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Family Structure, Closeness to Residential and Nonresidential Parents, and Psychological Distress in Early and Middle Adolescence

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Abstract

American adolescents currently live in a variety of different family structures, with the vast majority of adolescents living in intact, blended, divorced, and never-married families. Previous research shows that family structure correlates both with the quality of parent–adolescent relationships and adolescent psychological distress. The quality of parent–adolescent relationships also correlates with adolescent distress. This research hypothesizes that the observed differences in adolescent distress across family structure might result from differences in the quality of parent–adolescent relationships across family structure. Analyses, using data on 1,443 youth in early and middle adolescence from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY), indicate that when the variations in both the quality of parent–adolescent relationships and background characteristics across family structure are controlled, the association between family structure and adolescent psychological distress is significantly reduced. Further analyses revealed that the quality of residential parent–adolescent relationships explained the most variation in adolescent psychological distress. The quality of relationships with nonresidential fathers only had a significant association with adolescent psychological distress for adolescents in blended families.

American youth grow up in a variety of family structures created by marriage, divorce, remarriage, and births outside of marriage. The four most prevalent family structures within the United States are intact, blended, separated or divorced, and never-married families. Past research on the influence of family structure on adolescent developmental outcomes, however, has not adequately considered this diversity in family structures. Most studies compare only two family structures at a time, such as single-parent families and two-parent families, intact families and divorced families, or intact families and stepfamilies (see Amato 1987; Acock and Demo 1994 for exceptions). Nevertheless, findings from past research indicate that adolescents from two-parent intact families fare better on numerous adolescent outcomes, including psychological distress, compared to adolescents from never-married, divorced, and remarried families (Amato and Keith 1991; Acock and Demo 1994; Furstenberg and Teitler 1994; McLanahan and Sandefur 1994; Conger and Chao 1996; Simons et al. 1999).

Systematic variation of family background characteristics, such as household income, and family processes, such as the quality of parent–adolescent relationships, across family structure shed considerable light on the association between adolescent psychological distress and family structure. Intact families have the most advantageous financial circumstances (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994). All forms of two-parent families benefit from economies of scale and the possibility of two adult incomes, but intact two-parent families also benefit from never experiencing the division of family assets or the financial demands of supporting more than one household. On average, intact families have higher household income, and higher socioeconomic status is associated with lower levels of adolescent psychological distress (Acock and Demo 1994; Goodman 1999; Call and Nonnemaker 2000).

On average, adolescents from intact families also report the highest-quality relationships with their parents, and high-quality parent–adolescent relationships are consistently associated with lower levels of adolescent psychological distress (Hetherington, Cox, and Cox 1982; Amato 1987; Hetherington 1989; Mechanic and Hansell 1989; Goodyer 1990; Acock and Demo 1994; Simons and Johnson 1996; Cassidy and Shaver 1999; Videon 2002). Previous research, however, has not adequately assessed the complexity of the numerous types of parent–adolescent relationships across family structure, or embedded each type of parent–adolescent relationship within a family structure context. For example, one type of parent–adolescent relationship might have a stronger influence on adolescent outcomes than any other type across family structures. Thus, variation in both the quality and the effect of parent–adolescent relationships on adolescent outcomes could occur across family structures. The combination of the quality and the effect of a parent–adolescent relationship on adolescent distress will be most important to understanding the differences in adolescent distress across family structure.

The purpose of this research was to investigate different types of parent–adolescent relationships and the effects of these relationships on adolescent distress across family structures. Both the quality of significant parent–adolescent relationships and family background characteristics are expected to explain the variation in adolescent psychological distress across family structures in early and middle adolescence. This study improves on past research by comparing adolescents across four family structures, and by investigating the influence of multiple types of parent–adolescent relationships on adolescent psychological distress.

Adolescent Psychological Distress and Parent–Adolescent Relationships

Adolescence is the stage in the life course after childhood and prior to adulthood that is often broken down into three categories—early, middle, and late—corresponding to the age ranges of 10–14, 14–18, and 18–22. Psychological distress refers to an emotional state or mood characterized by feelings of sadness and tension. The proportion of adolescents reporting moderate to severe distress is high, roughly 30 percent (Rushton, Forcier, and Schectman 2002). Adolescents need and seek close

emotional connections to primary caregivers, and the lack thereof can lead to psychological distress (Bowlby 1982). Adolescents whose parents exhibit high levels of affection, acceptance, and support toward them report less anxiety and depression (Mechanic and Hansell 1989; Goodyer 1990).

Emotional attachment to primary caregivers develops through social interaction; thus, social interaction becomes the foundation and mechanism for the development of mental health in adolescence (Rosenberg 1986, 1989). However, not all social interactions will have the same influence on adolescent mental health outcomes, such as psychological distress. Social interactions involving highly salient role identities are most important for psychological development (Thoits 1991). A role identity refers to an individual's social location within a social institution and the meanings attached to that social location. Examples of familial role identities are daughter, mother, stepfather, and stepdaughter. Within the United States, the family is a primary social institution with high significance; thus, for adolescents being a son or a daughter is a highly salient role identity.

Both the degree of role identity salience for and the amount of social interaction from which to develop close emotional ties within a parent-adolescent relationship will vary across family structures. Compared to residential parents, adolescents are less likely to both identify a nonresidential parent as someone important in their life and engage in social interaction with a nonresidential parent (Hetherington 1989; Furstenberg 1991; Munsch, Woodward, and Darling 1995). Thus, parent-adolescent relationships with residential parents are likely to have higher role identity salience and more social interactions than relationships with nonresidential parents. Consequently, the quality of residential parent-adolescent relationships should have a higher association to adolescent psychological distress than the quality of relationships with nonresidential parents.

Family Structure and the Quality of Parent-Adolescent Relationships

Family structure specifies where biological parents live in relation to an adolescent, and whether or not a stepparent is present in the youth's household. For example, adolescents in divorced families have one nonresidential parent and one residential parent, but no stepparent. Thirty percent of youth experience the transition out of one family structure and into another family structure, and/or have a nonresidential parent. After divorce, one parent goes from being a residential parent to a nonresidential parent, and the other becomes a single parent. Both circumstances require a period of adjustment for parents and youth.

