepchildren would
likely exhibit mental, emotional, and interpersonal problems. Perhaps the most
prevalent view of stepfamily functions has been the deficit comparison model.
According to this model stepfamilies lack, or are deficient in, vital family
functions compared to first-marriage families. Stepfamilies have been depicted
as being at greater risk of marital instability (Huber and Spitze, 1980; White and
Booth, 1985) resulting in poorer outcomes for children than first-marriage
families (Garbarino, Sebes, and Schellenbach, 1984; Russell, 1984). Thus, from
the perspective of this model, the greater uncertainties of stepfamily living can
be explained in sociological terms as consequences of 'incomplete
institutionalization' (Cherlin, 1978). Actually, portrayals of stepfamilies in
popular literature have pictured them more negatively than other family forms
(Coleman and Ganong, 1987; Fine, 1986). One indication of this perspective is
that 'stepchild' has become a metaphor for something abused, neglected, or
unloved, and 'stepparent' (especially stepmother) has become a negative term
laden with stereotypes. For example, stepmothers are usually wicked and mean.

In contrast, an alternative to the deficit model of the stepfamily has
emerged in the last decade (Furstenberg, 1987; Ihinger-Tallman, 1988). The
adaptive model has viewed the stepfamily in a more positive light; it admits that
Stepfamilies may function effectively in a variety of ways and that subjective and structural conditions affect stepfamily adaption (Coleman, Ganong, and Gingrich, 1985; Furstenberg and Spanier, 1984). The stepfamily is conceived in this model as a dynamic system which responds during its life course to varying exogenous and endogenous forces. Putting popular assumptions and stereotypes aside, unanswered questions remain about the effects of parental remarriage on children? Is it always unfavorable? Because much of the professional literature has been initiated by therapists and clinical counselors, the body of empirical research on the stepfamily is still meager when compared to the clinical literature.

Stepfamily research has suffered from the lack of a firm theoretical framework from which to formulate research questions (Ganong and Coleman, 1984). Studies comparing the adjustment of children in stepfamilies with those in first-marriage families are limited in two ways. First, such studies have not elucidated potentially important differences between types of families (Clingempeel, Brand, and Segal, 1987). Second, these studies have not addressed the processes within stepfamilies that influence children's adjustment (Coleman and Ganong, 1990). Although there have been few direct investigations of specific mechanisms of influence, both Emery (1982) and Margolin (1981), in their reviews of the adolescent adjustment literature, have provided theory-based discussions in which a number of putative etiological mechanisms through which those exogenous factors may affect children are posited.

One idea derived from the family systems perspective is "detouring" (Minuchin, Rosman, and Baker, 1978), or so-called "scapegoating", whereby the
children's behavior problems serve the function of distracting the parents and
the family from the marital discord. This is presumed to lead to parental
rejection of the children, which is likely to result in an increase in the behavior
problems exhibited by the children. Other causal mechanisms have been posited
under the proposition of social learning theory. Patterson (1982) has suggested
that parental conflict increases the risk of child antisocial or coercive behavior by
reducing the consistency or effectiveness of parental discipline practices,
particularly maternal monitoring of the child's behavior, which Patterson has
found to be the best predictor of delinquent behavior in a nonclinic sample of
boys (Patterson, Stouthamer-Loeber, 1984).

In general, it can be argued that most of the interpretations derived from
these various theoretical frameworks suggest that marital discord influences
children's adjustment indirectly by altering some aspect of the parent-child
relationship. The disruption in the children's adjustment and functioning is
thus viewed as a direct response to the alternation in the parent-children
interaction, rather than the marital discord itself. The primary mechanism of
influence in each of these perspectives involves a path from the parental
subsystem (i.e., marital discord) to the parent-children subsystem (i.e., some
disruption or change in the parent-children relationship) and finally to the
children (i.e., children adjustment problems). A consideration of the similar
mechanisms posited above suggests that interparental discord may alter parental
behavior in at least three major ways each of which may have unique impact on
children's adjustment and functioning. First, marital discord can lead to a
decrease in consistent and effective discipline practices which would likely lead
to an increase in children's antisocial and undercontrolled behaviors. Second, marital discord can lead to parental withdrawal from, or even rejection of the children, with children adjustment problems, either internalizing or externalizing, seen as a response to the perceived withdrawal. Third, marital discord can result in an increase in the use of psychological or emotional control as a way of securing and maintaining a strong emotional alliance and level of support from the children. High levels of this type of parental behavior might be expected to be associated with internalizing symptoms in the children such as anxiety, depression, and/or somatic symptoms.

Given that parental conflict is thought to be related to adolescent adjustment regardless of parental status (Rutter, 1971), one might argue that marital discord would exert its impact on adolescent adjustment in the same manner (i.e., through parenting behaviors) for both family structures (i.e., step vs. intact family). However, some research has suggested that the relation between marital discord and adolescent adjustment may be stronger among adolescents from stepfamilies than among those from intact families (Forehand, et al., 1986). These findings are consistent with a cumulative stress interpretation (O'Leary and Emery, 1984; Rutter, 1971). The present study will do a direct comparison of the relations between marital discord, parenting, and adjustment across the two family structures to investigate the significance of differences in the research issues between these two family structures by employing the model testing and comparison across gender and family structures.
Marital Discord

In every marriage there is a tension between the need for stability in the couple's relationship and the desire of each member to maintain and develop an individual identity. Every marriage needs enough agreement and cooperation between its members for the marriage to hold together. Similar values, goals, and lifestyles between the partners make it easier for them to feel their marriage is moving in a desirable direction. On the other hand, each partner in a marriage has his or her individual needs, goals, and desires. Particularly in American culture, in which individual gratification is highly valued, putting the marriage first is not always acceptable. The need for identity is at times in conflict with the need for stability (Askham, 1984). Each relationship has different parameters of how much closeness is too much and how much separateness can be tolerated. These limits change as the relationship matures and in response to pressures on the couple from other family members, work, and community. The tension between these two poles can lead to creative solutions and to growth in the individual members. Along the way it can also cause arguments, disappointment, and frustration (Keshet, 1988).

Remarriages and first marriages have many similarities. First-time marriers and remarriers have to meet identical legal requirements in order to marry. Once married, husbands and wives in remarriages have the same legal obligations in respect to one another as husbands and wives as in first marriages. In each of these types of marriages, the two partners must learn to communicate effectively with one another, divide family work, decide how to earn and spend money, adjust to one another sexually, and build a family culture. Nevertheless,
remarriages are different from first marriages in at least four ways: 1) At least one of the partners in every remarriage is experienced at marriage, 2) The norms for remarriage are more ambiguous than the norms for first marriage, 3) Members of remarried families are typically involved in more complex kin networks than individuals in first marriages, and 4) Remarried individuals are more subject to negative stereotyping than individuals marrying for the first time (Stover and Hope, 1993).

The problems of a remarried family also differ from those of a family formed by a first marriage because one or both partners have been married before and might have children from their first marriage. The partner's past and present ties to their former families create special opportunities and constraints for the second marriage. When people enter a second marriage they find themselves in a new and unusual situation. In general, the remarried couple is the foundation of a stepfamily. They often bring together diverse stepfamily members and are responsible for keeping them together. However, their couple relationship is likely to have a shorter history and less power than the relationship between either parent and children. Under this circumstance, the remarried couple has a tremendous task of building a lasting relationship with each other at the same time that they are "struggling" with their former partners, raising their children (and/or their stepchildren), and pursuing their careers. The challenge for the remarried couple may be far more serious than that for the first marriage couple.

As most of the researchers agree, family serves as the primary initial context within which children learn appropriate and inappropriate interaction
styles. When children and adolescents behave in socially unacceptable ways, overt interparental conflict is widely considered to be the critical cause. Under the family context, the impact of marital discord on children has been the focus of numerous investigations over the past 30 years (Reid and Crisafulli, 1990). Unfortunately, past empirical studies have been inconsistent in supporting the assumption just mentioned. Although there is agreement that marital problems are associated either directly or indirectly with particular child behavior problems, there is disagreement about the linking direction between them. Some researchers have speculated that covert conflict may also play an important role. One should note that both marital conflict and child adjustment are multidimensional constructs. Marital conflict can vary in frequency, intensity, content, and resolution and can be overt or covert. Because marital conflict can be expressed in myriad ways, it becomes important to identify which dimensions of marital conflict are related to child problems.

Similarly, child adjustment is a global term that encompasses elements such as the adaptiveness and appropriateness of a child's behavior, emotional well-being, self-concept, and academic achievements. Understanding the relationship between marital discord and child adjustment also requires assessment of a wide range of adjustment indexes to determine if some outcomes are more closely related to exposure to marital conflict than others. (Grych and Fincham, 1990).

How disturbed marriages may affect children is an obviously important question for all segments of society concerned with family life and the welfare of children. Evidence on the relationship between marital disruption and
disturbance of children is central to developing an understanding of the family as a social system. The role of marital problems in child and adolescent functioning has received substantial attention in recent years. In general, most studies appear to support the general hypothesis that marital disruption is positively correlated with child disturbance (O'Leary and Emery, 1984; Margolin, 1981). In his landmark review, Emery (1982) presented a comprehensive assessment of the association between such problems and child functioning and concluded that the relationship is robust. Although the existence of a negative relation between ongoing marital discord and childhood adjustment has been well documented, research on stepchildren has seldom been articulated from a theoretical base. Although a few studies utilized a specific theory (e.g., systems, social learning, psychoanalytic, role, or attribution), a majority did not do so. Instead, the most common approach was one that has been labeled the “deficit family model” (Marotz-Baden et al., 1979). An assumption of this model is “that variations in the nuclear family will produce undesirable deviations in children's personality, social behavior, and school success.” (Ganong and Coleman, 1984). High levels of marital discord have been shown to increase behavior problems of toddlers (Jouriles, Pfiffner, and O'Leary, 1988), school-aged children (Shaw and Emery, 1987), and young adolescents (Long, Forehand, Fauber, and Brody, 1987). As indicated above, studies of nuclear families have found that positive marital relationships are related to competent parenting practices (Belsky, 1979; Olweus, 1980) which, in turn, are related to better adjustments by children (Baumrind, 1971; Hetherington, Cox, and Cox, 1982).
Can the results of research on the effects of parents' marital discord on children be extended to include "remarital discord" effects on stepchildren? There are at least two perspectives that can be taken in response to this question. First, discord in the stepfamily will negatively affect children's behavior, perhaps even to greater extent than in the nuclear family. Most stepchildren have already experienced at least one family disruption. Parents' marital discord in the new family may create anticipatory anxiety in the children regarding an additional disruption. Second, children may have far less invested in this new family and may be resentful of the time their biological parent spends with the stepparent. Thus, they may be relatively unaffected by discord between their biological parent and stepparent (Coleman and Ganong, 1987).

