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## Distinguishing between Family Structure and Family Instability on Child Well-Being in Low-Income Families

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Running Head: FAMILY STRUCTURE AND INSTABILITY

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## Abstract

The present study investigated the association of family structure and instability patterns with children's cognitive and socioemotional well-being among a sample of low-income, primarily Hispanic and African American children. Analyses employed longitudinal data from the *Three-City Study* to track maternal partnerships; data were stacked across the three waves, leading to a sample size of 2,279 children aged 2 to 10 years. Children in married-parent households scored higher in reading and math skills and lower in internalizing and externalizing problems than children in single-parent households. In contrast, measures of recent and cumulative instability were largely unrelated to child well-being. The family structure and instability findings remained robust to selection controls and were generally not moderated by current status or the male partner's identity (biological or social father). Policy implications of these findings are discussed.

Distinguishing between Family Structure and Family Instability  
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Recent policy initiatives to promote marriage among low-income families have generated wide interdisciplinary interest among child and family scholars about the benefits and drawbacks of maternal partnership types (marriage, cohabitation, or single-parent), the possible protective role of stability within these types, and potential developmental risks of instability. Within developmental psychology, a voluminous body of research heralds the importance of continuity and predictability in the caregiver-child relationship during early childhood (e.g., Bowlby, 1969; Sroufe, 2000). Likewise, growing work in family studies, psychology, and sociology has illustrated the deleterious effects of family instability, such as multiple maternal partnership changes, during this period, especially on children's socioemotional development (Cavanagh & Huston, 2008; Fomby & Cherlin, 2007; Osborne & McLanahan, 2007). Thus, there is increasing awareness that the developmental impact of low-income families' partnership history on children's development could overshadow the influence of current family structure, even if mothers are currently married. Therefore, the current study is aimed to disentangle associations of family structure and instability on children's cognitive and socioemotional skills within an ethnically diverse sample of urban, low-income families. In addition, we considered several potential moderators that may attenuate marriage benefits for children, including recent and cumulative instability and the male partner's identity (biological father vs. social or stepfather).

*Family Structure, Instability, and Early Child Development*

Over the last several decades, marriage rates have declined while rates of cohabitation have steadily increased, especially in disadvantaged populations (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Manning & Lichter, 1996). However, cohabitations tend to be short-lived, and the proportion of cohabiting couples who marry has also declined (Bumpass & Lu, 2000). Although the number of single-

mother headed families has decreased over the last decade, the incidence of father absence and single-parenting remains disproportionately high in low-income populations (Acs & Nelson, 2001; Cherlin & Fomby, 2002; Primus, 2002). These demographic trends result in increasing numbers of children experiencing multiple transitions in parental partnering, especially among low-income families (Cherlin, 2009; Ellwood & Jencks, 2004; Manning, Smock, & Majumdar, 2004; McLanahan, 2004).

Among middle and upper-income families, marriage among biological parents confers a variety of developmental assets for children, such as caregiving stability, enhanced economic resources, and higher quality parenting and supervision (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). In this family structure trajectory, namely childbirth following the marriage of biological parents, children display a host of positive academic and behavioral outcomes compared to peers in single-parent families (Acs, 2007; Carlson & Corcoran, 2001; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). In contrast, children in cohabiting-parent families show less optimal achievement and behavioral outcomes than children in married-parent families, even when living with both biological parents (Acs, 2007; Cavanagh & Huston, 2006). Similarly, children who experience a remarriage following a divorce look more academically and behaviorally similar to peers in single-parent than married-parent homes (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; Cooksey, 1997; Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998). In other words, exposure to family instability (i.e., divorce and remarriage) appears to dampen the potential developmental benefits of new marriages.

In low-income families, first marriages may be formed after non-marital birth(s) and involve stepfamily formation rather than a union among the biological parents of all children in the household (Cherlin, 2009). Thus, marital unions among low-income couples are likely to be preceded by a period of partnership instability (Mincy, 2002), and these marriages may not provide the economic advantages that middle and upper-income couples more commonly

encounter (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Wells & Zinn, 2004). The present study will examine whether marriage promotes academic and socioemotional competence for low-income children after taking into account earlier family instability and whether the male partner is the child's biological father or social father.