On average, divorced parents report less frequent parent-child interactions, monitoring, and affection than parents in intact families (Hetherington et al. 1982; Amato 1987; Hetherington 1989; Acock and Demo 1994; Simons and Johnson 1996). In some cases, however, divorce may result in a closer relationship between custodial parents and their children. Divorced mothers report a higher frequency of private talks with their children (Acock and Demo 1994; McLanahan and Sandefur 1994). This exchange

of emotional support and advice can contribute to a sense of equality and closeness between a mother and her children, especially her daughters (Arditti 1999).

For adolescents in blended families, residential parent-adolescent relationships face the challenge of the addition of a new parental figure into the family. In some instances, an adolescent might feel like an outsider in his or her own home because of his or her residential parent's new romantic relationship. A higher-quality marital relationship within blended families correlates with lower-quality residential parent-adolescent relationships (Hetherington 1989). Furthermore, adolescents in stepfamilies tend to spend less time with their biological parents and stepparents, and the time they do spend with their parents tends to be less enjoyable than what adolescents from intact homes experience. In contrast, adolescents in never-married families do not experience the addition of a new parental figure or the loss of a residential parent. Thus, the quality of residential parent-adolescent relationships for these adolescents will probably resemble those of adolescents from intact families. Maternal warmth, control, and mother-adolescent disagreement do not differ between adolescents from intact and never-married families (Acock and Demo 1994).

Women head the vast majority of single-parent families, and within blended families, adolescents are more likely to live with their mother and stepfather than their father and stepmother. Thus, fathers are more likely to be nonresidential parents or residential stepparents than mothers. On average, nonresidential divorced fathers report significantly lower-quality relationships with their adolescent children as compared to intact residential fathers. At the same time, fathers who remain residential parents after divorce report the same quality of relationships with their adolescent children as fathers from intact families (Shapiro and Lambert 1999). Finally, adolescents tend to report lower-quality relationships with their stepfathers as compared to fathers in intact families (Acock and Demo 1994).

In summary, both the transition involved in a change in family structure and the residential status of a parent appear to influence the quality of parent-adolescent relationships. At the same time, the degree of social interaction and role identity salience varies by type of parent-adolescent relationship; thus, the association between the quality of a parent-adolescent relationship and adolescent psychological distress is likely to vary by type of parent-adolescent relationship.

Family Structure and Family Background Characteristics

Family background characteristics will also provide an insight into understanding differences in levels of adolescent psychological distress across family structure. Substantial variation occurs in household income and race across family structure, and adolescent distress varies by socioeconomic status and racio-ethnic categories. Two-parent family structures tend to have higher incomes than single-parent families, and a large and disproportionate percentage of never-married single parents are black (Acock and Demo 1994; McLanahan and Sandefur 1994). Numerous indicators of social class show a negative correlation with adolescent distress and the quality of the parent-adolescent relationships (Conger, Ge, and Elder 1994; Conger and Chao

1996; Goodman 1999; Simons et al. 1999; Call and Nonnemaker 2000). The prevalence of depression in adolescence across race/ethnic categories is 16.9 percent for Mexican American, 13.4 percent for African American, and 9.6 percent for Anglo-American (Doi et al. 2001). However, controlling for social class, only Latino American adolescents have a higher prevalence of depressive symptoms and depression than Anglo-American, African American, and Asian American adolescents (Roberts, Roberts, and Chen 1997; Siegel et al. 1999).

Age and gender of the adolescent are also important considerations. Around age 14, girls begin to report higher levels of psychological distress and depressive symptoms than boys (Brooks-Gunn and Petersen 1991; Ge et al. 1994; Nolen-Hoeksema and Girgus 1994; Joyner 2000). Although the gender of adolescent children does not vary across family structure, the average age of children does vary across family structure. The average age of the youngest child in never-married families is significantly lower than all other family structures, and younger adolescents report less psychological distress and higher-quality relationships with their parents than older adolescents (Acock and Demo 1994; Joyner 2000; Polce-Lynch et al. 2001).

Methods

Sample

Data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) (1992) are used to investigate the relationships between family structure, parent-adolescent relationships, and adolescent psychological distress. In 1979, the NLSY began yearly face-to-face in-home interviews on a nationally representative cohort of adolescents between the ages 14 and 22. In 1986, the NLSY began dispensing self-administered questionnaires to the offspring of the women from the original NLSY study, who were 10 years of age or older. In 1992, 1,724 adolescents age 10 and above, filled out self-administered questionnaires. Adolescents not living with their biological mother ($N = 20$), or those who have a widowed biological mother ($N = 19$) are excluded from the study. Adolescents who could not be definitively placed into one of four family structures ($N = 19$), who were beyond middle adolescence (i.e., over the age of 18, $N = 18$) and who belonged to very small racial/ethnic groups within the sample ($N = 98$; primarily native Americans, $N = 64$) are dropped from these analyses. Additional cases were also lost because of missing data on race/ethnicity ($N = 2$), the quality of parent-adolescent relationships ($N = 31$), and adolescents' psychological distress ($N = 74$). The final sample size for this study is 1,443 adolescents.

Using the NLSY data offers two advantages for this research. First, the data set is large enough to make comparisons across four family structures with well over 100 cases in each category. Second, the mother's survey includes several questions about marital history and current household composition to divide adolescents into the four family structure categories with high accuracy. The NLSY has one limitation. The women from the 1992 sample do not yet constitute a nationally representative sample of mothers; the mothers in the sample were between the ages 27 and 35. They are more likely to be black, young, and have lower levels of education than average.

