

Chaotic Environment and Child Behavior Problems:
A Comparative Study of High-Conflict Never Married and Divorcing Parents

by

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ABSTRACT

Never married parents (NMPs) are a burgeoning population within the Family Court system. However, there is no empirical research on these parents' separation process, though the neighboring literature purports that NMPs are more at risk for negative child wellbeing outcomes than their divorcing counterparts. This study investigated child behavior problems in high conflict litigating never married families by assessing four salient issues collectively termed chaotic environment: economic strain, lack of social support for the parents, parental repartnering, and family relocation, which included parent changing residence and child changing schools. They were then compared to divorcing parents.

It was hypothesized that NMPs would experience higher levels of chaotic environment, and subsequent increases in child behavior problems than divorcing parents, but that the relationship for NMPs and divorcing parents would be the same with each of the chaotic environment variables. This study found the contrary. NMPs only had significantly higher mean scores on lack of social support for fathers and marital status did not predict child behavior problems. Both economic strain and child changing schools predicted child behavior problems for both mothers and fathers. Two interaction effects with mothers were found, indicating that the more a never married mothers repartnered and/or changed her residence, the more behavior problems her child had, while divorcing mothers experiencing the converse effect.

DEDICATION

To Quiqui and Delani, the loves of my life, my reasons, my being.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

One of the newest types of family populations to confront Family Courts and associated professionals consists of unmarried parents. While only 12% of children were born outside of marriage in the U.S. in 1970, today nearly one third of all children are born to an unwed mother (Census 2003; Parke, 2004, Sigle-Rushton & McLanahan, 2002, Ventura & Bachrach, 2000). The rate is especially high in some sub-populations. For example, 40% of Latino and 70% of African American children are born to unwed mothers (Parke, 2004). Giving birth without being married is also more common among lower income and less educated parents (Census, 2009; Sigle-Rushton & McLanahan, 2002; Ellwood & Jencks, 2004; Manning & Brown, 2003; Hao 1996; and McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994.)

The term usually given to unmarried couples who have children together is Never Married Parents (NMPs). Because NMPs have no formal legal status, unlike divorcing parents, they are not required to use the Court to formalize the details of their arrangements concerning parenting time or financial issues when separating. Indeed, many NMPs have only informal arrangements concerning these issues, and the Court is uninvolved in their lives; in fact, the Court may never be aware of their existence. Nonetheless, both the greatly increased rate of children born to NMPs and the outreach of the court and other government agencies to this population have prompted many more NMPs than previously to bring their issues before a Court to assist in their legal resolutions, including their

arrangements concerning parenting time. As a result, court administrators report that caseloads in current Court dockets consist of about 1/3 NMPs and 2/3 parents pursuing a legal divorce (Legally Divorcing Parents or LDPs). Moreover, the indications are that the proportion of Court cases involving NMPs is going to continue to grow even further, consistent with their increasing representation in the population (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008; Lichter, Turner, Sassier, 2010).

The largest subgroup of NMPs (comprising about half) and the one about which the most is known, is couples who at one time were living together, or “cohabiting” (McLanahan & Garfinkel, 2002). There are other subtypes of NMPs who have never cohabited (“non-cohabiters”). These include parents who never lived together, but who did have a committed relationship; those who had dating or other more casual relationships that did not involve monogamous commitment; those who were never in a relationship at all and who had either infrequent sexual encounters or a “one night stand”; and parents that would primarily consider themselves “friends” at the time of the child’s conception. For many writers (e.g., Heiland & Liu, 2006) the best way of distinguishing among the non-cohabiting parents is to identify whether they continue to have a romantic (or what they term “visiting”) relationship after the child’s birth. Approximately two thirds of non-cohabiting parents have such a visiting relationship following the birth of their child. While the above descriptors apply to the *parents’* relationship with each other, an additional distinction is whether each parent has a relationship with the *child*, especially prior to coming to Court.

There is a dearth of empirical literature concerning the characteristics of litigating NMPs who are seen in the courts to settle parenting time or child support issues. However, there is a substantial empirical literature on the characteristics and dynamics of cohabiting families, and a smaller literature on non-cohabiting NMPs. This study was concerned with NMPs who are seen by the Family Court, a sub-group of this larger population of NMPs. Although great caution is needed in generalizing findings concerning the broader population of NMPs to the narrower sub-population of concern to the current study, the literature on the broader population provided the best available empirical evidence concerning these parents and therefore was used to develop the conceptual framework. Key goals of this study were to assess the various characteristics of NMPs, and to investigate differences between litigating NMPs and LDPs, the historical and most broadly researched consumer in the Family Court system. The broader literature on NMPs was used to select key variables on which to make the comparisons.

Chapter 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Never Married Parents (NMPs)

Until fairly recently, relatively little was known about NMPs. Researchers were restricted to using large scale datasets, such as Census records, that contained few questions with special reference to understanding NMPs. This changed in the current decade with the advent of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FF; Reichman, Teitler, Garfinkel, & McLanahan, 2001). The FF researchers approached mothers at the time of the child's birth in 75 hospitals in 16 large cities (with populations of 200,000 or more) across the U.S. between 1998 and 2000. If the father was identified and present in the hospital, the researchers attempted to interview him as well. Biological parents in approximately 4,700 births were interviewed soon after childbirth and subsequently every two years; about 3,600 of the births were to unmarried parents while the rest were to married couples. In the FF data set, a large number of family socioeconomic, demographic, relationship quality, and child development outcome variables are assessed. FF is the basis for many of the findings presented in the next sections. Nonetheless, findings are just beginning to emerge as the dataset becomes ready for analyses.

In the following, distinctions between cohabiting, visiting, and non-visiting families are presented, since the dynamics of each have been shown to be different.