In addition to family structure, emerging literature has identified cumulative family instability as centrally important for child development. During early childhood, attachment theorists have argued that responsive and consistent caregiving promotes exploration of the environment and positive interpersonal relationships with other adults and peers (Sroufe, 2000; Waters & Cummings, 2000). These developmental characteristics would in turn support children's cognition, learning, and socioemotional development. Family instability in early childhood disrupts family processes such as caregiver-child relationships during an important developmental period (Hetherington, et al. 1998; Teachman, 2003). Indeed, longitudinal work has demonstrated that these changes are stressful for families and that disruptions in early childhood may have longer term implications for development in middle childhood (Cavanagh & Huston, 2008) and early adulthood (Hill, Yeung, & Duncan, 2001; Hetherington & Kelly, 2003).

Accumulating research suggests that multiple transitions into and out of single-parent status show deleterious consequences for children's internalizing and externalizing behavior problems as well as academic achievement and grades (Capaldi & Patterson, 1991; Kurdek, Fine, & Sinclair, 1995; Martinez & Forgatch, 2002; Najman et al., 1997). It is possible that much of the purported negative effects of single parent status or divorce and remarriage are due to cumulative changes in children's proximal living environments and relationships rather than to the relationship status per se. In recent work, cumulative transitions have predicted higher behavior problems and lower academic achievement among young children across several national samples (Cavanagh & Huston, 2006; Fomby & Cherlin, 2007; Osborne & McLanahan,

2007). Most research has found the number of transitions to function linearly, suggesting that each family structure transition adds to the prediction of less positive child functioning (Capaldi & Patterson, 1991; Fomby & Cherlin, 2007; Osborne and McLanahan, 2007). However, experiencing multiple transitions has not uniformly predicted worse outcomes than exposure to just one transition (Carlson & Corcoran, 2001), and the effects appear greater for White children than African American children (Fomby & Cherlin, 2007).

In addition to a focus on cumulative transitions over a child's lifetime, attention has been paid to the recency of these transitions and to potential short-term effects of marital transitions on children's functioning. "Recent" generally has been operationalized as the two years following a transition, which maps onto the divorce and remarriage literature about the length of short-term negative effects for these transitions (Cherlin, Chase-Lansdale, & McRae, 1998; Hetherington et al., 1998). However, when considered simultaneously with current status and/or cumulative transitions, recent transitions inconsistently predict behavior problems (Acs, 2007) or achievement (Fomby & Cherlin, 2007).

One limitation in much past research is a lack of attention to delineating the effect of instability from the effect of marital status. Some research studies in this arena have assessed the effect of partnership instability without attending to marital status (Ackerman et al., 1999, 2002); others have controlled only for marital status at the time of the child's birth (Cavanagh & Huston, 2008; Osborne & McLanahan, 2007). Only one recent study, to our knowledge, has addressed cumulative instability, recent instability, and current marital status, holistically in a single model (Fomby & Cherlin, 2007). In their full models, Fomby and Cherlin (2007) found that Black children in mother-only households did not significantly differ from peers with married biological parents across three measures of cognitive ability, but single mothers did report higher externalizing behavior problems among their children than did married mothers.

Moreover, recent transitions were unrelated to Black children's outcomes, while cumulative transitions only predicted one cognitive measure (reading), but in a positive direction. In contrast, for White children, recent transitions and current status (mother and stepfather household vs. married biological parents) each negatively predicted one of three cognitive outcomes, and cumulative transitions were positively associated with maternal ratings of externalizing behavior problems. These results suggest that the influence of family instability is less robust when all three factors, namely current status, recent transitions, and cumulative transitions, are considered simultaneously, particularly among minority samples.

Another issue that has been addressed is how to define family structure transitions. For example, Ackerman and colleagues counted only dissolutions when examining links between family instability and problem behaviors among economically disadvantaged families (Ackerman et al., 1999, 2002). In contrast, recent work has summed all transitions into and out of married or cohabiting unions, with one general exception. Transitions from cohabiting to married unions with the same partner have been excluded from recent family instability measures (Cavanagh & Huston, 2008; Fomby & Cherlin, 2007; Osborne & McLanahan, 2007). However, there is growing acknowledgement that cohabitation is not simply marriage in disguise, but a more unique family structure that is more transient (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Manning, Smock, & Majumdar, 2004), less economically secure (Manning & Brown, 2006), lower in relationship quality (Brown & Booth, 1996), and less developmentally supportive for children and youth (Ackerman et al., 2001; Dunifon & Kowaleski-Jones, 2002). Thus, we posit that the transition from a cohabiting union, which may contain some ambiguity in the consistency of co-residence and shared household and child-rearing responsibilities (Manning & Smock, 2005; Osborne & McLanahan, 2007), to a more formalized married union may indeed be experienced by the child as a transition in family structure. From this literature base, we argue

for the importance of simultaneously considering current partnership status with recent instability and cumulative instability based on all movements into and out of cohabiting and married unions to assess the relative importance of these family structure experiences on children's development.