Despite the gains in knowledge concerning the impact of marital quality on children's adjustments, research in this area has been somewhat hindered by several problems. First, because previous studies in this area have largely relied on cross-sectional data, there is uncertainty about the causal relation between marital quality and child outcomes. Second, earlier studies have also widely overlooked fathers, relying instead on mothers' report of marital quality in relation to child functioning. And third, many of the studies linking marital quality and children adjustments were conducted with families who identified themselves as requiring intervention for their children or experiencing marital disturbance, a more extreme end of the continuum of parental and child behavior that the likelihood of demonstrating effects is maximized (Howes and Markman, 1989).
In summary, the complexity of most stepfamily systems may make a simple explanation of the effect of marital discord on adjustment of children inappropriate. Also, the research findings may be affected by measurement consideration, since evidence suggests that reliance on parents' self-report for data on marital discord and child problems leads to stronger estimates of the relationship than when data are obtained from independent sources (e.g., interviews, teachers, and/or research observers (O'Leary and Emery, 1984). Finally, the sampling processes of previous studies may bias (e.g., over-estimate) the true relationship between marital problems and child outcomes.

In spite of the predicaments reviewed above, previous studies did shed considerable light on the association between marital problems and child adjustment problems. Specifically, three major findings have emerged. First, studies have indicated that marital discord, not separation, is the critical factor in the association between parental divorce and child problems (Emery, 1982; Markman and Jones-Leonard, 1985). Second, evidence suggests that boys respond to marital discord by manifesting problems of undercontrol, while girls respond by manifesting problems of overcontrol (Block, Block, and Morrison, 1981). Finally, evidence is accumulating that marital discord affects children through the parent-child relationship (Belsky, 1984; Easterbrooks and Emde, 1988). Taken together, these can be summarized to show that the quality of the parents' marital interaction is a major factor in influencing children outcomes. Although there is convincing evidence to suggest that marital distress or conflict is associated with a wide range of deleterious child outcomes, including depression, withdrawal, poor social competence, health problems, poor academic
performance, and a variety of conduct-related difficulties (Cowan and Cowan, 1990; Emery and O'Leary, 1982; Forehand, et al., 1986; Gottman and Katz, 1989; Peterson and Zill, 1986; Whitehead, 1979), the conclusion that marital discord is associated with children's adjustment needs to be examined more closely for two reasons. First, relatively few of the studies investigating marital discord published specifically measure interparental conflict, but focused instead on marital quality using self-report measures of global marital satisfaction or interviews of unknown reliability and validity. Moreover, marital satisfaction is also correlated with other factors that may affect children's adjustment, for example, the parent-child relations (Belsky, 1981). Thus, studies using measures of marital satisfaction provide only indirect evidence that marital discord is associated with child adjustments. Second, little attention has been paid to the processes that give rise to the association between marital discord and child problems, and specific causal hypotheses rarely have been tested. Therefore, it is necessary to analyze more precisely the association between marital discord and child adjustment and to explore processes that may account for this association (Grych and Fincham, 1990).

Parenting Practices

In the past two decades, diverse sectors of American society have demonstrated intense and growing concern about the quality of parent-child relationships, especially in the child's early years. Changing demographic characteristics of families and communities have contributed to wide-spread
interest in the nature and consequences of eroding sources of help for parents with young children. Through direct experience, most Americans encounter daily reminders of the loss of extended families and neighborhoods as traditional sources of support for parenting, and home environments that fail to facilitate children's optimal development (Powell, 1993). Contemporary concern about the quality of parent-child relationships can be regarded as an extension of earlier themes in America about the importance of parenting in the early years. Several factors are responsible for the current "zeitgeist" circumscribing parenthood. The major cause is the new family demographics. In addition, many scholars view the rapid and complex societal changes as contributing to a decline in the resourcefulness of families for rearing children. Coleman (1987) indicates that over the past 25 years, there has been an extensive erosion of social capital within families and communities for the proper rearing of young children. In the family, social capital includes the presence of parents and the range of parent-child relationships. Mattox (1991) argues that a "parenting deficit" in America today is more pressing than budget and trade deficits. He indicates that parents, on average, spend 17 hours a week with their children, down from 30 hours a week in 1965. Recent indicators of child functioning also have contributed to a sense of alarm about the situation of parent-child relations. The interest and concern regarding the parent-child relationship in recent years also stem from a greater awareness of the ecological embeddedness of child development (Powell, 1993). Due to the influential work of Bronfenbrenner (1979) and to changes in family and community demographic characteristics, there is a greater
understanding in society that children grow and develop within the context of families and their social networks.

In summary, an important lesson from empirical research is that parenting is best understood and facilitated within the context of individual and environment conditions. Determinants of individual differences in parent functioning can be grouped into three major domains. Sources of stress and support within the environment is one of the major domains (Belsky, 1984). That is, interspousal relationship which often is regarded as marital quality plays a critical role in influencing individuals' parent functioning. There is a growing research literature that points to the relation of environment conditions to the quality of parent-child relationships. For example, a recent study discovered that minor daily hassles associated with parenting, conceptualized as irritating, frustrating, annoying, and distressing demands which often are the major content of marital discord found in everyday transactions with the environment, were more significant sources of negative parenting within the parent-child system (Powell, 1993).

Traditionally, students of socialization have directed their primary interesting to understanding processes whereby parents' childrearing strategies and behaviors shape and influence their offsprings' development. Researchers and clinicians alike now recognize that families comprise several subsystems (i.e., spousal or marital, parent-child, and the sibling subsystem), each of which affects and is affected by events that occur in the other systems (Belsky, 1981). In particular, this transactional or systems approach to socialization suggests that parenting influences the children; in addition, the quality of parenting is
influenced by the marital relationships (Brody and Pillegrini, 1986). Research on the relation between marital quality and parenting that child developmentalists have undertaken has essentially focused on families with infants or toddler-aged children. The empirical results of these research efforts have consistently demonstrated that supportive husband-wife relationships facilitate the adaption of mothers and fathers to their parental roles during the transition to parenthood (Grossman, Eichler, and Winickoff, 1980; Russell, 1974; Shereshefsky and Yarrow, 1973). Traditionally, studies of infant and toddler development have examined only the child or the relationship between the child and his or her mother. However, studies which were conducted during the past twenty years have intentionally emphasized the importance of the father's parenting role (Clarke-Stewart, 1978; Lamb, 1976; Parke and Sawin, 1976). More recently, the focus of parent-child research has shifted to include the family triad. In studying the three-member family system, arguments have been forwarded regarding the significance of the husband-wife relationship in family functioning, and the case has been made that the quality of marriage influences parenting characteristics, and therefore, child functioning (Belsky, 1981; Parke, 1979).

Viewing the family as a dynamic system, child-parent relationships and husband-wife relationships are interdependent. Researchers usually assume that marital quality influences parenting characteristics, since the emotional support and fulfillment parents derive from the marriage influences their availability for sensitive interactions with their children. However, the positive or negative effects between marriage and parenting is not readily apparent. A poor marriage
could preclude attention and sensitive responsiveness to the children, such as when parents are irritable or emotionally strained from an unsatisfying marriage, but a stressed marriage may increase parents' attentions to the children, perhaps as compensation for the affection or satisfaction lacking in marital interaction. Conversely, good marriages also may either impede or facilitate sensitive parent-child interactions. In some cases, happy couples may regard the child as an intrusion in their intimacy, whereas in other situations, the child may be the source of common interest and shared pleasure. Theoretically, any of these configurations is plausible. However, the available clinical and empirical evidence support a position linking negative marital quality with negative parenting practices and with child conduct problems.

Given the modest correlation between general marital functioning and child behavior problems, researchers are speculating that specific aspects of marital functioning, irrespective of the level of general marital functioning, are important for understanding the development of problematic child behavior (Jouriles, Murphy, and O'Leary, 1989; Porter and O'Leary, 1980). Possible dimensions include disagreements about child rearing, interspousal aggression, and children's exposure to parental hostility. Research consistently has reflected that inter parental conflict, in both intact and step families, is related to difficulties in children's and adolescents' functioning, including externalizing and internalizing problems as well as deficits in cognitive and social competence (Emery, 1982; Long, Forehand, Fauber, and Brody, 1987; Shaw and Emery, 1987). Nonetheless, it remains unclear how interparental conflict negatively influences child development. One possibility is that such interparental conflict adversely
affects parenting skills (Emery, 1982). Extreme conflict between parents may create inconsistent moods in either or both parents and, therefore, contribute to inconsistent parenting behaviors.

Research on child maladjustment also indicates that parenting behavior represents one factor potentially accounting for a link between marital discord and child conduct problems (Belsky, 1984; Jouriles, Barling, and O'Leary, 1987; Patterson, 1982). Low levels of positive parental behaviors and high levels of negative parental behaviors have consistently been related to child deviance (Maccoby and Martin, 1983; Patterson, 1982). It is useful to consider briefly the kind of parenting that appears to promote optimal child functioning. In infancy, detailed observational studies have revealed that cognitive-motivational competence and socieoemotional development are promoted by attentive, warm, stimulating, responsive, and nonrestrictive caregiving (Belsky, 1984). Baumrind (1971) indicated that during the preschool years high levels of nurturance and control foster the ability to engage peers and adults in a friendly and cooperative manner, as well as the capacity to be instrumentally resourceful and achievement-striving. As children grow older, parental use of induction and reasoning, consistent discipline, and expression of warmth have been found to relate positively to self-esteem, internalized controls, prosocial orientation, and intellectual achievement during the school-age years (Coopersmith, 1967; Hoffman, 1970; McCall, Applebaum, and Hagarty, 1973). Consideration of these empirical findings suggests that, across childhood, parenting that is sensitively attuned to children's capabilities and to the developmental tasks they face promotes a variety of highly valued developmental outcomes, including
emotional security, behavioral independence, social competence, and intellectual achievement (Belsky, 1984). In contrast, negative and harsh parenting, and inconsistent discipline will increase the possibility of children conduct problems during the developmental courses.