Measures

The measures for this study come from two data sets in the NLSY: mothers and their offspring. Family structure is determined by the mothers' responses to three questions concerning their current marital status, residence of the biological father for each of their children, and the presence of a live-in partner. From this information, four categories of family structure are distinguished: (1) intact families, (2) blended families, (3) divorced/separated families, and (4) never-married families. Adolescents living with both biological parents are categorized as living in an *intact family* (N = 585). If the mother is married or has a live-in partner other than the biological father of the adolescent, then the adolescent is categorized as living in a *blended family* (N = 360). Legal marriage was not required for an adolescent to be categorized in an intact family or a blended family. Five percent (N = 26) of the adolescents categorized as an intact family and 26 percent (N = 94) of the adolescents categorized as blended did not have parents who were legally married. Finally, if the mother reported a marital status of divorced, separated, or never married and no live-in partner, then the adolescents are, respectively, categorized as living in a *divorced/separated* (N = 292), or *never-married* family (N = 206).

The income measure is the natural log of annual *household income* in dollars for 1992. If household income reported in 1992 was missing, then household income was imputed with the one reported in 1991 (N = 221). The remaining missing cases (N = 40) were replaced by the mean for annual household income reported in 1992. Gender is a dummy variable where *male* = 1. Age is a dichotomous variable called *middle adolescence*, where a value of 0 indicates early adolescence (ages 10–13) and a value of 1 indicates middle adolescence (ages 14–18). Racial classification for the adolescent respondent is based on race/ethnicity information collected from and on the adolescents' mothers. Two dummy variables distinguish across racial classifications, *black* and *Latino*, with white being the omitted reference category in all analyses.

Measures of the quality of parent-adolescent relationships and adolescents' psychological distress come from the adolescent self-administered questionnaire. To measure the quality of parent-adolescent relationships, adolescents are asked how close they feel to each parent. Responses include extremely close (coded 4), quite close (coded 3), somewhat close (coded 2), and not very close (coded 1). For *closeness to fathers*, respondents identified the type of relationship (biological father, stepfather, or a father figure) they have with the father they were thinking of when reporting on closeness to their father. All adolescents in intact families reported on their residential biological father. Adolescents in blended families, however, reported either on their nonresidential father (N = 124; 35 percent) or their residential stepfather (N = 231; 65 percent). Adolescents in divorced or never-married families reported on nonresidential fathers, but not necessarily their biological fathers. Eighty-two percent of adolescents living in divorced families and 82 percent of adolescents living in never-married families reported on their biological fathers.

The *psychological distress* index is a summation of the five indicators, which asked adolescents how often they feel sad, tense, lonely, excited, and happy. The three response choices for these questions are "often," "sometimes," and "hardly ever." For congruency, the values for sad, tense, and lonely were reversed. The values of the in-

dex range between 1 and 10, with higher values indicating greater psychological distress. A varimax rotation of the principal components analysis indicated the presence of two factors: positive and negative affect. As a result, Cronbach's coefficient alpha is an inappropriate measure of reliability because it varies as a function of the prominence of distinct factors in the index (Cronbach 1947; Cortina 1993; Rogers, Schmitt, and Mullins 2002). Cronbach's (1951) parallel forms reliability represents each factor equally in the index by weighing the components of the subscales by their associated coefficient alpha reliability. The parallel forms reliability formula is:

$$r_{xx(\text{pf})} = \frac{\sum_i \sum_j \sigma_i \sigma_j r_{ij}}{V_t}$$

where i and j are indices factors, V_t is the total index variance, and r_{ij} is the correlation between factors. The index items were standardized prior to computing the coefficient alpha, and the parallel forms reliability for the psychological distress scale is 0.73.

Data Analysis

Because of a survey design, all descriptive statistics and regression analyses make necessary statistical adjustments (National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 2001). First, all descriptive and regression analyses are adjusted by sampling weight. The original NLSY cohort contained an oversample of Hispanic, black and economically disadvantaged, non-Hispanic, and non-black youth. Second, the standard errors in all regression analyses are adjusted for sampling clusters. The NLSY collected data from all offspring born to the women from the original NLSY cohort. Thus, not all observations in the sample are independent. This violation of the independence assumption in regression generates the tendency to underestimate the true variance, which increases the probability of making Type 1 errors (i.e., finding statistical difference when none exists).

All descriptive statistics are adjusted in SAS 9.1 using the SURVEYMEANS Procedure. All regression analyses are adjusted in STATA 8 using Svyreg Procedure with the Huber/White or "sandwich" estimator of variance (Rogers 1993; Williams 2000). The sandwich estimator obtains robust variance estimates by adjusting for within-cluster correlation (i.e., the tendency of similarity within clusters). Observations are assumed to be independent across clusters, but not necessarily independent within clusters. The 1,079 mothers in the sample represent the clusters or primary sampling units in this study.

Two final considerations for the analysis need mentioning. First, although the sample is racially diverse overall, there is little racial diversity within the never-married family structure. Ninety percent of the adolescents in the never-married family structure are black compared to 30 percent in divorced families, 19 percent in blended families, and 11 percent in intact families. As such, the effects for the never-married family structure will be conflated with being black. The correlation between being black and the never-married family structure is $r = .463$. This is important to keep in mind when interpreting the results of the multiple regression models. It will be difficult for ordinary least squares regression to partition the variance (i.e., separate out the independent effects) for the never-married family structure, and being black on the quality of parent-adolescent relationships and adolescent psychological distress.

Second, very few children born to the original NLSY cohort of women were older than 18 in 1992; thus, youth in late adolescence is not included in this study. The sample for this research contains two adolescent age groups—early and middle adolescence—corresponding to the age ranges of 10–13 and 14–18. Two separate analyses revealed no variation in the influence of family structure or parent-adolescent relationships on adolescent distress by adolescent age category. First, no interactions between adolescent age category and family, or between adolescent age category and closeness to parents (mothers or fathers) on adolescent distress were significant. Second, tests on the equality of coefficients for closeness to parents on adolescent distress by adolescent age category did not reveal statistically significant differences (McDowell 2001). Variation did occur in the degree of closeness to fathers by adolescent age category, as reported in the following analyses. However, the processes that are hypothesized to reduce the association between family structure and adolescent psychological distress do not differ across early and middle adolescence.