Cohabiting Families. Cohabitation enables couples to have and jointly parent children, without dealing with common barriers to marriage, such as economic instability and uncertain relationship status (Edin & Reed 2005; Smock, Manning, & Porter, 2005). About half of cohabiting couples eventually marry (Parke, 2004; Smock, 2000). Nonetheless, data show that cohabiting parents are at greater risk of separating than their married counterparts; 40% will not be together by the child's 5th birthday (McLanahan & Beck, 2010). In fact, cohabitation seems to increase the rates of dissolution even if the couple later marries. Among children born to cohabiting parents who later marry, 15 percent will have their parents separate by the time they are one year old, half will not be living with both parents by age five, and two-thirds will not live with both parents by age 10 (Manning, Smock & Majumdar, 2000).

Visiting Families vs. Non-Visiting Families. Visiting relationship parents (those with a romantic relationship, but non-cohabiting) are intermediate in most respects in between cohabiting and non-visiting (where the parents have no ongoing romantic relationship) parents. While, as reported above, about 60% of cohabiters are still together five years after the child's birth, only about 1/5 of visiting couples are then still romantically involved, and, by definition, no non-visiting relationship parents are together (McLanahan & Beck, 2010). While virtually all cohabiting fathers provided financial support or other types of assistance during the pregnancy, came to the hospital to see the mother and baby, and said they wanted to help raise the child, all of these factors were true for at least three-quarters of visiting fathers as well. But all three of these factors were

only found with one-quarter to one-third of non-visiting fathers. Virtually all visiting fathers said that they wanted to be involved in raising their child, according to the mothers, who in turn wanted the fathers so involved. Three-fourths of non-visiting couples reported a desire for involvement (McLanahan & Beck, 2010).

The interaction between the mothers and fathers in NMPs was surprisingly good at the time of the child's birth, with parents indicating a high level of commitment to co-parent their child. Co-parenting quality was measured by questions that asked mothers whether the father: "acts like the father you want for your child"; "can be trusted to take good care of the child"; "respects your schedules and rules"; "supports you in the way you want to raise the child"; "talks with you about problems that come up with raising the child"; and "can be counted on to help when you need someone to look after the child for a few hours." On a scale from 1 (rarely true) to 3 (always true), cohabiting mothers gave an average score of 2.77; non-cohabiting mothers report a lower, but still rather high score of 2.12 (Carlson, McLanahan & England, 2004).

Divorcing Parents

There is considerable literature on divorcing families. It is approximated that 34% of US children will experience divorce before the age 16 (Bumpass & Lu, 2000) with over one million experiencing divorce each year (Center for Disease Control, 2008). Divorced parents experience more health problems, poorer psychological wellbeing, and lower levels of reported happiness than their married counterparts (Amato, 2000). Meta-analyses show that children from

divorcing families exhibit more conduct, social, and academic problems than children from intact homes (Amato, 2001; Amato & Keith, 1991). They also are at higher risk for dropping out of school, (McLanahan, 1999), leaving home early (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1998), and have higher rates of alcohol and/or drug use (Hoffmann & Johnson, 1998).

There was a rapid increase in the divorce rate in the United States during the 1970s, which continued to escalate to the current divorce rate. Due to the high prevalence of divorce, the courts have needed to adjust to meeting the needs for a wide range of services including dissolution of marriages, and adjudicating levels of child support and other financial issues in dissolving the marriage as well as deciding on custodial arrangements, parenting time and other issues involving the structure of parental rights and responsibilities. These are issues are often very emotionally trying for parents (Milne, Folberg, Salem, 2004). With that said, less than 25% of parents continue long-term conflictual relationships after divorce, even if they had contentious pre-separation relationships, and children tend to adjust well to divorce-related stressors within 1-2 years after the initial transitory period if over (Kelly, 2003). Though paternal presence and active involvement is, anecdotally, thought to be low, noncustodial fathers most often have high desire to integrally participate in their children's lives, have consistent visitation, and assist financially (Braver, 1998).

NMPs and LDPs in the Legal System

There is reason to believe that LDPs and NMPs who are seen in the Family Court face similar issues. They are both often transitioning out of a

relationship with an intimate other, they share children, and are utilizing the Family Court to adjudicate parenting time or financial issues. However, there is also reason to believe that NMPs and LDPs are different in many important ways, with never married parents being more at risk for certain stressors that may affect their children's wellbeing.

While the literature deriving from FF is a rich source of information about the population of NMPs, it contains virtually no information concerning the characteristics and needs of NMPs who are seen in the Family Court. In fact, there is a dearth of data on the characteristics and needs of NMPs seen in the courts. Court records provide little information concerning NMPs. In many jurisdictions there is no official demarcation labeling the file that even indicates whether parents are LDPs or NMPs. As a result, Courts lack official figures and have only unofficial "guesstimates" of the proportion of NMPs in its overall parenting-issues caseload (Salem, personal communication, 2010.)

The lack of a demarcation between NMPs and LDPs in court records may be because, for purposes of handling parenting issues, there is generally little legal distinction between the two, once the father's biological and social paternity are established. However, Courts' handling of strictly financial issues, such as alimony and property division, does require a clear differentiation between the LDPs and NMPs. Unlike spouses, even cohabiting partners generally have no financial claims against one another arising from their non-marital relationship (as opposed to their common parentage), although they may have rights arising from a "contract", explicit or, more commonly "implicit", if they had one. This means

that claims to a share in property accumulated during their relationship, or for alimony are generally unavailable to non-marital partners who do not have a contract establishing such claims (Ellman et. al, 2010).