Children from discordant marriages, especially violent ones, are more likely to exhibit a range of behavior problems than children from nondiscordant families (Emery, 1982, 1989; Jouriles, Murphy, and O'Leary, 1989). Summarizing these empirical studies, one can conclude that one important consequence of the interdependence between marital relations, parental behavior, and child development occurs when there is pervasive marital discord. Marital discord is associated with particular child-rearing behaviors that are considered to be detrimental to children's healthy development. Marital discord may result in heightened maternal stress, in part due to decreased paternal involvement in child rearing (Biller and Solomon, 1986). As a consequence of the stress, mothers may become emotionally unavailable to their children (Dunn, 1988) or may exhibit diminished mothering (Walker, 1979). A second argued link between marital discord and parenting posits that negative marital interactions may spill over into child-rearing behaviors. Consequently, parents in discordant relationships will be less positive and more negative in disciplinary practices than nondiscordant parents (Holden and Ritchie, 1991). From the literature on child abuse and families with problem children, we know that violent parents have lower rates of interaction, fewer positive interactions with their children, and more frequent interactions tinged with anger and punitiveness (Burgess and Conger, 1978; Patterson, 1980; Trickett and Kuczynski, 1986; Vasta, 1982). The
third suspected consequence of marital discord on parenting is an increase in inconsistent discipline, another suspected cause of child behavior problems (Becker, 1964). This inconsistency can result from two possible sources. Poor communication and disagreements about child rearing may lead to differences in disciplinary response between the maritally discordant parents. Besides, conflictual marital relationships may result in different parenting practices within one parent due to diminished ability to be consistent or a change in the parent's behavior in the presence of the spouse. Thus, influences between family relationships are bidirectional and circular (Parke, Power, and Gottman, 1979; Spainer, Lewis, and Aquilino, 1978). Just as marital quality may influence the child indirectly through its impact on parenting practices, it may also affect the child directly, for instance, by creating a high level of tension in the home or through the child's internalization of father-mother interactional patterns. These configurations gain added complexity when sex of child differences are considered. This will be discussed later.

Although the empirical findings do reflect that the interdependence existed, firm conclusions regarding the nature of the interdependencies between marital functioning and parenting still await further investigation in light of ambiguity due to methodological limitations such as inconsistency in measures of marital quality and parenting, and the lack of independent assessment of marital interaction and parenting behavior (Goldberg and Easterbrooks, 1984). It is of interest to know that, while great effort has been expended studying the characteristics and consequences of parenting, much less attention has been devoted to studying why parents parent the way they do beyond social-class and
cross-cultural comparisons. It is unfortunately the case that much of the research relevant to this field of concern remains unintegrated and underutilized. This could be, in part, a function of the general absence of conceptual models capable of integrating the disparate findings in the literature into a coherent whole that is greater than the sum of its parts (Belsky, 1984).

Previous research findings have indicated that, at least in the early stages of marital disharmony, parent-child relationships are disrupted and parents are less authoritative in both divorced and remarried families than in nondivorced families (Hagan, Hollier, O'Connor, and Eisenberg, 1992). The process of becoming a stepparent, particularly in the early stages of stepfamily living, is often rocky, confusing, and frustrating. The stepparent begins life in a stepfamily as an outsider to a set of already established relationships. The lack of well-defined roles for stepparents has long been a concern in the stepfamily research literature (Cherlin, 1992; Draughon, 1975; Waldron and Whittington, 1979). Stepparents, for example, are often unsure about how severely they can discipline their stepchildren. Some stepparents might decide not to show favoritism toward their own children, therefore, discipline their own children more harshly than their stepchildren. Others may encounter difficulty in establishing themselves as a disciplinarian with the stepchildren. Thus, stepparental role is distinct from the typical parental role. In the area of stepparental roles, there is a high degree of ambiguity and uncertainty about what can or should be done if stepparents do not play a particular role. Evidence from clinical studies indicates that many stepfamilies struggle with the questions of how closely stepparents should resemble parents (Visher and Visher, 1978).
Although one may expect that stepparents love their stepchildren and take on at least some aspects of the parental role, stepparents may still be blocked from exercising disciplinary and control prerogatives, giving rise to both role ambiguity and role conflict (Messinger, 1976). Given these ambiguous expectations, it is predictable that stepfamilies report issues concerning children under this situation as the most frequent problem area (Duberman, 1975). These uncertainties seem to result from the sharing of the parental role by the stepparent and the noncustodial biological parent, who usually retains some ties to the children. Both adult couple processes and stepparent-child interactions, are fundamentally different from biological parent-child relationships, particularly in early stepfamily life. One way to see how these roles differ in reconstituted families is to compare how parents and stepparents divide up the responsibility for making major decisions regarding different sets of children in the family. Examining the actual allocation of responsibility provides a basis for assessing the degree to which the stepparent has become integrated in the family system. Another way of viewing parent-child relationships in remarried families is in terms of relative marginality of all members, parents and children (Hobart, 1987). Usually, the mother is the more central parental figure because the mother assumes most of the parenting responsibilities, including both instrumental and expressive aspects (Entwisle and Doering, 1980; LaRossa and LaRossa, 1981). The father is thus the more marginal parent, particularly in remarried families. The stepchildren both of the mother's or of the father's in a stepfamily are also in a relatively marginal position compared to siblings who are the products of the current marriage since they are "unshared." Note that
because we are speaking of dyadic relationships enmeshed in the larger network of family relations, the more marginal the children, the weaker or more difficult may be his or her relations with his or her biological parent as well as his or her stepparent.

Another situation is worthy of note, is that late preadolescent and early adolescent children who are concurrently experiencing the changes and challenges associated with the transition to adolescence may be more vulnerable to the effects of parental divorce and/or remarriage (Anderson, Hetherington, and Clingempeel, 1989; Heterington et al., 1989; Lewis and Wallerstein, 1987; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). Recent evidence suggests that disruptions in family relationships may also occur in both new and more established stepfamilies when children move into adolescence (Heterington, 1989).

Summarizing this literature, some conclusions can be drawn. First, parent-child relationships in divorced and remarried families are generally more negative and conflictual and less authoritative than in intact families. Second, following remarriage, because of parental preoccupation and involvement in the new marital relationship, monitoring and control by both biological parent and stepparent would low (Hetherington, 1988; Wallerstein Corbin and Lewis, 1988). Third, a disengaged parenting style is more common in stepparents than in intact parents (Bray, 1988). Fourth, since it is especially difficult for children to adjust to a remarriage during early adolescence, children in remarried families continue to be more negative toward their stepparents over their life courses (Brand, Clingempeel and Bowen-Woodward, 1988; Bray, et al., 1987; Hetherington, 1989). Finally, as children move further into adolescence, there is
more distancing between stepparent and children in remarried families. This distancing would be reflected in decreased levels of warmth, monitoring, and control on the part of the stepparent and decreased positivity as well as increased negativity on the part of the children (Steinberg, 1988). In general, previous research has shown that relationships between most parents and children become less involved as children move into early adolescence and become more autonomous (Steinberg, 1988). Further, family structure superimposes particular patterns on this general trend. Adolescence can be a difficult time for parents as well as for children. Homes with a new stepparent appears to be vulnerable to the emergence of disrupted, unstable parent-child relationships during this troubled time (Bray, 1988; Hetherington, 1989).

Child Psychological Distress

Adolescence represents a particularly vulnerable phase of development in the preadult years. In general, this period is marked by rapid physical growth and psychological transmutation. In addition, it is also denoted by expanding roles into more complex social environments that expose the adolescent for the first time to a widening array of stressors and life-shaping choices. Despite all of these possible challenges, most boys and girls, under normal circumstances, are able to sail through this transitional period without significant difficulties. However, some adolescents, especially those who live in the disrupted families, do experience maladaptive response to the biological, psychological, and social changes of their preadult years (Rutter, Izard, and Read, 1986). Children and
adolescents in families are often influenced by external events and changes through the relationships of family members and social relations of affection and control. Among family relationships, marital interaction is especially vulnerable to external pressures and can serve as a link to the quality of parental behavior. As noted, studies on children of divorce and discord (Emery, 1988; O'Leary and Emery, 1984) generally have found increased conduct disturbance in children after parental divorce and in response to parental conflict. Other research on the interpersonal context of children's development has demonstrated that the importance of the quality of parent-child interactions and feelings for child adjustment (Grotevant and Cooper, 1985; Hauser et al., 1987). Although some studies suggested that the exposure of adolescents to open marital discord might promote children's psychological health and cognitive development, a majority of studies indicated that marital discord, emotional withdrawal, and open hostility between parents are detrimental to child and adolescent social and psychological functioning (Emery, 1982; Hetherington, Stanley, and Anderson, 1989).

Research on behavior problems of children has consistently identified two broad categories or bands which have been labeled externalizing and internalizing problems (Achenbach and Edelbrock, 1978). The former is disruptive to others whereas the latter is associated with personal distress (e.g., depression) for the individual. Researchers who are interested in these types of problems of children have attempted to identify the family factors which may contribute to such difficulties. As reviewed in the preceding paragraphs, interparental conflict in both intact and step families has been identified as a
primary correlate of child or adolescent behavior problems. Several hypotheses have been proposed to explore the mechanisms. Among these hypotheses, the most prominent ones is the disrupted parenting hypothesis. The disrupted parenting hypothesis argues that interparental conflict leads to disruption in parenting practices which lead to child behavior problems. Patterson (1986), among others have indicated that poor parenting is associated with externalizing problems. Moreover, in a retrospective study, Holmes and Robins (1987) reported that poor parenting predicted internalizing problems (i.e., depression). In other words, the mechanism proposes an indirect path through parenting which could lead to either externalizing or internalizing problems. In addition, internalizing problems could also result through a direct pathway, particularly when the interparental conflict is intense. Thus, rather than the child systematically appraising a situation and deciding upon a strategy for handling it, he/she may be overwhelmed by intense conflict and display behaviors similar to those reported as attribute of post-traumatic stress disorder. These symptoms include depression, anxiety, constriction of affect, diminished interest in activities, and physical symptoms, for example, headaches, stomach aches etc.. All of which are internalizing problems. Johnston, Campbell, and Mayes (1985) indicated that such symptoms in children exposed to physical violence between parents. Therefore, this mechanism also proposes a direct pathway from marital discord to internalizing conduct problems.

Research in both home and school settings also indicates that behavior, social, emotional, and learning problems have been found to be more characteristic of children from divorced and remarried families than of children
from intact families (Allison and Furstenberg, 1989; Bray, 1988; Guidubaldi, 1988; Zill, 1988; Zimiles and Lee, 1991). Thus, on the basis of previous research findings, one can expect that children in nondonorved families would be more socially responsible and academically competent and would exhibit fewer behavioral and emotional problems than children in stepfamilies. In brief, family structure relates significantly to adolescent's conduct problems. Children who had experienced their parents' marital discord demonstrated greater difficulties in adjustment than children who had been spared such experiences, as all children approached and entered adolescence.