### *Significance and Specific Aims*

Together, this recent scholarship suggests the importance of three aspects of family structure for children's healthy development: current status, recent transitions, and cumulative transitions. Our primary goal is to assess how these three aspects of family structure relate to children's healthy functioning in cognitive, behavioral, and emotional realms, focusing exclusively on economically disadvantaged families. Comparing effects of current family structure versus instability is essential in order to distinguish benefits of marriage from potential benefits of stability itself. A second essential question is whether the effect of current family structure is moderated by experiences of past instability. This comparison will provide important policy-relevant information regarding whether one could expect benefits to children from new efforts to encourage marriage among low-income mothers. A third important question to consider is the identity of the maternal partner. One explanation for the beneficial effects of stable marriage is that this family structure is undergirded by the presence of two biological parents of the child. Research results showing negative effects of remarriage on children's development (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; Cooksey, 1997) have not ascertained whether such effects may be due to past relationship instability or from the entrance of a father-figure into the child's life. Thus, we will also consider whether the effect of family structure is moderated by the identity of the male partner.

To assess these questions, the proposed study will employ longitudinal survey data from *Welfare, Children and Families: A Three-City Study*. These data provide a great many strengths,

including an exclusive focus on low-income families; rich, extensive, and well-validated data on children's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral well-being, derived from multiple methods and reporters; as well as endogeneity controls for earlier maternal partnership histories (prior to the child's birth) and direct assessment of mothers' literacy skills and education. Additional maternal, child, and family characteristics include maternal age as well as family size and child age, gender, and race/ethnicity, which are important controls for selection into particular family structure and instability patterns. Finally, the Three-City Study contains mothers' reports of their full partnership history, allowing measurement of all partnership transitions rather than relying on changes in current status across data points as is common practice with other data sets (e.g., The Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study, Osborne & McLanahan, 2007; The NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development, Cavanagh & Huston, 2006; 2008).

## Method

### *Participants and Procedures*

Data were drawn from waves 1 through 3 of *Welfare, Children, and Families: A Three-City Study*, a longitudinal, multi-method study of the well-being of low-income children and families in the wake of federal welfare reform. The Three-City Study main survey includes a household-based, stratified, random-sample survey with over 2,400 low-income children and their primary female caregivers in low-income neighborhoods in Boston, Chicago, and San Antonio. In each family, one focal child was selected for inclusion in the study: focal child were aged 0 to 4 years or 10 to 14 years in wave 1. Children and mothers were interviewed individually in their homes in 1999 (90% screening rate; 83% interview response rate), and again in 2000/01 (88% retention rate), and 2005 (80% retention rate of wave 1 respondents). Interviews were conducted in English or Spanish. For further sampling details, see Winston et al. (1999).

From the Three-City Study survey, we drew an analytic sample that was restricted in three ways to fit the needs of our research priorities. First, we restricted the sample to children residing with their biological mother to exclude children who experienced familial disruptions other than maternal partnership instability, such as relative or foster care (90% of caregivers in the Three-City Study sample were biological mothers). Second, the sample excluded adolescents in order to focus on the developmental period of childhood, and excluded children younger than age 2 years, because the measures used to assess child functioning were only applicable for children aged 2 and above. Third, we included only families who remained in the sample in wave 3, since the relationship transition history data were collected at that time. These sample exclusions led to an analysis sample of 528 children and mothers in wave 1; 797 in wave 2, and 891 in wave 3. Data from the three waves were stacked to provide a full sample of 2,216 children aged 2 to 11 years and their biological mothers. It is important to note that probability weights that adjust for sample selection, nonresponse, and attrition were used; the use of these weights creates a sample that is representative of low-income children and their mothers in low-income neighborhoods in the three cities. When missing data occurred in the analytic sample, variables were imputed using expectation maximization (EM), which uses a maximum likelihood approach (Dempster, Laird, & Rubin, 1977). Assessments of missing data imputation techniques report that inclusive strategies of imputation employing EM techniques yield optimal results (highly similar to multiple imputation [MI] techniques; Collins, Schafer, & Kam, 2001). A relatively small amount of missing data was apparent, ranging from 0 to 11% across study variables.

