RUNNING HEAD: Father Churning and Adolescent Depression

Is Father Instability Always Bad for Daughters?

The Relationship between Father Churning and Adolescent Depression

Daphne C. Hernandez, PhD, MSEd
Assistant Professor
University of Houston
Texas Obesity Research Center and the
Department of Health and Human Performance
3855 Holman St., Garrison Gymnasium Rm 104
Houston, TX 77204-6015
P: 713-743-9058
F: 713-743-9860
dhernandez26@uh.edu

Emily Pressler
Pennsylvania State University

Cassandra Dorius
Iowa State University

Is Father Instability Always Bad for Daughters?

The Relationship between Father Churning and Adolescent Depression

Previous research indicates that father absence (Amato 1991) and family instability (Brown 2006) during childhood are associated with long-term mental health problems, especially for daughters (Culpin et al 2013). Research has traditionally categorized instability and father absence as a uniform process resulting from a father entering and exiting the childhood home a single time. Research has neglected to consider more complex patterns in father's resident status. An emerging literature on young adults finds that that men classified as resident or non-resident partners at a single point in time may actually be "churners", individuals who cycle in and out of the home due to breaking up and repartnering with the same partner (Halpern-Meekin et al 2013). It is unclear whether paternal churning hurts or helps children over time, especially daughters who are particularly vulnerable to father absence. The proposed paper provides the first national estimates of the proportion of youth who experience churning from birth to age 18, and tests whether paternal churning is associated with higher or lower rates of adolescent depression among boys and girls.

Data for this study come from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79) and the linked Young Adults files (YA-NLSY). The analysis will focus on 3,891 adolescents (mean = 18.49 years) who were born between 1978 and 1992 to women from the main youth file. Father residential patterns and churning were based on child's experiences of their mother's household unions from birth to 18. Three categories describe biological father's residential patterns: biological fathers who resided with their children from birth to 18 (stable), biological fathers who resided with their children for part of their childhood (unstable), or biological fathers who never resided with their children (not present). Adolescents were coded as

experiencing churning if their biological father exited the home due to divorce or separation and then reentered the house due to cohabitation, marriage, or marital reunification. Youth elevated depressive symptoms are based on the 1994 Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (CES-D) (Radloff, 1991). Adolescents with scores in the 75th percentile or higher were coded as having elevated depression. A number of child and maternal characteristics were included as controls (Table 1).

Descriptive statistics indicates that 6% of youth in our sample experienced churning at some point from birth to age 18. Preliminary logistic regression analyses suggest that churning is more beneficial than harmful to adolescents, and the effects are particularly strong among girls (Table 2). Adolescents exposed to churning have 33% *lower* odds of experiencing elevated depressive symptoms overall (Panel A). Further, compared to children who experience a biological father leaving a single time or never having a biological father in the home, adolescents who experienced churning have 31% lower odds of elevated depression (Panel B). Policy and research implications will be discussed in light of family policies and mental health prevention.

Table 1. *Weighted Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables for the Analytic Sample and by Father Residential Patterns* [*M* (*SD*) or %]

			Unstable		
	Analytic Sample (n = 3,891)	Stable (n = 1,679)	No Churning (n = 1,123)	Churning (n = 219)	Not Present (n = 870)
Adolescent elevated depression	30%	27%	35%	30%	33%
Biological father residential pattern from birth to 18					
Stable	54%	100%	--	--	--
Unstable	33%	--	100%	100%	--
Not present	14%	--	--	--	100%
Type of biological father unstable pattern					
Churning	5%	--	--	100%	--
Child Characteristics					
Female	49%	48%	51%	43%	50%
Race/ethnicity					
White	76%	88%	77%	63%	33%
Black	16%	6%	13%	23%	58%
Hispanic	8%	6%	10%	14%	9%
Positive self-esteem	3.19 (0.40)	3.22 (0.40)	3.15 (0.39)	3.13 (0.39)	3.19 (0.42)
Number of siblings	1.84 (1.25)	1.79 (1.18)	1.82 (1.23)	2.06 (1.32)	2.02 (1.48)
Duration since last biological father transition	10.39 (4.75) [a]	--	10.62 (4.69)	9.01 (4.87)	--
# of non-biological resident fathers from birth to 18					
0	71%	100%	37%	70%	30%
1	22%	---	50%	23%	48%
2+	7%	---	13%	7%	22%
Proportion of years from birth to 18 exposed to:					
Family poverty	0.19 (0.29)	0.06 (0.16)	0.22 (0.28)	0.29 (0.30)	0.54 (0.33)
Maternal unemployment	0.36 (0.30)	0.34 (0.31)	0.32 (0.27)	0.35 (0.28)	0.47 (0.30)
Mother Characteristics					
Age at child's birth	26.32 (4.15)	27.42 (3.59)	25.67 (4.04)	24.62 (4.26)	23.97 (4.88)
Marital status at child's birth					
Single	15%	--	2%	21%	100%
Cohabiting	6%	4%	11%	12%	--
Married	79%	96%	87%	67%	--
Education at child's birth					
Less than high school diploma	15%	8%	16%	31%	36%
High school diploma/GED	46%	43%	52%	47%	45%
Some college	21%	23%	22%	18%	16%
Bachelor's degree or more	18%	26%	10%	4%	3%
Education increased by child's 18th birthday	19%	12%	23%	33%	31%
Elevated Maternal depressive symptoms	24%	17%	30%	39%	35%

Note: All values are weighted (except *N*) and based on non-imputed data.

[a] This statistic reflects the average time since the last transition for the unstable residential group (i.e. no churning + churning; n = 1,342).

Table 2. *Logistic Regressions Predicting the Association between Father Residential Patterns and Adolescent Elevated Depression*

Panel A: Comparisons Between all Father Residential Patterns and Stable Residential Fathers for the Full Sample and by Gender			
	Full sample (n = 3891)	Girls (n = 1923)	Boys (n = 1968)
Biological father residential pattern from birth to 18			
Stable (reference)	---	---	---
Unstable	1.26 (0.94, 1.70)	1.49 (0.98, 2.26)	1.06 (0.69, 1.62)
Not present	0.79 (0.42, 1.50)	1.10 (0.42, 2.84)	0.57 (0.23, 1.42)
Type of biological father unstable pattern			
Churning	0.67 (0.47, 0.96)*	0.55 (0.32, 0.95)*	0.80 (0.50,1.28)
Panel B: Comparisons Between Unstable Father Residential Patterns and No Biological Father Present for the Full Sample and by Gender			
	Full sample (n = 3891)	Girls (n = 1923)	Boys (n = 1968)
Biological father residential pattern from birth to 18			
Unstable	1.31 (0.99, 1.74)	1.47 (0.99, 2.16)	1.17 (0.78, 1.74)
Not present (reference)	---	---	---
Type of biological father unstable pattern			
Churning	0.69 (0.49, 0.97)*	0.54 (0.33, 0.91)*	0.86 (0.55, 1.34)

Note: Odds ratios and 95% Confidence Intervals are presented. Models were conducted on pooled and imputed NLSY79 & NLSY79-YA data. Models include the child and mother characteristics listed in Table 1.

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.