**Gender Differences**

A number of investigators have reported a relationship between marital discord and severity or frequency of behavior problems in children. Interestingly, these findings are consistent across cultures. In general, most investigators have viewed marital discord as a precursor of childhood conduct problems. In addition to this potential etiological role, behavior therapists also have reported clinical impressions that marital discord frequently undermines interventions directed at changing or maintaining changes in deviant behavior in children (Patterson, Cobb, and Ray, 1973; Kent and O'Leary, 1976). Despite the fact that the extent to which marital discord undermines treatment regimens is uncertain, clarification of the etiological link between marital discord and behavior problems of childhood would have broad implications for both treatment and prevention of many child conduct problems. There is little
empirical evidence that would clearly explain by what means marital problems impact on children behavior problems (Rutter, 1979). Nevertheless, two interesting findings may be of help in further delineating the relationships between marital discord and child conduct problems. First, it appears that marital discord has a greater association with the psychological problems of boys than with those of girls (Porter and O'Leary, 1980). Second, with certain exceptions, marital discord generally appears to be most strongly related to externalizing conduct problems such as delinquency. It is also related to anxiety, depression and other internalizing problems.

Several studies have suggested a relationship between marital discord and a variety of conduct problems and emotional difficulties in young children (Emery, 1982; Porter and O'Leary, 1980). For instance, it has been observed that children as young as 10 to 20 months become visibly distressed in the presence of open marital conflict (Cummings, Zahn-Waxler, and Radke-Yarrow, 1981). Boys appear to be more affected by marital discord than girls. Porter and O'Leary (1980) and Emery and O'Leary (1982) found that marital conflict was related to behavior problems in boys but not in girls. However, as Emery (1982) has also pointed out, there are disparities between the findings of clinical studies, where gender differences are reported as significant, and the findings from nonclinical empirical studies which generally indicate that the gender differences are not significant. One interpretation of this apparent discrepancy, proposed by Emery (1982), may lie in differences in the type of symptoms demonstrated by girls and boys in the presence of marital discord. That is, boys are more likely to react to marital discord by demonstrating externalizing symptoms, and girls are more
likely to show internalizing problems, such as becoming anxious or withdrawn, or by overcontrolled behaviors. This argument would certainly illustrate the gender difference in clinical data, as children are more likely to be referred to a clinic for antisocial or disruptive symptoms than they are for internalizing disorders. However, it does not explain the lack of gender difference in nonclinical data which have commonly used externalizing symptoms as the behavior ratings. The other possible explanation is that girls and boys are equally disturbed by discord but girls show it in ways that are less noticeable and less problematical to others (Cummings, Janotti, and Zahn-Waxler, 1985).

As marital problems are associated either directly or indirectly with particular child behavior problems, parenting practices are also reported in several recent studies to be correlated with children's adjustment problems. For example, Snyder et al (1988) and Block, Block, and Morrison (1981) have shown that it may be specific parenting factors such as discrepant child-rearing practices that predict child problems rather than global marital distress. The results from the study by Forehand et al. (1987), which are broadly in line with those from clinical data, do not support Emery's argument either. Forehand et al. argued that if adequate measures of internalizing symptoms were used, an association between these and marital conflict would be detected, particularly in girls. In their study of a small nonclinical sample of adolescents from intact homes, they found that boys living in homes where there was high marital discord demonstrated more antisocial and conduct problems than boys in low-discord homes, but there were no significant differences in externalizing, internalizing,
or physical problems in girls. Therefore, Forehand and colleagues that marital discord may differently disrupt parenting practices with regard to boys and girls.

In summary, if gender differences to marital discord do exist, they may be a result of differential awareness of such discord in boys and girls. If boys were more aware of marital discord than girls, they might react more adversely. A second possible explanation for gender differences is that marital conflict may differentially disrupt parenting practices. Marital discord may decrease parenting competence toward sons more than toward daughters. For example, since boys typically display more conduct problems than girls (Graham, 1979), they may require more competent parenting. Thus, if marital discord adversely affects parenting competence, boys may experience greater declines in quality of parenting than girls, therefore exacerbating their behavior problems (Forehand et al., 1987). Dadds and Powell (1991) indicated that although very few studies have directly examined the gender differences discussed above some structural equation models of the association between parental hostility and adolescent problems (both internalizing and externalizing) have been proposed to examine the controversial issue. They concluded that whereas the effects of parental hostility on externalizing problems were indirect, being mediated through maternal depressive symptoms and parent-adolescent conflict, there was a strong direct but unexplained association between parental hostility and internalizing problems. It was argued that marital discord would be associated most strongly with externalizing problems in boys and if any significant correlations were found for girls they would be correlations between marital discord and internalizing problems.
The stronger associations of marital discord with externalizing conduct problem in boys and internalizing emotional problem in girls deserve further investigation for at least two reasons. First, this specific finding has been insufficiently studied. Second, study of the specific effects of marital discord may provide evidence regarding etiological mechanisms. There are a variety of tenable suppositions available as potential explanations of the etiological function of marital discord in the development of behavior problems in children (Rutter, 1970). First, children whose parents have marital problems may experience "loss of love" and thus disrupt their relationships with their parents. A second argument related to the etiological mechanism is that parents in an unhappy marriage display more hostile and aggressive behavior than happily married couples and that this behavior is imitated by their children. Based on these two competing hypotheses, this study was planned as an exploration of the differential impact of marital discord on boys and girls. Particularly, two research problems are addressed: 1) Do girls respond differently from boys because they are shielded from overt and/or covert marital discord and therefore are not as aware of the discord? 2) Do children from families with discordant experience of marriages feel less loved by their parents and, if so, do boys experience more loss of love (or more hostility and aggression) from their parents?

Adolescent gender was treated as a personal variable in the present study because a number of empirical studies have found that, especially in stepfamilies, girls experience more difficulties with stepfamily living than boys (Amato and Keith, 1991; Aquilino, 1991; Bray, 1988; Hetherington, Cox, and Cox, 1985; Vuchinich, et al., 1991). The effects of marital quality may depend upon the
sex of stepchildren (Clingempeel and Segal, 1986). However, other studies have found no gender differences (Fine, Kurdek, and Hennigen, 1992; Hetherington and Clingempeel, 1992). Therefore, this study was devoted to unraveling the puzzles which have confused developmental researchers for a long time.

As in intact families, gender differences may affect parent-child relationships in remarried families as well. The greater self-assertiveness and aggressiveness to which boys are commonly socialized, and the problems that boys experience in mother-custody families (Hetherington, Cox, and Cox, 1982) imply that problems of relationships with both step and biological parents will be greater in the case of male than of female stepchildren. Thus, there is clearly the potential for troubled emotions and relationships in remarried families for a variety of reasons, some without parallel in the intact families.

Summary

Early adolescence is often a time of stress, turmoil, transition, and questioning. Children are sensitive to the “environment” changes in their developmental life course, especially in the early adolescencethood. Family is the most determinate factor affecting adolescent’s psychological and social functioning. Any changes of family structure will influence adolescent’s adjustment.

This study examines several research questions which are important for understanding the impact of marital discord and parenting practices on adolescent outcomes. First, is there any significant differences of the
mechanisms of the relationships among marital discord, parenting practices, and children's psychological distress between intact and step family? Second, are there any significant gender differences? For instance, do boys and girls experience different processes among these relationships? Finally, do boys and girls in different family structures (i.e., intact vs. step family) experience different parent-child relationships and show different patterns of behavior problems?
CHAPTER 3
HYPOTHESES

Based on the literature review in the last chapter, this study tries to investigate the relationships between the marital discord, parenting practices and child's psychological distress for different family structure (intact versus step families). As mentioned in the previous chapter, marital problems are associated either directly or indirectly with particular problems in children.

First, the direct effect of marital disagreement on child's distress is tested in the study. This direct relationships between marital disagreement and child's outcome in intact and step families are examined separately. The results of two different family structures are compared to determine whether there is a significant difference between these two family structure. As noted, the literature has argued that it is important to consider gender differences in this relationship. In order to test the gender difference, the model is also tested for boys and girls separately.

Figure 3.1 reflects the hypotheses to be tested. The direct relationship between marital disagreement and child's psychological distress is assumed to be positive and it would be stronger for children from step families than from intact families. In addition, boys' distress should be affected by parental marital discord more strongly than girls'.

After the direct effect between parental marital discord and child psychological distress is tested, parenting practices will be added to the model. In the past several years, several studies have attempted to identify various direct
and indirect effects of parenting practices on child's psychological distress. As suggested by the previous studies, interparental discord may alter parental behavior in several different ways, each of which would have unique impacts on children's adjustment and functioning. Marital discord can lead to a decrease in consistent and effective discipline practices which, in turn, would increase children's problem behaviors. Additionally, marital discord can result in an increase in the use of psychological or emotional control as a way of securing and maintaining a strong emotional alliance and level of support from the children. Parental behavior can be expected to influence the presence of internalizing symptoms in the children such as anxiety, depression, and somatic symptoms.

Figure 3.1 Proposed model for direct effect of parents' marital disagreement on child's psychological distress
The present study investigates the association between parents' marital disagreement, parenting practices and child psychological distress for both parents simultaneously to see which influence is stronger. Figure 3.2 represents the hypothesized model. In this model, parents' marital disagreement would be directly or indirectly associated with child distress through their parenting practices. Again, the direct relationship should be positive. Optimal parenting practices of both parents should be related to the child's psychological distress negatively. In sum, parenting practices mediate the relationship between marital disagreement and child's outcome. The proposed model is also tested by family structure and gender to see whether there is any difference between intact and step families, or between boys and girls.

Figure 3.2 Proposed model for the effect of parents' marital disagreement and parenting on child's psychological distress
CHAPTER 4
METHODS

Data

Data for this study are from the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) conducted from March 1987 to May 1988 by the Center for Demography and Ecology, University of Wisconsin-Madison (Sweet, Bumpass and Call, 1988). The objectives of the National Survey of Families and Households were to design a survey that:

(1) focuses almost exclusively on family issues,
(2) covers a broad range of family structure, process, and relationships, so that each could be examined in relation to the others,
(3) includes a national probability sample to generalize to the United States population.
(4) has a sufficiently large sample to permit subgroup comparisons and reliable statistical estimation.
(5) addresses to issues important to a number of disciplines and subdisciplines, and to persons working from a variety of theoretical perspectives.
(6) permits not only the testing of competing hypotheses concerning a variety of aspects of the American family, but also the description of the current state of the family.
(7) addresses many of the most important cross-sectional descriptive and analytic questions; which would provide respective reports of respondents' prior experience in both family and other life domains; and which could
form the base line for a longitudinal study of the determinants and consequences of family transitions and experience.

The NSFH data include five data collection forms which are, 1) a main interview schedule administered to the primary respondent by the interviewer, 2) a self-administered questionnaire which is filled in by the primary respondent at various points during the course of the interview, 3) a self-administered questionnaire filled out by the husband or wife of the main respondent, 4) a self-administered questionnaire filled out by the cohabiting partner of the main respondent, and 5) the tertiary respondent questionnaire that is filled out by the householder whenever the primary respondent is either an adult son or daughter of the householder or a relative of the householder.