Findings

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations for all variables for the entire sample of adolescents and within each family structure. Among the background characteristics, household income and race show the most variability, and the predominant disparities occur between single- and two-parent families. The two-parent families, intact and blended families, report substantially higher household incomes at \$33,200 and \$28,300, respectively, than the single-parent families (never married [\$13,100] and divorced [\$11,800]). Seventy-nine percent of adolescents living in intact families and 73 percent living in blended families are white, whereas 53 percent in divorced families are white and only 5 percent of adolescents in never-married families are white. Ninety percent of adolescents in never-married families are black, and the highest percentage of Latino adolescents occurs within divorced families, which is at 16 percent. Finally, adolescents from intact families are significantly younger than adolescents in blended, divorced, and never-married families with a mean age of 12.8. Among adolescents in intact families, 35 percent are in middle as compared to early adolescence. Almost 50 percent of adolescents in blended and never-married families are in middle adolescence.

Family Structure and Parent-Adolescent Relationships

Table 2 shows the relationship between the quality of parent-adolescent relationships and family structure. In model 1, the intercept represents the mean level of closeness to mothers for adolescents in intact families based on a 4-point scale. Overall, the degree of closeness to mothers in the sample is quite high, but significant variation occurs across family structure. Adolescents in intact families report a significantly higher degree of closeness (mean = 3.4) to their mothers than adolescents from blended families (mean = 3.2, $p < .01$) and divorced families (mean = 3.3). Adolescents in never-married families report closer relations to their mothers (mean = 3.5) than adolescents in blended ($p < .001$) and divorced ($p < .05$) families. In model 2, two

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations by Family Structure†

	All family structures		Intact families		Blended families		Never-married families		Divorced families	
	Mean*	Standard error	Mean*	Standard error	Mean*	Standard error	Mean*	Standard error	Mean*	Standard error
Psychological distress	3.74	0.06	3.45	0.09	4.02	0.13	4.15	0.14	3.91	0.13
Closeness to mother	3.33	0.03	3.40	0.04	3.19	0.06	3.50	0.06	3.29	0.06
Closeness to father	2.78	0.04	3.14	0.05	2.66	0.07	2.09	0.09	2.22	0.09
Middle adolescents	0.41	0.02	0.35 ^{BND}	0.03	0.48 ^I	0.03	0.49 ^I	0.04	0.45 ^I	0.04
Age in years	12.81	0.07	12.51 ^{BND}	0.11	13.18 ^I	0.15	13.15 ^I	0.15	12.90 ^I	0.16
Male	0.49	0.02	0.49	0.03	0.47	0.03	0.59	0.04	0.45	0.04
White	0.67	0.02	0.79 ND	0.02	0.73 ND	0.03	0.05 ^{IBD}	0.03	0.53 ^{IBN}	0.04
Black	0.23	0.02	0.11 ^{BND}	0.01	0.19 ^{IND}	0.02	0.90 ^{IBD}	0.03	0.31 ^{IBN}	0.04
Latino	0.10	0.01	0.10 ^D	0.01	0.08 ^D	0.01	0.06 ^D	0.02	0.16 ^{IBN}	0.03
Log household income	10.13	0.04	10.41 ^{BND}	0.06	10.25 ^{IND}	0.06	9.38 ^{IB}	0.07	9.48 ^{IB}	0.05
N =	1,443		585		360		206		292	

* The means are adjusted for sampling weights using the Proc SURVEYMEANS Procedure in SAS 9.0.

† The subscripts (B; blended families; D; divorced; I; intact; N; never married) indicate significant ($p < .05$) differences in the weighted mean of the background variable for the applicable family structure from the superscript-referenced family structure. These results are based on post hoc Tukey–Kramer multiple mean comparison tests.

Table 2. Ordinary Least Squares Regression of the Degree of Closeness to Mothers on Family Structure*

	Degree of closeness to mothers														
	Full sample					Boys					Girls				
	Model 1		Model 2			Model 4			Model 5						
	<i>b</i>	Standard error	<i>b</i>	Standard error	<i>b</i>	Standard error	<i>b</i>	Standard error	<i>b</i>	Standard error					
Intercept	3.400	0.04	4.023	0.39	3.492	0.62	4.423	0.46	4.423	0.46					
Blended families†	-0.205**	0.07	-0.173*	0.07	-0.097	0.10	-0.237*	0.10	-0.237*	0.10					
Never-married families†	0.099	0.07	0.072	0.08	0.100	0.11	0.072	0.13	0.072	0.13					
Divorced families†	-0.112	0.07	-0.133	0.08	0.029	0.10	-0.247*	0.11	-0.247*	0.11					
Middle adolescents			-0.279***	0.05	-0.325***	0.07	-0.245**	0.08	-0.245**	0.08					
Male			0.121*	0.05	—	—	—	—	—	—					
Black			-0.002	0.07	0.111	0.08	-0.100	0.10	-0.100	0.10					
Latino			0.056	0.07	0.073	0.08	0.039	0.11	0.039	0.11					
Log household income			-0.067	0.04	0.002	0.06	-0.092*	0.04	-0.092*	0.04					
R ² =		0.015	0.050		0.052		0.049		0.049						
N =	1,443		1,443		717		726		726						

Two-tailed significance: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

* The coefficients are adjusted for sample clusters and sampling weights using Svyregress Procedures in STATA 8.0.

† The reference category is intact families.

background characteristics—adolescent age category and gender—have significant relationships with the degree of closeness to mothers. Adolescent boys ($b = .120$; $p < .05$) and early adolescents ($b = -.278$; $p < .001$) report closer relations to their mothers than boys and middle adolescents.