### *Measures*

*Partnership status and transition variables.* Family structure information was gathered through numerous sets of questions in mother interviews, including relationship histories,

household rosters, and questions regarding current marital status. Current relationship status at each wave was coded through a set of dummy variables designating the mother as married or as cohabiting (with single being the omitted category). Another dummy variable indicated whether the mother's partner was the biological father of the focal child.

Partnership transition variables were created using information from the partnership history, in which mothers reported on the start and end dates of each marriage and cohabitation (defined as sexual relationships in which partners shared a household for at least one month). These data were used to create three variables: a count of the number of transitions prior to the focal child's birth, which we term prebirth transitions; a count of the number of transitions from the focal child's birth until the interview date for each wave of data, termed cumulative transitions; and a count of the number of transitions within a two-year period prior to each interview, termed recent transitions. Because the recent transitions variable had a very restricted range (0 to 3, with less than 5% of cases having a count of more than 1), we recoded this variable dichotomously to assess whether any transitions had occurred in the two years prior to each interview. It is important to reiterate that the recent, cumulative, and prebirth transitions variables include both entries into and exits from both cohabitations and marriage. Alternate specifications of these variables excluding transitions from cohabitation to marriage with the same partner were also assessed in alternate model specifications, detailed below. Additional alternate specifications assessed nonlinear recodings of the cumulative transition variable, coded into groups of 0 transitions (58%; omitted), and dummy variables indicating 1 transition (27%), or 2 or more transitions (15%).

*Child functioning.* We consider two central arenas of young children's development: cognitive skills and behavioral-emotional functioning assessed with full-scale, well-validated developmental assessment measures. These measures were collected at all three waves of the

survey for all children aged 2 and above. Children's cognitive skills were measured using direct assessments by field interviewers, using the Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-Educational Battery Revised (WJ-R) Letter-Word Identification and Applied Problems subtests to assess children's reading and math skills, respectively (Woodcock & Mather, 1989; Woodcock & Mather, 1990; Woodcock & Munoz-Sandoval, 1996). We use W scores of children's reading and math scores, which are equal interval, constant-metric scores (Rasch-scaled). W scores are preferred for longitudinal analyses over age-standardized scores, as they show growth in cognitive skills over time.

Children's behavioral functioning was measured using mothers' reports on the age-appropriate version of the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) (Achenbach, 1991, 1992; Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001), focusing on the internalizing and externalizing behavior problems scales. The CBCL internalizing scale assesses anxiety, depression, withdrawal, and somatic complaints, whereas the externalizing scale includes items related to aggressive, destructive and rule breaking actions. Standard scores (t-scores) for internalizing ( $\alpha = .82 - .88$ ) and externalizing ( $\alpha = .90 - .91$ ) behavior problems were utilized.

*Control variables.* In addition to our primary variables of interest, we also include a number of child and family characteristics to control for possible biasing factors. In selecting these characteristics, we paid careful attention to endogeneity concerns, focusing on variables, which may be linked both with mothers' partnership experiences and with children's development, but are not likely to be caused by maternal partnerships (e.g., family income or maternal depression). Control variables included child age in months, child gender, and child race/ethnicity, coded as African American, Hispanic (of any race), or White/Other, as well as mother's age in years and the number of children in the household. In addition, we control for mother's education, assessed on an 8-point scale from 1 (less than a high school degree) to 8

(graduate degree), and mothers' literacy skills, assessed through the Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-Educational Battery Revised (WJ-R) Letter-Word Identification subscale (Woodcock & Mather, 1989; Woodcock & Mather, 1990; Woodcock & Munoz-Sandoval, 1996). Finally, as described above, we control for mothers' partnership transitions, which transpired prior to the focal child's birth.