The self-administered questionnaire for the primary respondent is divided into 13 sections. Three of these are completed by all respondents, and the remaining ten are completed only when they are relevant, e.g., if the respondent was married, had an adult child living in the household, or was cohabiting.

The secondary questionnaire was given to the spouse or partner to complete. All questions asked of the spouse/partner were replicates of questions in the main interview. However, many of the questions had to be simplified and adapted to a self-administered format.

The proportion of the total sample which was currently married or cohabiting and thus eligible for a married secondary respondent questionnaire was 57.3 percent (52.1 percent married and 5.2 percent cohabiting). The response rate for the married secondary respondent questionnaire was 83.2 percent, and for the cohabiting secondary respondent questionnaire was 76.5 percent. Seven
percent of the respondents were sons or daughters or other relatives of the householder and thus eligible for a tertiary respondent questionnaire. The tertiary respondent response rate was 77.6 percent (Sweet, Bumpass, and Call, 1988).

Sample

The National Survey of Families and Households includes interviews with a probability sample of 13,017 respondents who are aged 19 or older. The sample has been weighted to adjust for household selection probabilities and nonresponse, and to match the current U.S. population profile for age, race, and sex. One adult per household was randomly selected as the primary respondent. If the primary respondent was married or cohabiting, the spouse or partner of the primary respondent was asked to fill out a questionnaire to serve as a secondary respondent. The NSFH included numerous questions on family life, educational and work histories, gender role attitudes values, and family roles (Sweet, Bumpass, and Call, 1988).

The analysis of this study is based on a subsample of respondents who are the biological parents of focal children in the data set. A specific child was selected from respondents who reported having children or step-children, including children of cohabiting partners, under aged 19 living in the household. Rather than using a random selection table each time, the procedure of listing the first names of each of the children meeting a particular set of criteria was used. The child whose first name came first alphabetically was selected (Sweet,
Bumpass, and Call, 1988). These focal children were limited to those aged 5 to 18 for the analytic sample in this study. This is due to the fact that different questions about parental control and demands for preschool were asked for parents whose child was under age 5.

Family structure is determined by the relationship of spouse of the primary respondent to children under aged 19 in the household. Intact families are those married couple families in which both parents are the biological parents of the focal child aged between 5 to 18 in the household. Step families are defined as those families in which respondents are the biological mother of the focal child who is aged between 5 to 18 and the spouse of the respondent is the step-father of the focal child. Father-stepmother families are excluded in this study due to its small sample size (N=53). Thus, the analyses in this study are based upon the 2392 families where there is a biological mother, either a biological or step-father, and a child aged from 5 to 18.

Measures

The NSFH is a large and multi-purpose study and, thus, it contains a wide variety of questions but relatively few comprehensive scales. A multi-step procedure was used to identify the component items to serve as indicators of the constructs in this study. First, the questionnaires were reviewed to identify items that had some degree of face validity for the constructs. Second, these items were factor analyzed to examine the degree to which they loaded onto a coherent dimension. The subset of measures that emerged as potential indicators were
then analyzed for reliability. Finally, based on the results of both the factor and reliability analyses, a final set of indicators were selected for each construct.

Marital Disagreement. Marital disagreement is one of the indicators of marital discord in studying family process. The general marital disagreement measure consisting of 7 self-report items was developed to assess the frequency of general marital disagreements. In the present study, both respondents and their spouses were asked to report the frequency of their disagreements for several domains in the past year.

Household tasks.

Money.

Spending time together.

Sex.

Having another child.

In-laws.

The children.

The response categories for the items are 1) never, 2) less than once a month, 3) several times a month, 4) about once a week, 5) several times a week, and 6) almost everyday. The Cronbach's coefficient alpha for the marital disagreement scales are .75 for mothers and .69 for fathers.

Parenting. In measuring parenting, parents were asked the frequency of some behaviors toward their children. The self-report of both respondents and
their spouses for five items were used to measure positive parenting. The lists are:

- praise child
- allow child to help set rules
- spank or slap child (Reverse coded)
- hug child
- yelled at child (Reverse coded)

The responses are 1) never, 2) seldom, 3) sometimes, and 4) very often for these items. A summed score for all items are calculated for indicating the parental behavior toward their children. Cronbach's alpha are .57 for mothers and .61 for fathers.

Child's psychological distress. Child's psychological distress is measured by the respondent's report about chosen focal child's psychological situation. In order to measure child's psychological distress precisely, four of the nine items related to child outcome were assessed. Respondents were asked to report the following statement regarding the focal child's psychological distress during the past three months:

- Is unhappy, sad or depressed.
- Loses temper easily.
- Is cheerful and happy. (Reverse coded)
- Is fearful or anxious.

The response format for these items ranged from 1 (not true) to 3 (often true). The four items were summed together to obtain a total score which is the
measure of child's psychological distress. Higher score on this scale indicates that
the child is perceived as experiencing greater psychological distress. Cronbach's
alpha for this measure was .56.

Methods

For analysis of the relationship between marital disagreement, parenting
practice and child's psychological distress, a latent-variable structural equation
model will be used. The LISREL VII statistical program will be used for this
analysis. This program is based on maximum-likelihood statistical theory and,
in contrast to ordinary least-squares procedures, allows for multiple indicators of
constructs, adjusts parameter estimates for the unreliability of measurement
when multiple indicators are used, permits correlated residuals, and provides a
test of the extent to which over-identified models fit the data (Joreskog and
Sorbom, 1989). The gender difference of focal children also will be considered,
and the group comparison option of LISREL VII is employed to determine
whether the difference is significant.
CHAPTER 5
RESULTS

The results of data analysis are based on the hypotheses derived in Chapter 3. Table 5.1 provides the mean and standard deviation for each of the variables broken down by family structure and gender of the child. As shown in the table, the children from step families experiencing higher degree of psychological distress than the children from intact families. T-tests were estimated to test the difference of child’s psychological distress across gender and family structure. The result indicates that the only significant difference for psychological distress is between the girls from intact families and girls from step families.

Table 5.2 and 5.3 present the correlations for all variables used in testing the proposed model. Correlations for intact families (Table 5.2) indicate that child’s psychological distress is positively associated with their parents’ reports of marital disagreement and negatively associated with parents’ warmth of parenting. The relationships between these variables are all significant for both boys and girls. It seems that the relationships with child’s psychological well-being are similar for both biological parents, although boys’ distress is more likely to relate to fathers’ reports of marital disagreement and parenting. Girls’ distress is mostly associated with their biological fathers’ reports of marital disagreement. As expected, mother’s and father’s report of marital disagreement is highly correlated since the same measures of marital disagreement are used for both parents. In contrast, mother’s parenting practice is mildly related to father’s parenting although the measures are also the same. The reason for the different
Table 5.1 Means and standard deviations for analyzed variables by family structure and gender of child

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Intact Family</th>
<th></th>
<th>Step Family</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>Girls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>S.D.</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>S.D.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother's Marital Disagreement</td>
<td>13.35</td>
<td>5.19</td>
<td>12.68</td>
<td>4.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12.42</td>
<td>4.89</td>
<td>13.25</td>
<td>5.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father's Marital Disagreement</td>
<td>13.32</td>
<td>5.05</td>
<td>12.82</td>
<td>4.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13.34</td>
<td>6.28</td>
<td>12.98</td>
<td>4.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother's Parenting</td>
<td>15.90</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>15.92</td>
<td>2.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16.05</td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>16.09</td>
<td>2.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father's Parenting</td>
<td>15.14</td>
<td>2.64</td>
<td>15.56</td>
<td>2.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14.30</td>
<td>2.07</td>
<td>14.79</td>
<td>2.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child's Psychological Distress</td>
<td>6.17</td>
<td>1.60</td>
<td>6.12*</td>
<td>1.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.37</td>
<td>1.71</td>
<td>6.40</td>
<td>1.51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* significant at .05 level (difference of means for girls between intact and step families).
Table 5.2 Correlations for all variables of intact families (coefficients for boys above diagonal, n=509; coefficients for girls below diagonal, n=507)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mother marital disagreement</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>father marital disagreement</td>
<td>.511**</td>
<td></td>
<td>-.173**</td>
<td>-.099*</td>
<td>.245**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mother parenting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>father parenting</td>
<td>.468**</td>
<td>-.100*</td>
<td>-.159**</td>
<td>.266**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>child psychological distress</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.213**</td>
<td>-.118**</td>
<td>.189**</td>
<td>-.103*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-.179**</td>
<td>-.208**</td>
<td>.178**</td>
<td>-.140**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.185**</td>
<td>.203**</td>
<td>-.180**</td>
<td>-.115**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* significant at .05 level  
** significant at .01 level

results with the similar situation could be that on the one hand, marital conflict is one kind of interaction between a couple, therefore the intercorrelation between two reports must be high. On the other hand, parenting is more likely to be individual behavior toward the child for each parent. While one parent’s behavior toward the child might be affected by the other one, the fact that the intercorrelation is not as high as that for marital conflict is understandable.

Comparing to Table 5.2, Table 5.3 shows that the correlations among variables for step-families are slightly different from those of the intact families. For example, the association between boys' psychological distress, their biological
mothers' marital disagreement and parenting and their step fathers' marital disagreement and parenting is in the expected direction but did not reach statistical significance. For girls, only biological mothers' parenting is not significantly related to their psychological distress. The small of sample size for step-families effects this situation and will be discussed in the next chapter.

Figure 5.1 and 5.2 present the maximum likelihood estimates obtained using LISREL VII to examine the direct relationship between parents' marital disagreement and child's psychological distress for both intact and step families. As Figure 5.1 indicates, the coefficients of the structural equation model show...
that marital disagreement for both biological mother and father have significant
direct effects on child's psychological distress across gender. It seems that girls'
distress is equally influenced by both of their biological parents' reports of marital
disagreement (gamma=.124 and .145 respectively), but boys are more likely to be
affected by their biological fathers' reports of disagreement (gamma=.234) than by
their biological mothers' (gamma=.119). This is needed more testing for the

*Significant at .05 level

Figure 5.1 The direct effect of parents' marital disagreement on child's
psychological distress for intact families, boys n=600 (coefficients for
girls are in parentheses, n=577)
difference by applying the model comparison to see whether the difference is statistically significant. In addition, the high correlation (.468 for boys and .466 for girls) between mother's and father's reports of marital disagreement is as expected. The R squares (.095 for boys and .053 for girls) of the structural equation models reflects that parents' marital disagreement only explain 10 percent and 5 percent variance of child's psychological distress. It is necessary to include more variables for the further analyses.