The Court however is enjoined by statute and precedent to adjudicate the *parenting issues* of NMPs in the same way that they adjudicate parenting issues between LDPs. They are permitted to base their dispositions for LDPs and NMPs on factors that co-vary with marital status, such as length of parental relationship, or the parent-child relationship (Thornton, Axinn, & Xie, 2007). There are multiple legal precedents that have been enacted to protect and afford privileges to long-term relationships that are often considered to be “common-law” marriages or “marriage-like” (Blumberg, 2001).

Virtually all LDPs initially come to the attention of the Court at the time they begin the process of seeking a legal divorce. They normatively expect some sort of Court involvement because they are seeking dissolution of a legal marriage, corresponding property settlements, child support orders, and as part of their decree, a formalized parenting plan. In contrast, there is no set time or circumstance that compels NMPs into legal action, and as a result, the timing of their involvement with the Court and with professionals assisting them with developing a parenting plan development is considerably more variable. Although many cohabiting NMPs originally come to Court at or near the time of the separation (or in the case of visiting NMPs, of the relationship break-up), many do not. Instead, formerly cohabiting NMPs may wait until disagreements arise, such as about child support, a change of employment or income, access to

children, a perceived change in parental fitness, or simply disputes about what they see as the best interest of the child (e.g., a new partner; Skaine, 2003; Raisner, 2004). It is often the aggregate of smaller disputes that catalyzes litigation.

Another key difference is that, generally with LDPs, the family is coming into the Court system because at least one of the parents has initiated litigation. But with NMPs, it is much more common that neither parent initiated litigation, but rather both are involuntary litigants. Forced litigants are brought into the family court system by an administrative order of the Superior Court by State government where public assistance (TANF) is being or has been received. Since these “IV-D” parents do not file their own petitions, they can be uninformed about the process and discontent with the prospects of having external management of important aspects of their life, i.e. paying child support for a child they may or may not have visitation with, sharing parenting time with a parent they may or may not have a relationship with, and/or repaying the State to recoup the cost of public assistance to the other parent.

High Conflict Parents

The term “high conflict” often connotes different criteria for legal and mental health professionals. Because the participants were mandated by a judicial officer to attend the Family Court’s high conflict resolution intervention, I utilize the legal parameters for this study. The court defines high conflict parents as those that litigate frequently or, less commonly, are seen at their initial foray into the legal system to be at high risk for relitigation. For mental health practitioners,

high conflict can be described appropriately with Johnston's (1998) definition, which entailed high levels of anger and distrust, verbal and/or physical fighting, poor and chronic communication regarding their children, and sabotaging of children's relationship with their other parent. For the Court, the main indicator of high conflict is how often they utilize Court services. Although it may be that many parents who are identified by the court as having high legal conflict also have high levels of interpersonal conflict between the parents, there is evidence that there is only a modest relationship between the legal and interpersonal measures of conflict (Goodman et al., 2004).

Families that are distinguished as high conflict often have different litigation trajectories than typical divorcing or separating parents, although there is little research comparing high conflict LDPs and NMPs. Regardless of legal marital status, high conflict parents may be less likely to use mediators, perceive the other parent as "fair," and may be less capable of cooperating with the other parent in regards to their children's issues (Pruett & Johnston, 2004). As this study highlights, only a select group of parents are denoted as "high conflict" and sent to the court's intervention for such parents. They are often in the midst of or have exhausted other court implemented and/or privately sought-out services, such as parenting coordinators, mediation, conciliation services, and custody evaluations. A relatively small proportion of divorces involve prolonged ongoing conflict between the parents after their divorce decree is finalized. Ayoub, Deutsch and Maraganore (1999) estimated that eight to 12% of divorces continue in a high state of conflict following the decree. Although this is a relatively small

proportion of court cases, the courts often believe that they utilize a disproportionate amount of court resources (Knox, personal communication, 2005). The literature (Kitzmann & Emery, 1994; Buchanan & Heiges, 2001; Kelly, 2000) consistently finds that when conflict remains high, children do poorer than when their divorced parents actively reduce and/or avoid conflict. Interparental conflict is associated with poor emotional adjustment and low self-esteem for children and these negative effects continue to be found when children reach adulthood (Dube, Anda, Felitti, Edwards, & Williamson, 2002), and include difficulties in their own marriages (Emery, 1999; Amato, 2006; Amato & Sobolewski, 2001).

Psychosocial Risk Factors

The voluminous literature on divorced families certainly gives reason to think that NMPs who use Family Court services face considerable stresses and that their children are at elevated risk. Research finds that parental divorce is associated with higher rates of child mental health problems (Bream & Buchanan, 2003; Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 2006; Carlson & McLanahan, 2010; Pedro-Carroll, Nakhnikian, Montes, 2001; Zill, Morrison, & Coiro, 1993; Johnston & Campbell, 1998). Nonetheless, experts caution that “outcomes for children and adolescents following divorce were complexly determined, varied considerably, and could be best understood within a framework of familial and external factors increasing risk and fostering resilience” (Kelly, in press).

While research specifically on NMPs is far more sparse, the studies that do exist suggest that their children appear to have generally poorer outcomes than

the children of LDPs across a myriad of indicators, including academic performance, emotional and behavioral problems, depression, and delinquency (Brown 2004, 2006; Hofferth, 2006; Deleire & Kalil, 2002; Acs & Nelson, 2002, 2004; Manning, 2004; Manning & Brown, 2003; Manning & Lichter, 1996; and Osborne & McLanahan, 2007). While acknowledging this elevated risk, it should be noted that, as with children of LDPs, the average child of NMPs will emerge without permanent impairment, and the variability of their reactions is related to a number of risk factors.