Models 3 and 4 report analyses split by gender, to test if there are differences in the degree of closeness to mothers across family structure by gender. Among adolescent boys, no significant differences occur in the degree of closeness to mothers across family structure. In contrast, adolescent girls in intact (mean = 4.4) and never-married (mean = 4.5) families report significantly closer relations to their mothers as compared to adolescent girls in divorced (mean = 4.2; $p < .05$) and blended (mean = 4.2; $p < .05$) families. This variation among adolescent girls and the lack of significant variation among adolescent boys in the degree of closeness to mothers do not vary by adolescent age category. In analyses not shown, however, older adolescent boys in never-married families appear to have exceptionally close relationships with their mothers.

Table 3 shows the relationship between family structure and the degree of closeness to fathers. In model 1, the intercept represents the mean level of closeness to fathers for adolescents in intact families (mean = 3.1) based on a 4-point scale. There is considerable variation in the degree of closeness that adolescents feel toward their fathers across family structure. Overall, adolescents from intact families report significantly more closeness to their fathers than adolescents in nonintact families. The largest difference occurs among adolescents in single-parent families. On average, adolescents in never-married and divorced families report a full-point less closeness to their nonresidential fathers than what adolescents in intact families report toward their residential fathers. Although adolescents in blended families report less closeness to their stepfathers when compared to adolescents in intact families, adolescents in blended families report significantly closer relations to their stepfathers (mean = 2.7) than what adolescents in divorced (mean = 2.2; $p < .001$) and never-married (mean = 2.1; $p < .001$) families report toward their nonresidential fathers.

Within blended families, based on analyses not shown, the mean degree of closeness to stepfathers (mean = 2.38; $N = 242$) is statistically equivalent to the mean for nonresidential fathers (mean = 2.56; $N = 128$). Additionally, adolescents in blended families reported significantly more closeness to their nonresidential fathers than what adolescents in single-parent families reported toward their nonresidential fathers ($p < .01$). Finally, adolescents in blended families reported significantly less closeness to their residential stepfathers than what adolescents in intact families reported toward their residential fathers ($p < .001$). The results of these analyses are consistent with the findings in model 1 in Table 3.

Model 2 of Table 3 includes the background characteristics. Adolescent girls ($b = -.274$; $p < .001$) and younger adolescents ($b = -.380$; $p < .001$) report closer relations to their fathers than boys and older adolescents. There are no gender differences in closeness to fathers across family structure; however, there are differences in degree of closeness to fathers across family structure by adolescent age category. Models 3 and 4 report analyses split by adolescent age category. The split sample analysis only differs in one way from the results of the full sample. Older adolescents in blended

Table 3. Ordinary Least Squares Regression of the Degree of Closeness to Fathers on Family Structure*

	Degree of closeness to fathers#							
	Full sample		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	<i>b</i>	Standard error	<i>b</i>	Standard error	<i>b</i>	Standard error	<i>b</i>	Standard error
Intercept	3.143	0.05	2.812	0.62	2.994	0.74	2.363	0.78
Blended families†	-0.479***	0.09	-0.412***	0.09	-0.515***	0.11	-0.250	0.13
Never-married families†	-1.053***	0.11	-0.918***	0.13	-1.165***	0.16	-0.636***	0.19
Divorced families†	-0.919***	0.10	-0.820***	0.11	-0.889***	0.14	-0.723***	0.15
Middle adolescents			-0.380***	0.07	—		—	
Male			0.274***	0.07	0.177*	0.08	0.412***	0.10
Black			-0.096	0.08	-0.071	0.10	-0.147	0.13
Latino			0.024	0.09	0.015	0.11	0.043	0.14
Log household income			0.032	0.06	0.024	0.07	0.024	0.08
R ² =	0.132		0.181		0.166		0.125	
N =	1,443		1,443		870		573	

Two-tailed significance: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

* The coefficients are adjusted for sample clusters and sampling weights using Svyregress Procedures in STATA 8.0.

† The reference category is intact families.

Adolescents in intact families reported on closeness to their residential fathers, adolescents in divorced or single families reported on closeness to their nonresidential fathers, and adolescents in blended families reported on closeness to either their residential stepfather or their nonresidential father.

families do not report significantly less closeness to their fathers compared to older adolescents in intact families ($b = -.250$; not significant [NS]). Among younger adolescents, however, there are significant differences in the degree of closeness to fathers between younger adolescents in blended and intact families ($b = -.515$; $p < .001$).

Adolescent Psychological Distress

Table 4 shows the relationships between adolescent psychological distress and family structure, and degree of closeness to parents and background characteristics. Model 1 shows that adolescents from intact families have the lowest levels of psychological distress with a mean score of 3.53, followed by 3.68 for divorced, 3.96 for blended, and 4.04 for never-married families. The mean levels of psychological distress for adolescents in nonintact families do not significantly differ from one another. Clearly, the differences in psychological distress across family structure are not large, and family structure alone explains 2 percent of the variation in adolescent psychological distress. This is similar to previous research comparing adolescents from divorced families to adolescents in two-parent families (less than 1 percent of variation in adolescents' internalizing problems; see Simons et al. 1999).

Model 2 in Table 4 adds the background characteristics to the model. Older and minority adolescents report higher levels of psychological distress than younger and white adolescents, respectively. The inclusion of the background characteristics significantly reduces the variation in psychological distress for adolescents in never-married and divorced families as compared to adolescents in intact families. The largest reduction occurs for adolescents in never-married families, with a 67 percent reduction in the coefficient for never-married families in model 2 compared to model 1. Model 3 includes the degree of closeness to parents and family structure on adolescent distress. Adolescents who feel close to their mothers ($b = -.314$; $p < .001$) and fathers ($b = -.288$; $p < .001$) have lower levels of psychological distress. The inclusion of the degree of closeness to parents significantly reduces the variation in psychological distress for adolescents in divorced families ($b = .155$; NS). The b coefficient for divorced families in model 3 is reduced by 66 percent compared to model 1.