To compare coefficients across models, LISREL VII analyses with cross-group constraints were used to assess the significance of any potential differences in the associations between parents' marital disagreement and child's psychological distress for boys versus girls in intact families. The results are presented in Table 5.4. The baseline model, which constrained both parameters in the boy's model to be equal those in the girl's model, obtained a chi-square=1.35 with 2 degrees of freedom. The alternative model, which constrained the parameter between father's report of marital disagreement and child's psychological distress to be equal for two groups, obtained a chi-square=1.28 with 1 degree of freedom. The difference in chi-square is .07 with 1 degree of freedom, which has a nonsignificant probability of .79. This result indicates that there is no gender difference in the relationship between mother's marital disagreement and child's psychological distress. The same comparison procedures were used to examine the relationship between father's marital disagreement and child's psychological distress. Similarly, the change in chi-square of 1.27 (chi-square=1.35 with 2 degrees of freedom for baseline; chi-square=0.08 with 1 degree of freedom for alternative) with 1 degree of freedom has
Table 5.4  Comparison of the paths for boys and girls in intact families

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Path</th>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>(\chi^2)</th>
<th>d.f.</th>
<th>(\Delta\chi^2(1))</th>
<th>p-value for (\Delta\chi^2(1))</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(\gamma_{11}(\text{MMD} \rightarrow \text{CD}))</td>
<td>(\gamma)'s equal in both groups</td>
<td>.121*</td>
<td>.121*</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(\gamma_{11}) free to differ</td>
<td>.127*</td>
<td>.112*</td>
<td>1.28</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(\gamma_{12}(\text{FMD} \rightarrow \text{CD}))</td>
<td>(\gamma)'s equal in both groups</td>
<td>.192*</td>
<td>.192*</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(\gamma_{12}) free to differ</td>
<td>.220*</td>
<td>.157*</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>.26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*\(p<.05\)
a nonsignificant probability of .26. This indicates that there is similarly no gender difference in the relationship between father's report of marital disagreement and child's psychological well-being.

Figure 5.2 shows the direct association between parents' marital disagreement and child's psychological distress for step families, especially for families with step-fathers. For step families, the child's psychological distress is

\[
\text{Mother's Marital Disagreement} \rightarrow \text{Child Psychological Distress} \quad R^2 = .079 
\]

\[
\text{Father's Marital Disagreement} \rightarrow \text{Child Psychological Distress} 
\]

\[
R^2 = .079 
\]

*Significant at .05 level

Figure 5.2  The direct effect of parents' marital disagreement on child's psychological distress for step families, boys n=69 (coefficients for girls are in parentheses, n=83)
more affected by the biological mother's report of marital disagreement (.300 for boys and .182 for girls) than by step-father's report (.038 for boys and .049 for girls). This situation is the same for boys and for girls which means no matter what gender the child is, his or her psychological situation is mostly affected by his or her biological mother. This result contrasts with the children from intact families, where distress is equally influenced by both biological parents. As pointed out by Coleman and Ganong (1987), children may have far less invested in their new family due to resentment over the time their biological parent spends with the stepparent. Thus, they are relatively unaffected by the marital discord between their biological parent and stepparent (Coleman and Ganong, 1987). Not surprisingly, mother's marital disagreement is highly correlated to step-father's marital disagreement (phi=.468 for boys and .520 for girls). The R squares are .079 for boys and .059 for girls. Parents' reports of marital disagreement doesn't explain much of the variance in child's psychological distress.

A model comparison was performed to test the difference between the boy's and girl's models in step family. The results were summarized on Table 5.5. The test of relationship between mother's marital disagreement and child's psychological distress was examined first. The baseline model, with all parameters being constrained to be equal across the two groups, generated a chi-square=1.33 with 2 degrees of freedom. The alternative model, which only allowed the path between father's marital disagreement and child's psychological distress to be estimated free obtained a chi-square=0.46 with 1 degrees of freedom. Thus, with 1 degrees of freedom, the difference in chi-square was 0.87 which has
Table 5.5  Comparison of the paths for boys and girls in step families

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Path</th>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
<th>d.f.</th>
<th>$\Delta \chi^2(1)$</th>
<th>p-value for $\Delta \chi^2(1)$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$\gamma_{11}(\text{MMD--&gt;CD})$</td>
<td>$\gamma$s equal in both groups</td>
<td>.204*</td>
<td>.204*</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$\gamma_{11}$ free to differ</td>
<td>.330*</td>
<td>.168*</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\gamma_{12}(\text{FMD--&gt;CD})$</td>
<td>$\gamma$s equal in both groups</td>
<td>.049</td>
<td>.049</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$\gamma_{12}$ free to differ</td>
<td>.042</td>
<td>.054</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<.05
a nonsignificant probability of .35. The association between father’s marital
disagreement and child’s psychological distress was also tested. The result
indicates that there is no significant gender difference in the association between
these two variables (the same chi-square values were obtained for baseline and
alternative models).

Tables 5.6 and 5.7 show the result of model comparison between the intact
and step families for boys and girls. Similar procedures are used to examine the
difference between two family structures. There is no significant difference
between the two family structures for either the boy’s or girl’s models. The
changes of chi-square were 0.47 with 1 degree of freedom and 1.05 with 1 degree
of freedom for the influence of mother’s and father’s marital disagreement on
boy’s psychological distress, and 0 with 1 degree of freedom and 0.18 with 1 degree
of freedom for the influence of both parents’ reports of marital disagreement on
girl’s.

In order to further assess the extent of association between parents’ marital
quality and psychological distress of child, parents’ parenting practices are
included in the model. This extended relationship is shown on Figure 5.3 and
Figure 5.4. For better distinguishing the effects of two parents, both parents’
reports of marital disagreement and parenting practices are tested
simultaneously in the same models. Figure 5.3 reports the maximum likelihood
estimates obtained by fitting a structural equation model to examine the impacts
of parents’ marital disagreement and parenting in intact families. Mother’s and
father’s parenting are significantly correlated with each other (.170 for boys and
.138 for girls) in the intact family. The result also supports the previous research
Table 5.6  Comparison of the paths for boys between intact and step families

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Path</th>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Intact family</th>
<th>Step family</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
<th>d.f.</th>
<th>$\Delta\chi^2_{(1)}$</th>
<th>p-value for $\Delta\chi^2_{(1)}$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$\gamma_{11}(FMD\rightarrow CD)$</td>
<td>$\gamma$'s equal in both groups</td>
<td>.127*</td>
<td>.127*</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$\gamma_{11}$ free to differ</td>
<td>.122*</td>
<td>.237</td>
<td>2.86</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\gamma_{12}(MP\rightarrow CD)$</td>
<td>$\gamma$'s equal in both groups</td>
<td>.212*</td>
<td>.212*</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$\gamma_{12}$ free to differ</td>
<td>.224*</td>
<td>.085</td>
<td>2.28</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>.31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<.05
Table 5.7  Comparison of the paths for girls between intact and step families

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Path</th>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Intact family</th>
<th>Step family</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
<th>d.f.</th>
<th>$\Delta \chi^2_{(1)}$</th>
<th>p-value for $\Delta \chi^2_{(1)}$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$\gamma_{11}(FMD\rightarrow CD)$</td>
<td>$\gamma$'s equal in both groups</td>
<td>.131*</td>
<td>.131*</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$\gamma_{11}$ free to differ</td>
<td>.131*</td>
<td>.128</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\gamma_{12}(MP\rightarrow CD)$</td>
<td>$\gamma$'s equal in both groups</td>
<td>.138*</td>
<td>.138*</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$\gamma_{12}$ free to differ</td>
<td>.144*</td>
<td>.099</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>.67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<.05
Figure 5.3 The effect of parents' marital disagreement and parenting on child's psychological distress for intact families, boys n=509 (coefficients for girls are in parentheses, n=507)
that parents' marital conflict has a negative effect on their parenting practices (gamma=-.170 for boys and -.201 for girls on mother's parenting; gamma=-.156 for boys and -.205 for girls on father's parenting).

Parenting practices have a slightly different effect on child's psychological distress. Boy's distress is more affected by father's parenting practices (beta=-.090) than by mother's parenting (beta=-.044). In contrast, mother's parenting practice most influences girls psychological distress (beta=-.047 for father and beta=-.138 for mother). However, both parents' reports of their marital disagreement still have direct effect on boys' (gamma=.138 for mother and gamma=.177 for father) and girls' psychological distress (gamma=.083 for mother and gamma=.139 for father). The indirect effect of mother's report of marital disagreement on child psychological distress through her parenting is only evident for girls. Father's marital disagreement only has an indirect effect on boy's psychological distress.

The models fit the data quite well, although the fit is better for the boys' model (chi-square=.34 with 2 degrees of freedom, p=.845) than for that of the girls' (chi-square=4.93 with 2 degrees of freedom, p=.085). Goodness-of-fit (1.00 for boys and .996 for girls) and Adjusted Goodness-of-fit indices (.998 for boys and .971 for girls) indicate that the model fits extremely well to the data. The model explained only around 10% of the variance of boys psychological distress and over 7% of the variance of psychological distress for girls.

Next, the model comparisons were computed to investigate potential gender differences in the associations between the variables. Table 5.8 presents the results of the model comparison in intact families. The differences are rather small. For example, the path ($\beta_{32}$) between father's parenting practices and
Table 5.8  Comparison of the paths for boys and girls in intact families

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Path</th>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
<th>d.f.</th>
<th>$\Delta \chi^2(1)$</th>
<th>p-value for $\Delta \chi^2(1)$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$\gamma_{11}(MMD-&gt;MP)$</td>
<td>$\gamma$'s equal in both groups</td>
<td>-.185*</td>
<td>-.185*</td>
<td>9.46</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$\gamma_{11}$ free to differ</td>
<td>-.167*</td>
<td>-.206*</td>
<td>9.04</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\gamma_{22}(FMD-&gt;FP)$</td>
<td>$\gamma$'s equal in both groups</td>
<td>-.181*</td>
<td>-.181*</td>
<td>9.46</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$\gamma_{22}$ free to differ</td>
<td>-.160*</td>
<td>-.200*</td>
<td>9.03</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\gamma_{31}(MMD-&gt;CD)$</td>
<td>$\gamma$'s equal in both groups</td>
<td>.112*</td>
<td>.112*</td>
<td>9.46</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$\gamma_{31}$ free to differ</td>
<td>.135*</td>
<td>.085</td>
<td>8.79</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\gamma_{32}(FMD-&gt;CD)$</td>
<td>$\gamma$'s equal in both groups</td>
<td>.159*</td>
<td>.159*</td>
<td>9.46</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$\gamma_{32}$ free to differ</td>
<td>.182</td>
<td>.133</td>
<td>8.81</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\beta_{31}(MP-&gt;CD)$</td>
<td>$\beta$'s equal in both groups</td>
<td>-.090*</td>
<td>-.090*</td>
<td>9.46</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$\beta_{31}$ free to differ</td>
<td>-.053</td>
<td>-.127*</td>
<td>7.94</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td>.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\beta_{32}(FP-&gt;CD)$</td>
<td>$\beta$'s equal in both groups</td>
<td>-.068*</td>
<td>-.068*</td>
<td>9.46</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$\beta_{32}$ free to differ</td>
<td>-.082*</td>
<td>-.050</td>
<td>9.18</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>.60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<.05
child’s psychological distress in the baseline model is $\beta_{32} = -0.068$ when it is
constrained to be the same for both boys and girls. When the path is free to differ
between the two groups $\beta_{32}$ is $-0.082$ for boys and $-0.050$ for girls. The change in
chi-square value of 0.28 (9.46 with 10 degrees of freedom for baseline and 7.94
with 9 degree of freedom for alternative) with 1 degree of freedom has a
nonsignificant p-value .60. This suggests that there is no significant gender
difference in the association between father’s parenting behavior and child’s
psychological distress. Similar results are obtained for each of the other
associations.