### *Analytic Technique*

Our aim in this analysis is to capitalize on longitudinal variation in family structure and child well-being so that we can assess links between partnership structure and instability and child cognitive and socioemotional functioning. To assess this question, data from all three waves of the Three-City Study were merged to optimize our sample size and statistical power. The effects of current family structure and the history of family structure instability on children's well-being were assessed using OLS regressions with clustering to adjust standard errors for the inclusion of multiple observations from each child.

$$(1) y_{it} = \mu + \gamma_1 \text{FAMSTR}_{it} + \gamma_2 \text{RECENT INSTAB}_{it} + \gamma_3 \text{CUMULATIVE INSTAB}_{it} + \gamma_4 \text{CONTROLS}_{it} + \varepsilon_{it}$$

In this model, the well-being of child  $i$  at time  $t$  is a function of the child's family structure at time  $t$ , recent family transitions in the prior two years, the cumulative number of family transitions prior to time  $t$ , as well as a set of child and family control variables. The central goal of this model is to assess the relative effects of current, recent, and cumulative family structure experiences on children's well-being. A challenge to this model is the threat of omitted variable bias. We addressed this concern through the inclusion of a range of child and family characteristics. Yet it is nonetheless possible that selection effects, that is unmeasured characteristics of mothers or families associated with family structure, will affect measured relationships (Fomby & Cherlin, 2007; Foster & Kalil, 2007).

Following our main models addressing whether cumulative transitions, recent transitions, and current mother partnership status were related to children's cognitive and socioemotional functioning, we addressed two additional questions. First, we assessed whether the effects of current partnership status was moderated by the identity of the partner, that is, by whether the partner is the biological father of the focal child or a step/social father. Second, we assessed whether the effect of current partnership status was affected by prior relationship transitions. This question, in essence, assessed whether marriages (or cohabitations) that are or are not preceded by other relationship transitions will have differential links with children's development.

## Results

### *Descriptive Statistics*

Descriptive statistics on the sample are presented in Table 1. The sample is 58% Hispanic, 38% African American, and 4% White/Other, and just over half of the focal children were male, with an average age of 5 ½ years. Just over one-third of the mothers were married, compared to only 12% who were cohabiting. Just over one-third of children resided with their biological father (76% of marriages and 52% of cohabitations were with biological fathers). Twenty-one percent of mothers reported a partnership transition in the two years prior to the interview, and 42% reported any transitions since the focal child's birth, with mothers reporting an average of .66 cumulative transitions. Prior partnership transitions were slightly more common among single than among married mothers, but these differences were very small. Explicitly, 26% of currently single mothers reported a transition within the prior two years, in comparison to 19% of cohabiting and 14% of married mothers. Considering cumulative transitions, single mothers reported an average of .74 transitions since the focal child's birth, in comparison to .63 for cohabiting and .54 for married mothers. In comparison, nearly twice as

many transitions were reported, on average, prior to the focal child's birth, an average of 1.12 transitions across the sample.

### *Main Effect Models*

Table 2 presents results from the OLS regression models predicting each of the four child functioning measures with current status, cumulative transitions, recent transitions, and the child and family controls. The primary result, apparent across all four measures of child functioning, is a positive effect of maternal marriage. Married mothers had children with significantly lower internalizing and externalizing problems and with higher math and marginally higher reading skills than single mothers. All of these effects were small in magnitude. Children of cohabiting mothers, on the other hand, did not differ from children of single or married mothers across either cognitive or behavioral functioning. In contrast to the importance of current partnership status, results indicate no significant effects of either recent partnership transitions or cumulative transitions on children's cognitive or behavioral functioning. Following these main effect models, a number of interactive models and additional specifications were run to further explore the beneficial effect of marriage and the lack of a negative effect of relationship transitions on children's cognitive and socioemotional functioning.

### *Interactions between Current Status and Father Identity*

A second set of models assessed whether the effects of a current relationship's status were moderated by the partner's identity (biological father versus a step/social father). A dummy variable designating the father's identity was added to the main effects model, in addition to interactions between the father's identity and the current status variables. The results, shown in panel 2 of Table 2, again show a pattern of null effects. Maternal marriage and cohabitation were not more or less beneficial for children's cognitive and behavioral functioning when they were with a biological father versus a step/social father.

*Alternate Measures of Instability*

In order to fully explore the lack of significance between partnership transitions and children's functioning, we assessed alternate specifications of the main effect models and the instability measures. These alternate specifications included (1) testing recent and cumulative transitions without controlling for current relationship status; (2) testing one measure of instability at a time (i.e., recent or cumulative), controlling for current status; and (3) excluding cohabitation into marriage transitions in the transitions variables. All four of these alternate specifications yielded the same pattern of results, with no significant links between recent or cumulative transitions and children's cognitive or socioemotional functioning.