Model 4 of Table 4 includes both the degree of closeness to parents and the background characteristics. The inclusion of both the background characteristics and degree of closeness to parents reduces the differences in adolescent psychological distress for adolescents in never-married ($b = .006$; NS) and divorced families ($b = -.003$; NS) to zero. The significant mean difference between adolescents in blended and intact families remains ($b = .313$; $p < .05$), but is reduced by 45 percent. Overall, family structure, closeness to parents, and family background characteristics explain the majority of the variation in psychological distress across family structure and 9.1 percent of the variation in adolescent psychological distress overall. The degree of closeness to parents explains more variation in adolescent psychological distress than family structure and background characteristics combined. However, not all parent-adolescent relationships have a significant influence on adolescent psychological distress.

Table 4. Ordinary Least Squares Regression of Adolescent Psychological Distress on Family Structure*

	Adolescent psychological distress							
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	<i>b</i>	Standard error	<i>b</i>	Standard error	<i>b</i>	Standard error	<i>b</i>	Standard error
Intercept	3.452	0.09	3.661	1.21	5.425	0.31	5.669	1.27
Blended families†	0.566***	0.16	0.478**	0.16	0.363*	0.16	0.313*	0.16
Never-married families†	0.698***	0.17	0.231	0.21	0.425*	0.20	0.006	0.23
Divorced families†	0.455**	0.16	0.260	0.20	0.155	0.17	-0.003	0.21
Middle adolescence			0.355**	0.13			0.166	0.13
Male			-0.052	0.12			0.059	0.11
Black			0.504***	0.15			0.477***	0.15
Latino			0.317*	0.15			0.341*	0.15
Log household income			-0.038	0.11			-0.047	0.12
Closeness to mother						0.09	-0.311***	0.09
Closeness to father#						0.07	-0.270***	0.07
R ² =	0.022	0.043	0.078	0.091				

Two-tailed test: **p* < .05, ***p* < .01, ****p* < .001.

* The coefficients are adjusted for sample clusters and sampling weights using Svyregress Procedures in STATA 8.0.

† The reference category is intact families.

Adolescents in intact families reported on closeness to their residential fathers, adolescents in divorced or single families reported on closeness to their nonresidential fathers, and adolescents in blended families reported on closeness to either their residential stepfather or their nonresidential father.

Parent's Residential Status and Adolescent Psychological Distress

Table 5 shows the association of three types of parent-adolescent relationships with adolescent psychological distress. All models report normalized beta coefficients and control for adolescent age category, race, gender, and household income. Model 1 includes the full sample and also controls for family structure. Within the full sample, closeness to parents shows very similar associations with adolescent psychological distress for mothers (beta = $-.140$; $p < .001$) and fathers (beta = $-.158$; $p < .001$). Models 2-5 are stratified by family structure. The intact family structure, model 2, is the only one where both the closeness to mothers and fathers significantly reduces adolescent psychological distress. The degree of closeness to mothers has a slightly stronger correlation to adolescent distress (beta = $-.178$; $p < .01$) than the degree of closeness to fathers (beta = $-.140$; $p < .05$) for adolescents in intact families.

Among adolescents in single-parent families, the nonresidential father-adolescent relationship is not significantly associated with adolescent psychological distress. However, the degree of closeness to residential mothers is negatively associated with adolescent psychological distress for adolescents in divorced (beta = $-.233$; $p < .01$) and never-married (beta = $-.179$; $p < .05$) families. In contrast, model 5 shows no association between closeness to residential mothers and adolescent psychological distress for adolescents in blended families (beta = $-.001$; NS). There is, however, a significant negative association between closeness to residential stepfathers or nonresidential fathers and adolescent psychological distress (beta = $-.245$; $p < .01$).

Models 5a and 5b investigate possible differences in the association between degree of closeness to fathers and adolescent psychological distress by type of father figure, residential stepfathers, or nonresidential fathers within blended families. Model 5a includes adolescents in blended families who reported on the degree of closeness to their residential stepfathers, and model 5b includes adolescents in blended families who reported on the degree of closeness to their nonresidential fathers. Both of these models are congruent with the results in model 5. Among adolescents in blended families, higher feelings of closeness to residential stepfathers (beta = $-.279$; $p < .001$) or nonresidential fathers (beta = $-.205$; $p < .10$) correlate with lower levels of adolescent distress. The association is slightly stronger for residential stepfathers compared to nonresidential fathers. The beta coefficient for nonresidential fathers does not reach conventional levels of statistical significance; however, there is a substantial loss of power because of the small group size ($N = 124$). The size of the beta coefficient for nonresidential fathers in blended families is on a par with the other significant parent-adolescent coefficients across the various models, and is over twice the size of the residential mother coefficient in model 5b.

Discussion

The findings from this research highlight the differences in both the quality of parent-adolescent relationships across family structure and the variable association of parent-adolescent relationships with adolescent distress across family structures.

Table 5. Ordinary Least Squares Regressions of Adolescent Psychological Distress on Degree of Closeness to Parents by Family Structure*

		Adolescent psychological distress											
Full sample		Intact		Divorced		Never married		Blended families					
Model 1	beta	Model 2	beta	Model 3	beta	Model 4	beta	Model 5	beta	Model 5a	beta	Model 5b	beta
Closeness to residential mothers	-0.140***	-0.178**	-0.233**	-0.179*	-0.001	0.064	-0.067						
Closeness to residential fathers	-0.158***	-0.140*	—	—	-0.245**	-0.279***	—						
Closeness to nonresidential fathers			-0.107	0.049			-0.205†						
N =	1,443	585	292	206	360	236	124						
R ² =	0.085	0.097	0.093	0.067	0.115	0.101	0.159						

Two-tailed significance: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, † $p < .10$.

* The coefficients are adjusted for sample clusters and sampling weights using Svyregress Procedures in STATA 8.0. All regression models control for adolescent age group, gender, race, and household income logged.