Figure 5.4 reports the other model to investigate the association between
parents’ marital disagreement and child’s psychological distress mediating by
parenting practices for step families. The result is different from the result from
intact families. For step families, the effects of both parents’ reports of marital
disagreement and parenting on child psychological distress are not statistically
significant although some of them are mildly related. The only exception is the
relationship between step-father’s parenting and girls distress (beta=-0.233), which
is significant at .05 level. This means that there is only a indirect effect between
step father’s report of marital disagreement and girl’s psychological distress
which is mediated by step father’s parenting practice. However, the report of
marital disagreement from biological mother has spurious effect for girl’s
psychological distress due to the highly significant relationship between
biological mother’s report and step father’s report of marital disagreement
(\phi=0.483 for girls’ model and \phi=0.504 for boys’ model). Otherwise, the
Figure 5.4 The effect of parents' marital disagreement and parenting on child's psychological distress for step families, boys n=59 (coefficients for girls are in parentheses, n=76)
relationships among variables for boys from step families are not strong enough to show the effect for boys' psychological distress.

The chi-square values (.519 with 2 degrees of freedom, p=.074 for boys and .87 with 2 degrees of freedom, p=.646 for girls) and indices of Goodness-of-fit (.967 for boys and .995 for girls) and Adjusted Goodness-of-fit (.965 for girls) show the models fit data well especially for girl model, but Adjusted Goodness-of-fit for boys is not as good (.750). The models for step-families explain about 10% of the variance of the boys' psychological distress and over 13% of the variance of the girls' psychological distress.

Parallel to the model comparison procedures performed in Table 5.8, Table 5.9 presents the results of model comparisons on gender groups for step families. First, looking at the path between mother's marital disagreement and her parenting, the baseline model obtained a $\beta_{31}=-.047$ for each group and a chi-square=9.99 with 10 degrees of freedom. The alternative model allowing the path to differ across the two gender groups generated $\beta_{31}=-.205$ for boys and $\beta_{31}=.027$ for girls with a chi-square=8.14 with 9 degrees of freedom. The chi-square improved only 0.08 with a p-value=.77. Similarly, the difference for both gender of the children on the association between father's marital disagreement and his parenting is not statistically significant. The chi-square value of the alternative model is 9.57 with 9 degrees of freedom. In comparing to the baseline model (chi-square=9.99 with 10 degrees of freedom), the change of chi-square is 0.42 with 1 degree of freedom. The other comparisons have similar results with the alternative models showing chi-squares ranging from 9.99 to 8.14 with 1 degree of freedom. The changes of chi-square values range from 0 to 1.85 with p-
Table 5.9  Comparison of the paths for boys and girls in step families

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Path</th>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
<th>d.f.</th>
<th>$\Delta \chi^2(1)$</th>
<th>p-value for $\Delta \chi^2(1)$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$\gamma_{11}(MMD\rightarrow MP)$</td>
<td>$\gamma$'s equal in both groups</td>
<td>-0.035</td>
<td>-0.035</td>
<td>9.99</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$\gamma_{11}$ free to differ</td>
<td>-0.071</td>
<td>-0.018</td>
<td>9.91</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\gamma_{22}(FMD\rightarrow FP)$</td>
<td>$\gamma$'s equal in both groups</td>
<td>-0.271*</td>
<td>-0.271*</td>
<td>9.99</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$\gamma_{22}$ free to differ</td>
<td>-0.221*</td>
<td>-0.328*</td>
<td>9.57</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\gamma_{31}(MMD\rightarrow CD)$</td>
<td>$\gamma$'s equal in both groups</td>
<td>0.194*</td>
<td>0.194*</td>
<td>9.99</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$\gamma_{31}$ free to differ</td>
<td>0.190</td>
<td>0.196*</td>
<td>9.99</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\gamma_{32}(FMD\rightarrow CD)$</td>
<td>$\gamma$'s equal in both groups</td>
<td>-0.011</td>
<td>-0.011</td>
<td>9.99</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$\gamma_{32}$ free to differ</td>
<td>-0.056</td>
<td>-0.115</td>
<td>8.97</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\beta_{31}(MP\rightarrow CD)$</td>
<td>$\beta$'s equal in both groups</td>
<td>-0.047</td>
<td>-0.047</td>
<td>9.99</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$\beta_{31}$ free to differ</td>
<td>-0.205</td>
<td>0.027</td>
<td>8.14</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.85</td>
<td>.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\beta_{32}(FP\rightarrow CD)$</td>
<td>$\beta$'s equal in both groups</td>
<td>-0.189*</td>
<td>-0.189*</td>
<td>9.99</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$\beta_{32}$ free to differ</td>
<td>-0.159</td>
<td>-0.200*</td>
<td>9.94</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>.82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<.05
values are from 1.00 to .17 for the model comparison. The differences are rather small, especially for the effect of mother's marital disagreement on child's psychological distress. In other words, the baseline model can be regarded as the best fitting approach. This implies that there is no support for gender differences for the model presented in Figure 5.4.

Finally, the difference between family structures was tested. Table 5.10 shows the result of the comparison for boys. With the model parameters set to be equal, the baseline model generated a chi-square=11.69 with 10 degrees of freedom. When allowing β's or γ's to differ between groups, the improvement of chi-square ranged from 11.69 to 9.22 with 9 degrees of freedom for each alternative model. With 1 degree of freedom the changes of chi-square ranged from 0 to 2.47 which are statistically nonsignificant. Difference between the family structures is not found for the boy's model.

Table 5.11 presents the results of comparing association among parents' marital disagreement, parenting and girl's psychological distress between intact and step families. The baseline model constrained all parameters in both the intact and step families models to be equal and obtained a chi-square of 13.69 with 10 degrees of freedom. The alternative model, which frees parameters for estimation in each family structure, allowed β's and γ's to be estimated in each model and generated chi-square ranged from 13.65 to 10.33 with 9 degrees of freedom. The changes in chi-square with 1 degree of freedom are from .04 to 3.36 (p-values ranged from .84 to .07). This indicates that there are no statistically significant differences by family structure among the variables for girls, except for the association between mother's marital disagreement and mother's parenting.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Path</th>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Intact Family</th>
<th>Step Family</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
<th>d.f.</th>
<th>$\Delta \chi^2(1)$</th>
<th>p-value for $\Delta \chi^2(1)$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$\gamma_{11}(\text{MMD} \rightarrow \text{MP})$</td>
<td>$\gamma$'s equal in both groups</td>
<td>-.160*</td>
<td>-.160*</td>
<td>11.69</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$\gamma_{11}$ free to differ</td>
<td>-.170*</td>
<td>-.057</td>
<td>11.09</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\gamma_{22}(\text{FMD} \rightarrow \text{FP})$</td>
<td>$\gamma$'s equal in both groups</td>
<td>-.165*</td>
<td>-.165*</td>
<td>11.69</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$\gamma_{22}$ free to differ</td>
<td>-.161*</td>
<td>-.181*</td>
<td>11.65</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\gamma_{31}(\text{MMD} \rightarrow \text{CD})$</td>
<td>$\gamma$'s equal in both groups</td>
<td>.143*</td>
<td>.143*</td>
<td>11.69</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$\gamma_{31}$ free to differ</td>
<td>.143*</td>
<td>.154</td>
<td>11.69</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\gamma_{32}(\text{FMD} \rightarrow \text{CD})$</td>
<td>$\gamma$'s equal in both groups</td>
<td>.148*</td>
<td>.148*</td>
<td>11.69</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$\gamma_{32}$ free to differ</td>
<td>.167*</td>
<td>-.068</td>
<td>9.22</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2.47</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\beta_{31}(\text{MP} \rightarrow \text{CD})$</td>
<td>$\beta$'s equal in both groups</td>
<td>-.054</td>
<td>-.054</td>
<td>11.69</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$\beta_{31}$ free to differ</td>
<td>-.042</td>
<td>-.246</td>
<td>10.22</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.47</td>
<td>.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\beta_{32}(\text{FP} \rightarrow \text{CD})$</td>
<td>$\beta$'s equal in both groups</td>
<td>-.090*</td>
<td>-.090*</td>
<td>11.69</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$\beta_{32}$ free to differ</td>
<td>-.086*</td>
<td>-.184</td>
<td>11.47</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>.64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05
Table 5.11 Comparison of the paths for girls between intact and step families

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Path</th>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Intact Family</th>
<th>Step Family</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
<th>d.f.</th>
<th>$\Delta \chi^2(1)$</th>
<th>p-value for $\Delta \chi^2(1)$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$\gamma_{11}(MMD\rightarrow MP)$</td>
<td>$\gamma$'s equal in both groups</td>
<td>-.174*</td>
<td>-.174*</td>
<td>13.69</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$\gamma_{11}$ free to differ</td>
<td>-.208*</td>
<td>-.016</td>
<td>10.33</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\gamma_{22}(FMD\rightarrow FP)$</td>
<td>$\gamma$'s equal in both groups</td>
<td>-.218*</td>
<td>-.218*</td>
<td>13.69</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$\gamma_{22}$ free to differ</td>
<td>-.206*</td>
<td>-.271*</td>
<td>13.31</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\gamma_{31}(MMD\rightarrow CD)$</td>
<td>$\gamma$'s equal in both groups</td>
<td>.104*</td>
<td>.104*</td>
<td>13.69</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$\gamma_{31}$ free to differ</td>
<td>.088</td>
<td>.172*</td>
<td>13.04</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\gamma_{32}(FMD\rightarrow CD)$</td>
<td>$\gamma$'s equal in both groups</td>
<td>.132*</td>
<td>.132*</td>
<td>13.69</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$\gamma_{32}$ free to differ</td>
<td>.129*</td>
<td>.152</td>
<td>13.65</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\beta_{31}(MP\rightarrow CD)$</td>
<td>$\beta$'s equal in both groups</td>
<td>-.115*</td>
<td>-.115*</td>
<td>13.69</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$\beta_{31}$ free to differ</td>
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<td>-.005</td>
<td>12.63</td>
<td>9</td>
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<td>-.068</td>
<td>13.69</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>-.229</td>
<td>11.75</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.94</td>
<td>.16</td>
</tr>
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*p < .05
The purpose of this chapter is to review the results and to consider the implications and limitations of the study. First, limitations of the present study are discussed. The next section highlights the findings of this study. Finally, specific research issues raised by the present study are delineated and their implications are discussed.