Next, we addressed possible nonlinearities in the experience of cumulative partnership transitions by categorizing the cumulative transitions variable into 0 (omitted), 1, or 2 or more transitions. Using this categorization, results indicated that experiencing one cumulative transition was predictive of higher math scores in comparison to 0 cumulative transitions, whereas experiencing a recent transition was predictive of lower math scores in comparison to no recent transitions. The effects of marriage remained constant and no other significant effects of recent or cumulative transitions on the other three child development measures were unearthed (all alternate specification results available upon request from the first author). All told, across numerous specifications, we found no consistent evidence that recent partnership transitions or the cumulative experience of partnership transitions were significantly linked to low-income children's functioning in cognitive and socioemotional realms.

*Interactions between Current Status and Relationship Instability*

Given that we had found a significant effect of current maternal marriage on children's functioning but no effect of partnership transitions, we next assessed whether there was an interactive relationship, that is, whether current marriage or cohabitation were differentially

linked with child functioning, depending upon whether they were preceded by partnership transitions. This question addresses whether newer marriages may have the same benefit for young children as marriages, which have been stable throughout the child's life. To address this issue, the third set of models added interaction terms between the marriage and cohabitation dummy variables and the recent and cumulative transition variables. Presented in the third panel of Table 2, these results consistently showed null effects, indicating that the beneficial effects of maternal marriage were not moderated by prior transitions.

### Discussion

In recent policy initiatives, marriage has been promoted as a means of improving low-income children's well-being. However, considering the influence of current family structure simultaneously with instability is necessary to disentangle the benefits of marriage from the potential benefits of stability for children and youth. This study provides new insights into the repercussions of such maternal partnership experiences and transitions on low-income children's development in cognitive, behavioral, and emotional domains. Overall, three primary patterns of results emerged.

The first notable pattern of findings suggested that current marital unions were linked with better child functioning in comparison to other types of relationships structures. Current marriages were associated with higher standardized math and marginally higher reading scores, and lower mother-reported internalizing and externalizing scores for children compared to peers in single-parent households. In contrast, current cohabitation was not linked to enhanced or poorer academic or behavioral functioning for children in comparison to marriage or single-parent status. Research that assesses the impact of cohabitation on child well-being is notably sparse (Brown, 2002), particularly in relation to cognitive or achievement skills among young children. Most national surveys either do not sample children younger than age 7 or have limited

data on cognitive skills for young children. Since children were 2-5 years of age at wave 1 of the Three-City Study, the present findings represent a relatively novel examination of the influence of cohabitation on key developmental domains from early through middle childhood.

A second important pattern in the results indicated that the marriage and cohabitation findings did not differ if those partnerships included biological fathers or social fathers. This finding provides additional evidence that marriage may operate differently for low-income families, where the influence of biological fathers appears more comparable to social fathers or stepfathers. Foster and Kalil (2007) found essentially no significant differences in the externalizing and prosocial behaviors of low-income children in the Comprehensive Child Development Survey across four living arrangements (mother only, biological father in household, blended, and multigenerational), indicating a lack of distinction between biological and social father presence, but failing to address the importance of marriage versus cohabitation because most marriages in this sample involved biological fathers. Likewise, Hanson, McLanahan, and Thomson (1997) reported nonsignificant differences in externalizing, internalizing, and school behavior scores for children in two-biological cohabiting and married parent families. Why might this be? Among low-income families, unmarried African American fathers are more likely to sustain involvement with their children over time than are other unmarried fathers, which may protect children from the more deleterious outcomes associated with blended families in higher income contexts (Stier & Tienda, 1993). It is also possible that the nonbiological fathers who select into new marriages with women with young children are a more select group in low-income populations, or that social norms concerning involvement with stepchildren are stronger and more positive in this population, leading to greater benefits of step/social father involvement among low-income or minority families (Berger, Carlson, Bzostek, & Osborne, 2008; Bzostek, 2008).