The Concept of Chaotic Environment

It is here proposed that cohabiting NMPs are likely to face substantially the same types of issues or challenges as LDPs do, but that they commonly experience higher levels of certain adversities described below. As a result, NMPs are likely to be more distressed than LDPs, and their children are accordingly faced with environments, both parental and otherwise, that are more threatening to their well-being. The empirical literature has identified a constellation of factors or variables along which NMPs may differ from LDPs, all of which increase the psychological risks their children face. In this study, these factors are collectively termed *chaotic environment* (cf. Evans, et al., 2005). The environments of NMPs are proposed to be more chaotic and toxic than LDPs in four respects: First, they are more likely to experience economic decline, and to have higher levels of economic problems than LDPs (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002; Teachman & Paasch, 1994). Second, NMPs are more likely to have inadequate support networks and to fail to receive appropriate assistance from friends and

family, though (Wang & Amato, 2000). Third, NMPs are more prone to move their residence more often than LDPs, thus forcing the child to attend a new school (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Finally, NMPs appear to differ in the rapidity of changes and fluidity in family restructuring, with a focus on new romantic relationships that either parent may have (Carlson & Corcoran, 2001).

It is likely that the aggregate of these different environmental risk factors have a greater negative affect on children than any one experience or stressor (Amato, 1993; Wang & Amato, 2000). For the sake of this study, economic strain, partner instability, lack of social support, and relocation, are characterized as “chaotic environment” factors.

Social Fields

As a guiding theoretical perspective, I have adapted Kellam’s developmental epidemiology theory of social fields. According to this concept, individuals are involved in specific social fields that impact risk and protective factors (Kellam & Werthamer-Larsson, 1986). Kellam and his colleagues integrated an interdisciplinary perspective regarding prevention strategies in order to take into account environmental factors in their model of developmental psychopathology. Their social field approach to understanding development also reflects the different changes and experiences that occur across the lifespan, making it a relevant framework across the life span (Ialongo, Rogosch, Cicchetti, Toth, Buchley, Petras, & Neiderhiser, 2006). Coalescing community and developmental epidemiology, or looking at community-wide antecedents within life stages, it is possible to assess the risk factors amongst individuals in the

context of their environments and/or within the context of their specific population, i.e. divorcing or separating families (Kellam & Van Horn, 1997).

This theoretical framework includes looks at public mental health as a person-environmental transactional framework, or the combination of changes in the social environment affecting the development of an individual, (Wolchik, Sandler, Weiss, & Winslow, 2007), exposure risk and access to protective factors, biological and psychological characteristics, and particular life stages (Kellam & Van Horn, 1997). Their framework also requires researchers to look at the longitudinal effects of certain antecedent factors within defined populations that lead to poor adaptation to the demands of the social fields of their community (Kellam & Werthamer-Larsson, 1986). The implication of this framework is that changing the antecedent risk factors may lead to changes in the long-term outcomes of individuals. The family taxonomy that Kellam, Ensminger, and Turner (1977) developed using a community epidemiological framework has a specific focus on understanding which adults are present in the family environment. making it an appropriate fit to the study of how divorcing or never married families affects the development of children.

Kellam's framework focuses on four social fields: Work, Peers, Family, and School. These domains often overlap and shift in importance and definition throughout the lifespan. Looking at multiple social fields allows researchers to examine more nuances within the family environment and assess family risk variables with a wider lens. For the purposes of this study, I am translating the social fields into factors that more appropriately address the concerns of the never

married and divorcing population. The families in the study will be at a specific “milestone” of their separation, i.e. adjusting to a new parenting plan or revisiting a custodial order; both entailing a lifestyle change for the children. As Kellam and Wethamer-Larsson (1986) hypothesized, these social fields are fluid and are changing throughout the duration of the specific life circumstance. I will be using economic strain, relocation, social support, and relocation as the key variables of what I conceptualize as a “chaotic environment”. These variables include aspects of the children’s and family’s encounter with the major social domains identified by Kellam and his colleagues. Chaotic environment variables represent the Work, Family, Peers, and School domains, respectively, given the presenting issues of the population and the specific point of contact with the participants.

Work Domain: Economic Strain. One of the most arduous transitions for separating families is the change in economic status. According to most research, the majority of NMPs experience considerable economic stress, with their poverty rate at about 35%, compared to the general population rate of around 20% (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2009). If the parents were non-cohabiters, this level of hardship has tended to be chronic. Among former cohabiters, the level of economic stress tends to be generally lower than former married parents, but lower than that of non-cohabiters. However, following the separation their economic well-being drops to very low levels (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002; Braver, Gonzalez, Wolchik, & Sandler, 1989; Klebanov, Brooks-Gunn, & Duncan, 1994; Teachman & Paasch, 1994; Wang & Amato, 2000). *Chronic* economic hardship and *decreases* in economic level (experienced by formerly cohabiting NMPs at

separation) are each associated with problems for the parents as well as for the children (Barnett, 2008; Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Mistry, Vandewater, Huston, & McLoyd, 2002).

Of course, not all NMPs are from the economic underclass; there is a full continuum of NMPs of varying economic background. Some higher socioeconomic status NMPs make a deliberate choice not to marry for a myriad of reasons, such as personal beliefs and diverse worldviews, including rejecting both gendered ideas of marriage and pressures to conform to social constructions (DePaulo & Morris, 2005). In terms of its effects on NMP children, declines in parental economic well-being (no matter to what eventual level) appear to have both *direct effects* and *indirect effects* through the parenting they experience. Children are *directly* affected by declines when their parents have less money to take care of their needs. The indirect effects come from the parent's psychological distress in dealing with the economic challenges (Cutrona, Russell, Hessling, Brown, & Murry, 2000; Jones, Forehand, Brody, & Armistead, 2003), which may lead to use of less effective parenting such a more use of harsh and inconsistent discipline and less positive attention (Klebanov et al., 1994; Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). New or unsatisfying employment patterns can also create strains as NMP mothers attempt to balance family life and work with limited resources (Osborne & Knab, 2007).