Variation in the mother-adolescent relationship across family structure is limited to adolescent girls. Adolescent girls in blended and divorced families report significantly less closeness to their residential mothers than adolescents in intact and never-married families. For adolescent girls, either the event of a divorce or remarriage appears to strain the mother-adolescent relationship. Adolescent girls in never-married families do not experience the addition of a new parental figure or the loss of a residential parent from their household; thus, as expected, the degree of closeness to mothers does not differ from adolescent girls in intact families. Contrary to expectation, there is no variation in the degree of closeness to mothers across family structure among adolescent boys. The disruption to the mother-adolescent relationship because of family structure transitions, such as divorce or remarriage, might have more influence on adolescent girls because of their closer connections and greater reliance on their mothers than adolescent boys. Adolescent girls in this study report closer relations to their mothers than adolescent boys.

Adolescents in intact families report significantly closer relations to their fathers than adolescents in any other family structure. Nonresidential status considerably disrupts parent-adolescent relationships, and the ambiguity of social norms concerning the relations between a stepparent and a stepchild makes these relationships tenuous (Ihinger-Tallman and Pasley 1997). However, adolescents in blended families report closer relations to their stepfathers than what adolescents in divorced and never-married families report toward their nonresidential fathers. Overtime, adolescents can develop close emotional bonds with their stepparents (Cherlin and Furstenberg 1994). Among the older adolescents in this study, there is not a statistical difference in the degree of closeness to fathers between intact and blended families.

Variations in parent-adolescent relationships and family background characteristics across family structure accounted for the vast majority of the variation in psychological distress across family structure. Family background characteristics alone accounted for the differences in adolescent distress for adolescents in never-married and divorced families compared to adolescents in intact families. Older adolescents and minority adolescents tend to have higher levels of adolescent distress. The mean age of adolescents in never-married and divorced families is significantly lower than the mean age of adolescents in intact families. Across family structure, the highest proportion of black adolescents occurs within never-married families, and the highest proportion of Latino adolescents occurs within divorced families. The combination of background characteristics and the degree of closeness to parents reduced the differences for adolescents in divorced and never-married families compared to adolescents in intact families to zero. Adolescents in divorced and never-married families report significantly less closeness to their nonresidential fathers than what adolescents in intact families report toward their residential fathers. Adolescent girls in divorced families also report significantly less closeness to their mothers than adolescent girls in intact families.

The combination of background characteristics and the degree of closeness to parents significantly reduced, but did not mediate, the differences in psychological distress between adolescents in intact and blended families. The proportions of black adolescents and the mean age of adolescents in blended families are significantly higher in blended families compared to adolescents in intact families. Moreover, adolescent

girls report less closeness to their mothers, and younger adolescents report less closeness to their fathers within blended families than adolescent boys and older adolescents, respectively, in intact families. Nevertheless, significant differences remain between adolescents in blended and intact families after these factors are controlled. The blended family structure is by far the most complex family structure with the possibility of four parental figures. This research could only account for two parent-adolescent relationships. The ability to control for the degree of closeness to both residential stepfathers and nonresidential fathers might have reduced the differences between adolescents in blended and intact families to zero.

Overall, the degree of closeness to parents explains the most variation in adolescent distress; however, not all parent-adolescent relationships have a significant influence on adolescent distress. For adolescents in intact families, closer feelings toward mothers and fathers are associated with lower levels of adolescent psychological distress. For adolescents in single-parent families, only closer feelings toward residential mothers correlate with lower adolescent distress. Closeness to nonresidential fathers was not significantly associated with adolescent distress in single-parent families. The amount of contact between nonresidential fathers and their children varies considerably. About 60 percent of nonresidential fathers report visiting their children one to three times a month (Cooksey and Craig 1998). This level of contact might not be enough to exert a significant influence over adolescent well-being.

For adolescents in blended families, only closer feelings toward either a residential stepfather or a nonresidential father are associated with lower adolescent psychological distress. The role identity salience of the nonresidential father might be heightened among adolescents living with a stepfather than adolescents living in single-mother families. Although adolescents in blended families are unlikely to spend more time with their nonresidential fathers than adolescents in single-parent families, the amount of time an adolescent thinks about or is reminded of their nonresidential father is likely to increase. For example, adolescents might make comparisons between their nonresidential father and their new stepfather. The heightened salience of the nonresidential father could engender a significant association between the quality of the nonresidential father-adolescent relationship and adolescent psychological distress among adolescents in blended families.

Residential stepfathers can also be a source of support for adolescents in blended families. Their residential status supplies an opportunity for high levels of social interaction and the prospect of negotiating the meaning of these social role relationships. A good relationship with the residential stepfather, whether as a friend or father figure, will make a home more welcoming to an adolescent and be less threatening to the residential parent-adolescent relationship. Unfortunately, adolescent relationships with stepfathers tend to be less close than adolescent-father relationships within intact families, and troubled relations with stepparents can lead to adolescent psychological distress. Thus, working through the social norm ambiguity of the step-parent-adolescent role relationship and possible tension arising from the new marital relationship are necessary for the well-being of adolescents within blended families.

The residential stepfather-adolescent relations gain an increased importance because the degree of closeness to residential mothers has no effect on adolescent psy-

chological distress among adolescents in blended families. Adolescents within blended families appear to detach from their residential parent earlier than adolescents in other family structures. Adolescents in blended families tend to leave home earlier than adolescents in intact families (Cooney and Mortimer 1999). Adolescents in blended families might rely more on other sources of social support, such as peers. Peer support can play an important role in adolescent depressed mood when parent-child relationships are troubled (Joyner 2000; Call and Mortimer 2001). This research also suggests that nonresidential fathers can become an important resource for adolescents in blended families.

The findings from this research should be interpreted in conjunction with the limitations of the study. First, this study does not include a nationally representative sample of adolescents. The generalizability of these findings is restricted to the age range of mothers in the sample (between 27 and 35), who are more likely to be black, young, and have lower levels of education than average mothers. In addition, there is a substantial overlap for living in a never-married family and for being black. Ninety percent of the adolescents in never-married families are black. The associations for the never-married family structure with the quality of parent-adolescent relationships and adolescent psychological distress may not be generalizable to other racio-ethnic groups.