In addition to assessing the importance of marital status for children's well-being, another primary goal of the current research was to assess links between recent and cumulative partnership instability and children's functioning. Past work with a focus primarily on White or middle-class samples has repeatedly demonstrated that multiple transitions into and out of single-parent status show deleterious consequences for children (e.g., Capaldi & Patterson, 1991; Cavanagh & Huston, 2008; Kurdek, Fine, & Sinclair, 1995; Martinez & Forgatch, 2002). However, in the present study of low-income, primarily minority families, the influence of cumulative instability was unrelated to child well-being after controlling for current status and recent instability. This pattern is partially supported by recent work with the children of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth sample by Fomby and Cherlin (2007), which found no effect of cumulative instability on Black children's well-being when controlling for recent instability and current status. Their instability findings were detected primarily for White children. In addition to the null results related to cumulative instability, our results also found no negative effects of recent instability on children's cognitive and socioemotional outcomes, reflecting other recent research, which also has failed to find consistent significant associations for recent effects when cumulative instability or current status are taken into account (Acs, 2007).

There are several possible explanations for our lack of instability findings. Inclusion of multiple aspects of family structure and instability in our regression models, as well as controls for mothers' cognitive skills and earlier partnership histories before the child's birth, may have adjusted for selection effects, that is characteristics that select women into multiple relationship transitions, thus weakening links between transitions and children's development. Another possibility is that family instability is a less effective predictor of minority or low-income children's well-being. Within low-income samples, families are already dealing with an

accumulation of stresses and transitions associated with poverty (Duncan, & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; Friedman & Chase-Lansdale, 2002). The Three-City Study, for instance, occurring on the heels of welfare reform and related shifts in social policies targeting low-income families, captured notable instability in low-income families' employment and welfare experiences, examples of other aspects of instability among low-income families. When adjusting to cumulative risks or stressors within the context of poverty (Sameroff, Seifer, Baldwin, & Baldwin, 1993; Seifer, Sameroff, Baldwin, & Baldwin, 1992), maternal partnership transitions may be just one aspect of instability and stress experienced by families and may have limited predictive value in relation to children's healthy development.

#### *Limitations and Conclusion*

Several limitations should be noted when reviewing these findings. Although our data contained rich histories of mothers' partnership entrances and exits, these data were gathered retrospectively, presumably increasing measurement error in the transition variables. In addition, although we exploited the availability of three waves of data, our analyses assessed concurrent links between current family structure status, past transitions, and children's functioning. Other analytic techniques are required to assess whether family structure and transitions are linked with trajectories of children's functioning over time. In addition, our sample, while generalizable to a particular population, cannot be generalized to other types of American families. Finally, the effect sizes of most of our findings are small, averaging about .10, which is common among more methodologically rigorous family structure studies that utilize random sampling, multiple-item measures, and larger samples (Amato, 2007; Fomby & Cherlin, 2007). In conclusion, results suggest that even with a history of relationship instability, low-income children living in married parent families show development that is more positive across a range of functioning areas.

Table 1  
*Weighted Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables (N = 2216)*

	M / %	SD	Range
<i>Predictor Variables</i>			
Currently Cohabiting	12%		
Currently Married	35%		
Cumulative Transitions	0.66	0.98	0 - 5
Recent Transitions	21%		
<i>Control Variables</i>			
Mother Woodcock Johnson	91.26	13.85	60 - 140
Prebirth Transitions	1.12	1.19	0 - 5
Mother Age in Years	29.39	6.22	16 - 50
Mother Education	4.01	2.05	1 - 8
Child is Male	53%		
White/Other	4%		
Hispanic	58%		
Minor	2.72	1.31	1 - 8
Child Age in Months	66.81	30.46	24 - 141
Father in Household	34%		
<i>Child Outcomes</i>			
Math Skills	424.29	51.79	331 - 525
Reading Skills	397.63	59.52	316 - 556
Internalizing Behavior	50.03	10.10	30 - 86
Externalizing Behavior	50.77	10.10	30 - 86

Table 2

*OLS Regression Models Predicting Achievement and Behavioral Outcomes from Current Status, Recent Instability, and Cumulative Instability*