Although they receive somewhat less attention, NMP fathers, both custodial and non-custodial, also experience financial strain and its attendant distress following separation. NMP fathers with low incomes have less supportive

coparenting relationships, particularly if the mother was also economically disadvantaged (Bronte-Tinkew & Horowitz, 2010). Some never married fathers have difficulty maintaining formal employment, and may have increased dependence on unstable sources of support through the underground economy, sometimes referred to colloquially as hustling.

Peer Domain: Lack of Social Support. Social support has been shown to protect children from many community-related adverse events such as exposure to negative peer groups, as well as internal family strain, which would otherwise pose difficulties (Murry, Bynum, Brody, Willert, & Stephens, 2000). Social support has been found to be both a buffer against the adverse effects of exposure to stressful situations (Cohen & Wills, 1985), and to be directly related to positive psychological outcomes (Pierce, Sarason, & Sarason, 1996). Informal social support from family and friends is particularly salient for certain ethno-racial communities that often rely on extended family networks for support in childrearing and parenting duties (Forehand & Kotchick, 1996). For parents, higher levels of social support may serve to enhance positive parenting, mainly by decreasing parental psychological distress (MacPhee, Fritz, & Miller-Heyl, 1996), leading to increased child well-being outcomes.

When parents are parenting alone, the social support benefits of the other parent, such as care-giving and providing financial and emotional resources, are lost (Sigle-Rushton & McLanahan 2002). In addition, NMPs may be less adept at harnessing broader social support networks than LDPs (Cairney, Boyle, Offord, & Racine, 2003) and are more likely to feel isolated and alone. Parents' feelings of

isolation can affect the children, who feel equally isolated and who may experience the loss of significant sources of adult social support (Kelly & Emery, 2003).

Family Domain: Repartnering. Repartnering refers to how many people a parent has had a significant relationship with that included exposure to and/or experience with their child. For the purpose of this study, the partner is restricted to new parental romantic partners with whom the parent has been involved with for over one month, which was adopted from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, Wave 3 . These repartnering relationships of the parent involve familial transitions for children and accordingly constitute major stressors in children's lives (Amato, 2001). Children from homes with more transitions and/or more restructuring exhibit more externalizing behaviors, classroom disruptions, and negative interactions with peers than did children from more stable homes (Cavanagh & Huston, 2006; Osborne & McLanahan, 2007).

NMPs commonly experience more repartnering than divorcing parents, and their children thus experience more transitions in their family structure than do children of traditional marriages (Osborne & McLanahan, 2007). The quantitative research data shows that family transitions can also be linked to dramatic changes in income and residential moves (Amato, 2000; Astone & McLanahan, 1994; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994), which can affect children's well-being (Teachman, 2003). Families who experience one major family transition are more likely to experience additional transitions, thus compounding the stresses that accompany these life changes (Martinson & Wu, 1992).

School Domain: Relocation. NMPs are particularly likely to have unstable physical environments, either as a result of separation (for formerly cohabiting NMPs) or because of their lower financial resources. Moving or relocation can be a stressful experience for children, posing its own set of risk factors (Austin, 2008). Moving often involves attending a new school, which causes children stress due to changes in their peer networks and community ties (Astone & McLanahan, 1994; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994), especially during key developmental periods of their life. Children have natural social pathways that mark developmental transitions, such as entering middle school (Elder, 1998). The aggregate of multiple stressors that disrupt these social pathways can lead to problem behaviors with school aged children, such as disruptive behaviors with teachers (Cavanagh & Huston, 2006). The more times a child changes schools, with the exception of normal transition times (kindergarten, middle school, and high school), the lower their academic success rate (Pribesh & Downey, 1999). Children who moved more frequently have also been found to have failing grades and/or to have repeated a grade than children who had never moved or who moved infrequently (Wood, Halfon, Scarlata, Newacheck, & Nessim, 1993).

Rationale

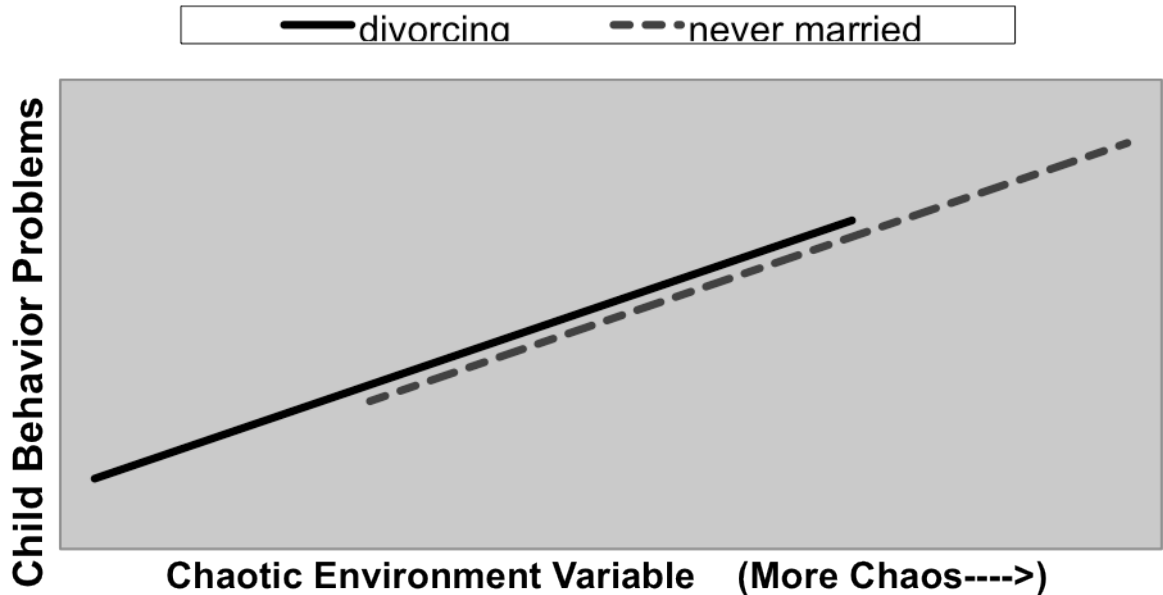
The literature in the related fields of divorcing families and cohabiting families suggest that children in these circumstances experience relatively high levels of psychological distress, poorer school performance, and higher levels of drug and alcohol use (Furstenberg & Teitler, 1994; Buchanan & Heiges, 2001).