Second, this study only includes adolescents living with their biological mothers. The latter limitation augments the differences between mother-adolescent and father-adolescent relationships across family structure. In other words, gender differences in parental residential status account for the greater variation in the father-adolescent relationships than in the mother-adolescent relationships across family structure (Munsch et al. 1995; Shapiro and Lambert 1999). Third, this study did not collect information on all possible parent-adolescent relationships, and the father-adolescent quality measure for adolescents in blended families is a mixture of reported relations with residential stepfathers and nonresidential fathers. Thus, the findings regarding the variation in quality of stepfather, nonresidential father, and residential father relationships should be considered tentative.

Finally, this research does not include other potentially relevant variables. Although not the focus of this research, parental conflict and the psychological well-being of parents have also been shown to help explain the differences in adolescent distress across family structure (Mechanic and Hansell 1989; Furstenberg 1991; Acock and Demo 1994). At the same time, the quality of parent-adolescent relationships can mediate the effect of other stressors in an adolescent's life, such as marital conflict and economic hardship (Simons et al. 1999). Nevertheless, this study needs to be replicated on a nationally representative sample of adolescents, including adolescents living in single-parent father and father-stepmother families, with data on the quality of all possible parent-adolescent relationships and additional variables of influence.

Conclusion

Family structure indirectly affects adolescent psychological distress through variations in the degree of closeness to parents and family background characteristics

across family structure. There is a higher composition of racial minority adolescents in nonintact families, and the mean age of adolescents in nonintact families is significantly higher than adolescents in intact families. Family structure has an influence on the quality of parent-adolescent relationships, especially for residential parent-daughter relationships. Overall, adolescents in intact families report the closest relations to their parents. Minority and older adolescents, and adolescents who report low levels of emotional closeness to their parents tend to have higher levels of psychological distress. The variation in these background characteristics and family processes across family structure explains the vast majority of variation in adolescent psychological distress across family structure.

Family structure also moderates the influence of parent-adolescent relationships on adolescent psychological distress. Within intact and single-parent families, the quality of residential parent-adolescent relationships has the most influence on adolescent distress. Within blended families, residential stepfathers or nonresidential fathers have the most influence on adolescent distress. Close to half of all adolescents under the age of 18 live in nonintact family structures. Between 1996 and 2003, 68 percent of children under age 18 were living with two parents, intact or blended (Child Trends 2003). For adolescents in nonintact families, family structure is not a constant. Family structure can go through a series of transitions, such as from a never-married family to a blended family, and then possibly to a divorced family structure. At some point in family structure transitions each type of parent-adolescent relationship, residential parent, nonresidential parent, and residential stepparent, has a significant influence on adolescent distress. Therefore, maintaining high-quality relationships with all parental figures across various family structures is important. Across various family structures, different parent-adolescent relationships become more or less central and significant for adolescent well-being.

There is a strong belief that traditional intact families are the best, or the only, family structure to thwart negative outcomes in adolescence. As a result, much legislation focuses on how to promote and preserve intact families, rather than providing programs and services to accommodate the diverse needs of adolescents across various types of family structures. The findings from this research suggest additional avenues for policy makers to pursue. First and foremost, social policy should focus on enhancing the quality of parent-adolescent relationships across all family structures, because the quality of parent-adolescent relationships has the most proximate and pervasive influence on adolescent psychological distress. All families could benefit from educational programs or campaigns that help parents and adolescents develop close relations to one another.

Furthermore, social support services and social policy should reflect the diversity of needs and challenges occurring across all family structures. Thus, different foci should be placed on each family structure to match the unique needs and processes of each family structure. Within blended families, for example, developing close bonds with a residential stepparent should be encouraged. Overall, our culture needs to recognize the importance of the relations between stepparents and stepchildren, and attempt to clear up the ambiguous nature of these relations. Social programs should

also encourage the maintenance of emotional bonds for the nonresidential parent–adolescent relationship and the residential parent–adolescent relationship in nonintact families. Although nonresidential parents may not have a large influence on adolescents in single-parent families, maintaining this relationship could have future benefits to adolescents if their residential parent remarries.

Two findings from this research shed new light on the findings from previous research. First, some research suggests that the nonresidential parent has no effect on children's well-being, whereas other research finds significant influences (Furstenberg and Nord 1985; Clingempeel and Segal 1986; Amato and Gilbreth 1999). This inconsistency could result from the differential affect of nonresidential father–adolescent relationships across family structure, that is, single-parent families versus blended families, found in this research. Second, contrary to previous research, this research showed that adolescent girls in divorced families did not have especially close relations to their residential mothers (Acock and Demo 1994; McLanahan and Sandefur 1994; Arditti 1999). Rather, adolescent girls in divorced and blended families report significantly less feelings of closeness toward their mothers than girls in intact families. Thus, the adjustments of divorce and remarriage appear most difficult for the mother–daughter relationship. The contradiction from past research is likely caused by differences in reporting on the quality of the mother–adolescent relationships. Past studies have relied on mothers' reports of the quality of the mother–adolescent relationship; however, this study uses the adolescents' perspectives on the mother–adolescent relationship.

The findings from this study highlight the importance of practicing several research strategies in the future. Future research needs to study multiple two-parent and single-parent family structures. The investigations on parent–adolescent relationships across family structures must consider the multiple and varying familial role relationships across and within each family structure. New surveys should collect data on all possible types of parent–adolescent relationships within each family structure, such as residential, nonresidential, step, and/or biological parents, and the quality of relations and levels of conflict among parents for both current and former romantic partners. This depth of information within and breadth of comparisons across family structures will provide the most insight into variations in family processes across family structure. Essentially, future research needs to contextualize the lives of adolescents within each family structure. The different experiences associated with the formation of each family structure shape family processes. Thus, researchers must consider the possibility of differential effects of each type of familial relationship on adolescent outcomes by family structure.

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