	<b>Reading Skills</b>	<b>Math Skills</b>	<b>Internalizing Behaviors</b>	<b>Externalizing Behaviors</b>
	<b><u>Model 1</u></b>	<b><u>Model 1</u></b>	<b><u>Model 1</u></b>	<b><u>Model 1</u></b>
	Coeff (SE)	Coeff (SE)	Coeff (SE)	Coeff (SE)
<i>Predictor Variables</i>				
Currently Cohabiting	-0.87 (2.33)	-0.26 (2.43)	-0.47 (1.23)	-0.42 (1.22)
Currently Married	2.98 (1.78) <sup>T</sup>	4.23 (1.82)*	-1.76 (0.89)*	-2.24 (0.87)*
Lifetime Transitions	0.29 (1.03)	0.85 (1.00)	0.36 (0.51)	0.28 (0.51)
Recent Transitions	0.34 (2.16)	-2.96 (1.95)	0.39 (1.14)	0.80 (0.95)
<i>Control Variables</i>				
Mother Woodcock Johnson	0.20 (0.05)***	0.08 (0.06)	-0.02 (0.03)	0.01 (0.02)
Prebirth Transitions	1.82 (0.69)**	1.15 (0.74)	0.21 (0.33)	0.03 (0.33)
Mother Age	0.02 (0.15)	0.02 (0.16)	-0.31 (0.08)***	-0.25 (0.08)**
Mother Education	1.65 (0.42)***	1.16 (0.48)*	-0.12 (0.19)	-0.36 (0.19) <sup>T</sup>
Child is Male	-4.64 (1.62)**	-3.07 (1.80) <sup>T</sup>	-0.07 (0.78)	-0.37 (0.77)
White/Other	-4.10 (3.43)	3.62 (3.81)	1.66 (1.48)	1.62 (2.00)
Hispanic	0.10 (1.82)	1.53 (1.82)	0.08 (0.91)	-1.09 (0.88)
Minor	-1.73 (0.87)*	-0.82 (0.68)	0.16 (0.29)	0.76 (0.26)**
Child Age	1.82 (0.03)***	1.54 (0.03)***	0.05 (0.01)***	0.05 (0.01)***
F score	589.88***	424.20***	2.97***	4.91***
R <sup>2</sup>	0.87	0.83	0.05	0.08
<b>Model 2</b>				
Currently Cohabiting	17.93 (8.97)*	15.75 (7.58)*	-0.17 (1.89)	0.26 (1.91)
Currently Married	26.03 (8.88)**	19.70 (8.28)*	-0.79 (1.61)	-2.65 (1.38) <sup>T</sup>
Lifetime Transitions	-12.66 (3.62)***	-9.48 (2.91)**	0.10 (0.54)	0.12 (0.50)
Recent Transitions	28.92 (7.83)***	20.58 (6.29)**	0.73 (1.20)	1.46 (0.98)
Father in Household	-43.47 (9.95)***	-44.68 (10.97)***	1.56 (2.90)	0.78 (3.93)
Father in HH X Cohabiting	8.38 (13.99)	15.21 (14.03)	-2.06 (3.74)	-1.85 (4.63)
Father in HH X Married	13.16 (14.10)	23.81 (14.21) <sup>T</sup>	-2.77 (3.35)	0.05 (4.30)

F score, Interaction	0.44	1.42	0.34	0.24
F score, Model	15.44***	15.44***	2.39**	3.72***
R <sup>2</sup>	0.08	0.11	0.05	0.07
<b>Model 3</b>				
Currently Cohabiting	-0.25 (7.64)	2.61 (6.72)	-0.59 (1.28)	-0.46 (1.30)
Currently Married	0.79 (7.48)	5.27 (6.02)	-1.39 (1.08)	-2.28 (1.05)*
Lifetime Transitions	-5.42 (3.57)	-5.83 (2.82)*	0.29 (0.61)	0.59 (0.63)
Recent Transitions	25.75 (8.85)	23.54 (7.07)**	1.18 (1.17)	1.15 (1.10)
Lifetime X Cohabiting	-11.46 (9.09)	-4.05 (7.00)	-1.01 (1.67)	-1.00 (1.51)
Lifetime X Married	-11.07 (10.78)	-5.48 (8.48)	-0.11 (1.10)	-1.33 (1.03)
Recent X Cohabiting	-1.07 (20.30)	-6.72 (15.62)	0.38 (4.92)	0.28 (4.44)
Recent X Married	7.34 (18.30)	-8.41 (14.35)	-2.08 (2.80)	-0.04 (2.21)
F score, Interaction	1.19	0.35	0.18	0.87
F score, Model	10.98***	11.29***	2.41**	3.63***
R <sup>2</sup>	0.06	0.09	0.05	0.07

Note. \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; <sup>T</sup>  $< .10$ .

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