Limitations of the Present Study

Prior to discussing the results of the empirical findings, several restrictions need to be elucidated. First, although causal arguments were implemented in doing the data analyses, the data only represent covariation among variables. That is, the information may be more useful in suggesting, rather than testing explicitly the temporal ordering among variables since cross-sectional data was utilized. Second, the measures constructed (e.g., marital disagreement, parenting, and psychological distress) in this study are not measures which have been standardized and operationalized in other studies. The data structure are limited sample size for selected subgroups requires the use of composite indicators. Thus, the findings of the study, might more or less involve measurement bias or measurement error which obviously needs to be considered when trying to elaborate the significance of these generalizations. Third, the NSFH is primarily a single-respondent-design survey. It has minimal
multiple-respondent measures. Thus, a method variance problem might be entailed in the effort to interpret a causal mechanism among involved variables. In other words, the findings of significant correlations among marital disagreement, parenting, and adolescent's psychological distress might be simply exist because they all come from the same reporter. Fourth, although the findings reflect that marital disagreement and parenting did affect adolescents' psychological distress, there is a question as to whether the relationships observed should be attributed to some other latent factors other than the two explanatory variables. The literature on family and adolescent research has pointed out that the adolescent's perception of parents' marital disagreement and parenting might also serve as an very important source in affecting adolescent's psychological distress. Therefore, a cognitive process might be significantly involved in the causal mechanism argued by the present study. Obviously, further research is needed which concerns the cognitive process simultaneously with the casual mechanism is needed. Finally, although the discussion about the theoretical perspectives in viewing stepfamilies including all kinds of stepfamilies (i.e., step-father family, step-mother family etc.) the present study only concerned the step-father family when doing data analyses due to the restriction of the NSFH sample. The following discussion is presented with these restrictions in mind.

Summary of Results and Theory

Despite the fact that the knowledge about the psychological functioning of children and adolescents associated with parents' martial disagreement and
parenting has greatly increased, and despite the surge of studies in the fields of sociology, psychology, and child development, research on the conduct problems of children remains largely diffuse and uncoordinated. Can the results of empirical research on the impact of parents' marital disagreement and parenting on children be extended to include remarital disagreement effects on stepchildren's behavior problems? There are at least two perspectives that can be considered in response to this question. From a social exchange perspective, children may have far less invested in this new family and may be resentful of the time their biological parent spends with the stepparent. Thus, they may be relatively unaffected by disagreement between the biological parent and stepparent. This would be especially true if the parent-child bond was a close one. On the other hand, from a family systems perspective, the marital subsystem is a critical one for family functioning (Haley, 1976; Minuchin, 1974). Disagreement in this particular subsystem will certainly have a disruptive influence on the functioning of other family subsystems (such as children, parent-child relations etc.). In other words, marital disagreement and parenting will still execute their influence on children in stepfamilies and the effects should be far more stronger than in intact families.

The results presented in Table 5.1 showed that children from stepfamily experience higher degree of psychological distress (6.37 for boys and 6.40 for girls) than children from intact families (6.17 for boys and 6.12 for girls). This finding is consistant with the findings of most previous studies which suggest that behavior and emotional problems have been found to be more characteristic of children from stepfamilies (Allison and Furstenberg; Bray, 1988; Zimiles and Lee,
The results show that children under different family structures might undergo different life experiences which could, in turn, result in different degrees of psychological problems. Table 5.2 shows that, for intact families, psychological distress is positively correlated with marital disagreement (for both mother’s and father’s report) and negatively associated with both mother’s and father’s warmth parenting. Further, the relationships among these three variables are all significant for boys and girls and the relationship patterns for boys and girls are similar to each other. Thus, in intact families, both parents’ marital disagreement and parenting practices will affect their children’s (both boys and girls) psychological well-being in the same way. In other words, there are no child gender effects involved in these associations. For intact families, both mother and father show roughly equal power in influencing their offsprings’ psychological well-being. However, for stepfamilies, Table 5.3 seems to tell a different story. For example, for boys in stepfamilies (i.e., biological mother with step father), the relationships among psychological distress, marital disagreement, and parenting for both mother and step-father reflect the same patterns as those for intact families. However, these correlation coefficients did not reach statistical significance. For girls in stepfamilies, although it still shows similar relation patterns, the relationship between biological mother’s parenting and girls’ psychological distress \( r = -0.019 \) is not significant. However, before further inferences can be discussed, several methodology problems need to be dealt with. For instance, does the difference (or similarity) between family structures (i.e., intact vs. step families) exactly reflect the “true situation” in the population? Do the girls of stepfamilies have different behavior patterns from
the girls of intact families? In addition, for stepfamilies, are girls' and boys' psychological well-being influenced by parents' marital disagreement and parenting differently?

Figure 5.1 and 5.2 present the causal relationship between marital disagreement and psychological distress argued by this studies. For intact families, as Figure 5.1 indicated, both mother's and father's marital disagreements have a significant direct effect on adolescent's psychological distress cross gender. As mentioned earlier, the findings imply that in intact families, both mother and father own roughly equal power in affecting their children's psychological well-being. There is no child gender effect intervening in the causal relationship between parent's marital disagreement and adolescent's distress for intact families. In contrast, Figure 5.2 tells a far more interesting story. First, for stepfamilies, step-father's marital disagreement did not have significant direct effect on step-children's psychological distress (.038 for boys and .094 for girls). This situation is different from the children from intact families whose distress is equally influenced by their both biological parents. As Coleman and Ganong (1987) indicated, children may have far less invested in their new stepfamily due to resent of the time their biological parent spending with their stepparent. Thus, they are relatively unaffected by the marital discord between their biological parent and stepparent. Apparently, this empirical finding supported the arguments of social exchange perspective. The family subsystem perspective fails to predict the relationship between parents' marital discord and adolescents' psychological distress under stepfamily structure.

Second, more interestingly, Figure 5.2 shows that biological mother's marital
discord significantly affect boy's distress (gamma=.300) but did not influence girl's distress (gamma=.182). This could be due to small sample size which reduces the power to reach statistical significance. However, if the nonsignificant direct effect of mother's marital discord on girl's distress does really reflect the truly relationship between these two variables in population then the empirical finding is meaningful. The finding could imply that boys and girls might encounter different life experiences or follow different life processes under the environment of stepfamily. It also could reflect that girls from stepfamilies might have far more sensitive or complicated psychology than boys which makes their psychological well-being more open to other possible influential factors. In that case, mother's marital problems did not execute significant influence on girls' distress like it did on boys. To detect whether these differences are significant statistically, series model comparison are processed, table 5.4 to table 5.7 show that there is no gender and family structure effects for this direct relationship.

Figure 5.3 and Figure 5.4 investigate another interesting research issues. That is, does parenting practice "mediate" the effect of marital disagreement on distress, if does, then is the "mediating pattern" similar or different in both family structures? Figure 5.3 indicated that in intact families, parent's marital discord has a significantly negative effect on their parenting practices (gamma=-.170 for boys and -.201 for girls on mother's parenting; gamma=-.156 for boys and -.205 for girls on father's parenting). Furthermore, as shown in Figure 5.3, boy's distress is more likely affected by father's parenting (beta= -.090) than by mother's parenting (beta=-.044). However, girls the pattern is reversed. It is not father's
but mother's parenting that is more likely to influence girl's distress (beta=-.047 for father and -138 for mother). Lastly, after adding parenting practices as the mediating variable, both parents' marital discord still have significant direct effects on children's (both boys and girls) psychological distress. The empirical findings indicated that parenting practices may not serve as a mediator for the relationship between marital disagreement and distress. It appears to be more like a "co-occurrence" with marital discord. The "co-occurrence" between marital discord and parenting practice then influence adolescents' psychological distress simultaneously. Figure 5.4 showed the results for stepfamilies. Although it is quite different from the results of intact family, again, it could be due to the small sample size problems. Before reaching any meaningful conclusion, a comparable further study is needed. One thing should be demonstrated here, that is, the R-square for models in Figure 5.3 and 5.4 is not significantly improved from Figure 5.1 and 5.2. Which means that maybe some other very critical influential factors are not included in these models. These left-out factors could be theoretically meaningful.

At last, the present study examined the difference of relationships between family structure and parenting practices on psychological distress. Table 5.8 to table 5.11 indicated this effort. In general, the results appearing in these tables points that the difference for gender and family structures did not have significant influence on the relationship among variables. All in all, although family structure, marital disagreement, and parenting practice all affect adolescents' psychological distress, the differences between boys and girls or between intact and step families is pretty small and not at significant level.
As mentioned earlier, the R-squares for models presented in the present study are not impressively high (all of them are around 10% to 13%). One very important message which can be detected from here is that besides family structure, marital disagreement, and parenting, there could exist other very critical factors which influence psychological distress. For example, some literature on child development has pointed out that ongoing live events and life strain have to do with individual's psychological distress evidently. In addition, strong social support systems will largely reduce the degree of individual's psychological distress. Adolescents and children under any family structure do not live in a static environments, instead, they are living in a dynamic ongoing life course. Parents' marital discord and parenting practices are just two of the possible life events that children will experience in their daily lives. It is very possible that other meaningful life events which happen at the same time with marital discord and parenting practice also have critical influence on children's psychological well-being. To investigate the "true" causal mechanisms which eventually cause the distress, one should consider this research issue from a life course perspective. In other words, a longitudinal study which observes the ongoing life process of individual is preferred. This kind of research offers a very good opportunity for exploring the casual mechanisms.

Because of it's lower cost in terms of time and money, cross-sectional studies have been widely accepted by researchers. However, causal modeling approaches to the understanding of the associations among multiple independent and dependent variables have become popular and powerful in
recent years. With the progress of statistical techniques, the methods of structural equation modeling has expanded researchers' ability to consider issues about causal ordering over time. A longitudinal designed research which collects data for adolescents' or children's living experiences, and is coordinated with advanced causal modeling methods, will help the researchers develop more comprehensive knowledge which will eventually uncover the causal trajectories of adolescents' and children's psychological well-being.
REFERENCES