However, sparse research exists on children of high conflict NMPs who are seen in the family courts. This study posed a unique opportunity to study the needs of high conflict never married families by assessing four salient issues that are hypothesized to be particularly important in this population and to influence the well-being of children in these families; economic strain, lack of social support for the parents, parental repartnering, and family relocation, as compared to divorcing parents. By comparing never married high conflict families to divorcing families, it was proposed that the unique circumstances and needs of high conflict never married families seen in the courts could be better understood.

The study investigated how NMPs and divorcing families differ on multiple demographic variables, including gender and age of their children, ethnoracial minority status, educational attainment, age of parent, how long their relationship was, how long they have been apart, decree status, and custodial time spent with their child. These demographic variables were used as covariates in the study of the Chaotic Environment variables that were the main focus of the study. Four questions were addressed in this study: Do NMPs experience more Chaotic Environment than divorcing parents? Do their children have more behavior problems than children of divorced families? Are the chaotic environment variables predictive of the wellbeing of children in families that were never married and families who were divorcing following a legal marriage? Does marital status moderate the effects of chaotic environment variables on children's wellbeing? Understanding familial adjustment to this transition can provide insight into ancillary service creation and delivery or changes needed in the

existing Family Court structure. This study marks a foundational work in empirically evaluating NMPs within the Court system.

Proposed Model



Proposed Model

Each of the chaotic environment variables has been shown, and is here proposed, to lead to symptoms of distress in children. In general, the higher the level of the factor, the more behavior problems children should exhibit. While the relationship above is assumed to be the same for high conflict never-married and divorcing families, never married parents are hypothesized to show elevated scores, on average, on each of these variables compared to divorcing parents. As a result, the children of never married parents are hypothesized to have higher levels of behavior problems than those of divorcing parents.

Hypotheses:

1. Children of never married parents will have lower child wellbeing outcomes than children of divorcing families.
2. Never married parents will have higher means on each of the chaotic environment variables than divorcing parents.
3. Increases in each of the chaotic environment variables will be positively associated with child behavior problems.
 - 3.a. More economic strain is associated with higher child behavior problems.
 - 3.b. More repartnering is associated with higher child behavior problems.
 - 3.c. Lack of social support is associated with higher child behavior problems.
 - 3.d. More relocations (residential and school mobility) are associated with higher child behavior problems.
 - 3.e. Each of the chaotic environment variables will still be related to child behavior problems even after controlling for each other.
4. The correlations between chaotic environment variables and child behavior problems will be the same for NMPs and divorcing families.
 - 4.a. The relationship between economic strain and child behavior problems will be the same for divorcing and never married parents.
 - 4.b. The relationship between repartnering and child behavior problems will be the same for divorcing and never married parents.

4.c. The relationship between lack of social support and child behavior problems will be the same for divorcing and never married parents.

4.d. The relationship between relocation and child behavior problems will be the same for divorcing and never married parents.

Sampling

The sample consisted of 500 participants mandated by a judicial officer to attend one of two randomly assigned high conflict interventions offered by the Family Court. Both interventions gave parents equal opportunity to participate in the study. The parents were involved in litigation through the Court system, with the vast majority being post-decree, or parents requesting modifications of their established parenting plans (80% of fathers and mothers), and a much smaller proportion being pre-decree, or just beginning their litigation process. The Judge in each case was given the option of designating the couple “high conflict” and ordering them into interventions specifically designed for such families. Of the parents that participated in the study, 41% of fathers and 40% of mothers were NMPs. At the very beginning of the intervention, parents were given the opportunity to fill out a survey. A video was shown that detailed the informed consent issues and instructions regarding filling out the survey. The survey was clearly specified as voluntary and confidential and parents were offered \$20 to participate. They were asked to sign an informed consent to participate and were given a copy of it for their records. The survey asked them to report on their oldest child involved in their current Court case. Approximately 75% of all parents that attended the intervention agreed to fill out the survey. In addition to

the chaotic environment variables and designated covariates, the survey also included measures, not part of the current study, assessing interparental conflict, coparenting alliance, parent mental health, and time with child. There were 63 total items, with 22 pertaining to chaotic environment, and took approximately 10 minutes to complete.

Child Behavior Problems

Using two longitudinal data sets, the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth and the Study of Separating Families (Braver et al., 1993), Tien, Braver, and Sandler (2006) developed a 15-item risk index with good predictive validity to help parents assess families' needs for preventive services. The 15-item risk index predicted child behavior problems at post-test ($r = .54$) and 6-year follow-up ($r = .41$). It has an odds-ratio of 4.78 in predicting diagnosis of mental disorder (DISC) six years later. The 8-items used for this study measured internalizing and externalizing behaviors. With the time anchor of the last three months, sample items included: "has your child...had difficulty concentrating, could not pay attention for long," "...felt worthless or inferior," "...was disobedient at school." The three item-response were, "never true," "sometimes true," and "always true," with the response values as "1," "2," and "3" respectively. The scale was scored by using a composite score. The 8-item subset of items for this study had good internal reliability ($\alpha = .86$);

Chaotic Environment Measures

Economic Strain. The following items were adapted from an Economic Hardship scale developed by Barrera, Caples, and Tien in 2001. The original

scale had four domains, including, “Financial Strain,” “Inability to Make Ends Meet,” “Not Enough Money for Necessities,” and “Economic Adjustments/Cutbacks” and was twenty questions in length. This Economic Hardship scale was also adapted from other scales that were used in multiple studies.

