Thriving in Stepfamilies: Competence & Well-being Among African American Youth*

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Introduction & Purpose

Although children/adolescents can do well in a variety of family forms, it appears that adolescents in two-parent nuclear families are advantaged over those in other family forms and that living in a stepfamily is associated with greater risk on a host of measures of social, emotional, and physical health and well-being (Cherlin, 2008; Ganong & Coleman, 2003). Importantly, prior research on the relationship between family structure and adolescent well-being and competency has focused primarily on European Americans; therefore the experiences of ethnic minority families and adolescents have been literally overshadowed (Crosbie-Burnett, 1993).

Shaped by their socio-historical context, African American families tend to operate as a “pedi-focal” family system, centered on the children and characterized by a communal-oriented philosophy, permeability of family boundaries, movement of children among households, and shared parenting among multiple parents (kin and fictive kin) (Crosbie-Burnett, 1993). It is suggested that African Americans share a culture that has normed family patterns that are consistent with characteristics and function in stepfamilies (Stewart, 2007). Stepfamily issues salient to majority culture, European American families – such as difficulties with norming the practice of parenting someone else’s child or the parenting of a nonresidential child – may not be as relevant among African American families. African-American youth, as well as those from other cultures that support multi-parental models, may be more accepting of stepparent presence and less likely to experience loyalty conflicts (i.e., feeling “torn” between being loyal to the nonresident parent if accepting of or caring for the new stepparent). Thus, assumptions are that among African Americans, stepfamily adjustment may be comparatively easier and/or stepparents may move more quickly into parenting roles facing less resistance.

In 2006, 70.2% of children born to African American mothers were nonmarital births (Martin et al., 2009). Among disadvantaged African American families, it is more likely that marriage to a stepparent will be a first marriage rather than a remarriage (Moore & Chase-Lansdale, 2001). Thus, the introduction of a marital union to a single parent household may increase family economic and social stability, support and monitoring of children, and household maintenance.

In addition to cultural and practical considerations, the attenuation hypothesis suggests that African American children may be more accustomed to life transitions and stressful life conditions and have an enhanced capacity for accommodating and adjusting to changes compared to European American children (Moore & Chase-Lansdale, 2001). Indications are that the effect of a divorce on adolescents may depend on the race and socioeconomic status of the family (McLoyd, et al., 2000; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994).

Some of the most common indicators of well-being assessed in family structure comparative studies are depression, self-esteem, social skills, and academic achievement (Ganong & Coleman, 2003). Presented here are results from stepfamily and orphan adjustment in three of the four areas. We examine large samples of African American youth in two-parent families and indicators of well-being and interpersonal competence.

Method

Sample

The analytic samples of African American youth in two-parent families were drawn from pre-program data collected for applied research studies involving adolescents in a southern state offered across 4 years. Youth in Sample 1 voluntarily participated in an educational program offered in a non-school-based setting (e.g., after-school program, church program) in the initial phase of the project; in youth in Sample 2 also voluntarily participated in an educational program offered in a non-school-based setting in a later phase of the study; youth in Sample 3 participated in an elective Family and Consumer Sciences class; youth in Sample 4 and Sample 5 were part of a required high school Health class (data were gathered in two different years). Because there are systematic differences between the samples’ contexts and characteristics, we conducted these analyses first with the community sample, then replicated our analyses in each of the other 4 samples. Table 1 provides additional information on the samples’ demographics.

Measures

Depression/Distress was measured with the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (CES-D). Self-esteem was measured with the Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). Conflict management skills were measured using the subscale from the Interpersonal Competence Scale (Burhmeister, et al., 1988). Cronbach’s a alpha ranged from .78 to .88 across the measures in the five samples.

Results

Our initial examinations use multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA), with father’s education level as the covariate (a proxy for socioeconomic status) to determine the multivariate effect of family structure for depression, self-esteem, and conflict management skills. Use of multivariate models reduces the risk of Type I error.

The overall multivariate effect for family structure was not significant (F [3, 510] = 1.64, p = .184). Results for Sample 1 indicate no significant mean differences between African American youth in two-parent nuclear families and African American youth in stepfamilies on measures of depression, self-esteem, and conflict management skills.

Findings were replicated in each sample of African American youth in two-parent families. Sample 2 from non-school-based settings, (F [3, 810] = 2.29, p = .079); Sample 3 from high school Family and Consumer Science classes, (F [3, 440] = 31.8, p = .006); Sample 4 from high school Health classes, (F [3, 399] = 4.44, p = .0064); Sample 5 from other high school Health classes, (F [3, 468] = 2.54, p = .058). When controlling for gender; findings were similar in each of the five samples.

Summary of Findings & Discussion

For decades, studies of stepfamilies have either overlooked and not addressed the small proportion of African Americans and other ethnic minorities in study samples, or simply controlled for race and ethnicity. The chorus of empirical generalizations regarding the well-being of children in stepfamilies as compared to children in two-parent nuclear families may not be accurately capturing African American children’s experiences in stepfamilies. Recent research has provided some evidence of this. Onset of sexual activity and rates of teenage childbearing were lower among African American girls aged 15-18 with stepfathers than those of girls in single-parent families - and comparable to those in biological 2-parent families (Moore & Chase-Lansdale, 2001). Given the greater likelihood of experiencing an out-of-wedlock birth, African American girls are less likely to be captured in the literature. Further, studies to date have not controlled for cultural norms in multi-parental family, it may be that for African American youth, the presence of a father, whether biological father or stepfather, serves to increase the likelihood of positive outcomes (Moore & Chase-Lansdale).

We offer here another step forward in building a broader family dynamics literature base that considers ethnic diversity and cultural variations in the effects of stepfamily experience on adolescent health and well-being. In five diverse samples of African American youth, we find that in comparison to children in two-parent nuclear families, we can detect no effect of family structure on several important well-being and social competence indicators for youth in stepfamilies and youth in two-parent nuclear families. African American youth in nuclear families do not appear to be advantaged over African American youth in stepfamilies on the indicators of well-being and competence assessed. This is particularly noteworthy given the large sample sizes and the increased sensitivity to detect differences between groups. It is cautioned, however, that this is not evidence of “sameness” of experience for African American youth in both of these 2-parent family structures. In other words, detecting no differences in outcomes does not imply there are no differences in family and individual processes between the groups.

Further analyses are planned with these data that include hierarchical linear modeling and the development of more complex models for predicting positive well-being and competence among African American youth in diverse family forms that considers multiple levels of contextual influences and the interplay of multiple process variables. It is essential that we grow this literature in order to inform our work with culturally and economically diverse stepfamilies. In prevention and intervention, we are relying on an incomplete empirical base for expected developmental patterns, family dynamics, and experiences in stepfamilies.

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References