For the purposes of this study, two Financial Strain domain items were chosen, “you worried that your family would have bad times such as poor housing or not enough food” and “you worried that you would have to do without basic things that your family needs.” The correlation in Barrera’s 2001 study was .74 for mothers and .72 for fathers. The third item, “you worried that you would have difficulty paying your bills,” was taken from the Inability to Make Ends Meet construct whose internal consistency reliabilities were .85 for mothers and .88 for fathers. The response items were changed to make the answers consistent with the other questions on the protocol. Each item had the same item responses, which included, “never true,” “sometimes true,” and “always true,” and were scored using the values “1,” “2,” and “3,” respectively. The scores were then composited to create an overall economic strain score. In the context of this study, its reliability was .87.

Lack of Social Support. The Lack of Social Support questions were adapted from a 6-item scale that was developed by Manuel Barrera for the Adolescent and Family Development project at Arizona State University. It was designed to assess parents’ perceptions of their social support.

The original scale asked parents to rate how much they agreed (or disagreed) with

the following statements: “I have people who are important to me who (a) I can talk to about things that are personal and private, (b) would loan or give me money or valuable objects that I needed, (c) I could turn to for personal advice if I needed it, (d) let me know when they like my ideas or the things that I do, (e) I can call to help me take care of things that I have to do—things like watching the children, driving me someplace I need to go, helping me with some work around the house, or things like that, and (f) I can get together with to have fun or to relax.” Each item was rated on a 5-point scale that ranged from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.” This 6-item scale had an internal consistency reliability of .82, and one-year test-retest reliability of .61. It was correlated -.21 and -.25 with psychological distress for fathers and mothers, respectively.

For the purposes of this study, the response items were modified to be consistent with other parts of the survey by adding, “How many people do you have...” to each question. For example, “How many people do you have that you could turn to for personal advice if you needed it?” The item, “(d) let me know when they like ideas or the things that I do” was not included because it measures issues related to personal validation versus specific types of support or activities. Each question had the same item response categories, including “no one” or “none,” “1-3...,” and “4 or more...,” and were scored using the values “1,” “2,” and “3,” respectively. They were composited to create an overall score. Within this study, it had an internal reliability score of .84.

Repartnering. The item, “Since you last separated from your child's other parent, how many people have you lived with in a marriage-like relationship for one month or more?” was adapted from the relationship history questionnaire

from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, Wave 3, which included over 15,000 respondents (Knab & McLanahan, 2007). The other items were adapted from the Study of Separating Families, Wave 1 and Wave 2, to appropriately address the needs of this distinct population. The questions included, “Since you last separated from your child's other parent, how many people have you dated or been in a relationship with for one month or more?” and “Of the relationships you indicated in the previous question, how many of those people were around your child at least half of your parenting time?” Each question had the same item responses, including “no one” or “none,” “1-3...,” and “4 or more...,” and were scored using the values “1,” “2,” and “3,” respectively. They were scored by creating a composite. It had good internal reliability ($\alpha = .87$) within this study.

Relocation. The following items, “How many times has your child changed schools” and “How many times have you changed where you live,” were adapted from the Study of Separating Families, Wave 1 and Wave 2. Relocation was analyzed as two single item causal indicators, inferring that internal consistency is not necessary for it to be an adequate measure based on the relationship between the indicators (single item questions) and the latent construct (relocation) (Bollen & Lennox, 1991). Each question had the same three item response categories, including “no one” or “none,” “1-3...,” and “4 or more...,” and were scored using the values “1,” “2,” and “3,” respectively. They were composited to create an overall score.

Data Analytic Approach

Covariates. In addition to the chaotic environment variables (economic strain, lack of social support, repartnering, relocation), nine covariates were factored into the analysis. We included parent ethnicity, using a majority (Caucasian only) and minority (all other ethnracial minorities with the majority being Hispanic) dichotomous variable, months since separation, nominal parental age, education using 10 categories ranging from “8th grade or less” to “PhD, JD, MD, etc.”, child gender, stage of divorce or separation (pre- or post-decree), length of their relationship together by months, nominal age of oldest child, and number of overnights per month. Each analysis controlled for all of these factors simultaneously. Chi-squared analyses were conducted on the dichotomous variables and Mann-Whitney U tests were used to analyze the continuous variables, not assuming normal distributions.

Analyses of Hypotheses. In examining hypothesis 1 and 2, the analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) analytic approach was employed, separately for fathers and mothers, to examine the effect of marital status on child behavioral problems after covarying or partialling out all the aforementioned covariates. In examining hypothesis 2, using a similar approach, the effect of marital status on the chaotic environment variables (economic strain, lack of social support, repartnering & relocation) was analyzed by controlling for the chosen covariates. This was conducted separately for fathers and for mothers.

In examining hypothesis 3, a two-step hierarchical multiple regression model was computed to predict child behavior problems. At step 1, all nine

covariates (parent ethnicity, time apart, parental age, education, child gender, pre-post-decree, length of relationship, age of child, and number of overnights) were entered, while at step 2 the four Chaotic Environment independent variables (economic strain, lack of social support, repartnering, & relocation) were added. The regression model was conducted separately for fathers and for mothers. In examining hypothesis four, a four-step multiple regression was employed. Specifically, four separate step-wise regression analyses were conducted. Each analysis consisted of four nested models. For step 1, the four analyses consisted of the same covariates (minority, time apart, parent's age, education, child's gender, child's age, amount of overnights, pre-post decree and length of relationship) and in step 2, all of the analyses incorporated the same predictor (i.e., marital status).

However, in step 3, the predictors, which consisted of one chaotic environment indicator, varied across the four analyses. For the first three analyses, there was one predictor and for the fourth analysis, there were two predictors. The step 3 predictors consisted of economic strain, lack of social support, repartnering and two relocation indicators (i.e., children changing schools and parent changing residence). In step 4, the model consisted of two mean centered predictors, parental marital status and one of the predictors from step 3, and their cross product. The cross-product was computed to evaluate the interaction of the predictors. They were hypothesized to NOT be significant.

Addressing Statistical Dependency and Sample Size. A preliminary decision needed to be made about how to handle the fact of both mother and

father reports. One possibility was to treat the family as the unit of analysis, with each having matched mother and father reporters. However, while both the mother and the father from the family were indeed almost always ordered to participate in the intervention, in fact about one-quarter of those ordered never did. Moreover, even if both had attended the intervention, one might have chosen to complete the (voluntary) survey, while the other might have chosen not to. This had the possibility of greatly limiting the number of families with matched father and mother reports.

Altogether, 233 Fathers completed the survey, as did 267 Mothers together comprising the 500 respondents in the sample. However, of the fathers, 99 did not have matching mothers who participated (42% of the dads). For 56 of these, the mother never attended the class. For the remaining 43, the mother attended the class, but she (a) declined to complete the survey, was late to class and thereby precluded from completing the survey, or (b) subsequently withdrew permission to use her data, or (c) was in an early group of respondents (Cohort 1) not asked the relevant question. Similarly, of the mothers, 133 did not have matching fathers who participated (49% of the moms). For 62 of these, the father never attended the class. For the remaining 71, the father attended the class, but he (a) declined to complete the survey, was late to class and thereby precluded from completing the survey, or (b) subsequently withdrew permission to use her data, or (c), for 15 of the 71, was in Cohort 1 and therefore not asked the relevant question.

Thus, had we limited the analyses to just those cases with matching mother- and father-reports, only 134 families would be counted, a mere 31% of

the 436 distinct families for whom we had at least one parent reporting. Not only were two-parent-report families a much *smaller n* of families, but they were also likely a self-selected and therefore somewhat unique and nonrepresentative sample. This rendered unwise the prospect of analyzing only the families with matched reports.

An alternative was to analyze only the families that did not have matched reports (*i.e.*, the 99 fathers and the 133 mothers from distinct families.) This strategy would have the virtue of avoiding the statistical dependency problems brought about when reporting on the same child's well-being outcomes, as well as the same level of parental conflict, etc. On the other hand, such a strategy would have the drawback that the sample size would be only 232, rather than the 500 parents who completed the survey. It would also likely be a self-selected subgroup.

Yet another possibility was to analyze all 500 respondents at once but use gender of parent as a moderator variable in the analyses. This strategy would have the virtue of allowing us directly to compare what mothers say to what fathers say. But such an analysis would require the assumption that the 500 cases were all statistically independent, yet the fact that many had the same child in common clearly falsified such an assumption. Similarly, "holding constant" gender of parent by treating gender as a covariate was precluded for the same reason.

The final possibility, and the one adopted here, was to conduct all of the analyses for the hypothesis tests twice, once for fathers and a second time for mothers. This strategy has the virtue of using all the data collected, and avoiding

the shrinking sample size, self-selection, and statistical dependency problems mentioned above. Note, however, that it has the drawback that, because some but not all of the families for the father analyses are in common with the mother analyses, the findings for fathers and mothers cannot be directly compared, since it is unclear whether any differences are due to the fact that different families are involved as compared to that there are different dynamics at work for mothers and fathers

Statistical Approach. The data were analyzed using SPSS (PASW) version 18. Either frequency and percentage distributions or descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were computed for the ordinal level covariates (parent ethnicity, educational level, gender of eldest child under 18, and pre-post decree status) and for interval/ratio Level Covariates, as a function of parental marital status (divorcing and never married),. However, these statistics were computed (and reported) separately for fathers and for mothers. For all the data, descriptive and reliability analyses were conducted for each of the chaotic environment subscales. These analyses were not calculated separately for fathers and mothers, nor are they reported separately by marital status. The inter-variable correlations of the dependent variable children behavior problems and chaotic environment covariates were computed separately for fathers' and mothers' data.

Chapter 4

RESULTS

Frequencies and Descriptive Statistics for Father's and Mother's Covariates

The frequency and percentage distribution for fathers' data are reported in Table 1a, and mothers are reported in Table 1.5. There were significant differences in ethnoracial minority status between divorcing and NMPs for both fathers, $\chi^2 (df= 1, n= 232) = 3.81, p = .05$; and mothers, $\chi^2 (df= 1, n = 267) = 5.27, p = .02$ and level of education also differed significantly by marital status (fathers, $n = 233, p < .01$; mothers, $n = 267, p = .01$). Regarding gender of child, there were no significant differences between divorcing and NMPs for either fathers, $\chi^2 (df= 1, n = 229) = .65, p = .04$; or mothers, $\chi^2 (df= 1, n = 266) = .20, p = .065$, nor were there significant differences between divorcing and NMPs regarding decree status for either fathers, $\chi^2 (df= 1, n = 230) = .81, p = .37$; or mothers, $\chi^2 (df= 1, n = 265) = .58, p = .45$. Age of parent varied significantly by marital status for both fathers, ($n = 225, p < .01$), and mothers ($n = 242, p < .01$), and the same held true for age of child (fathers, $n = 230, p < .01$; mothers, $n = 266, p < .01$), and length of relationship (fathers, $n = 231, p < .01$; mothers, $n = 266, p < .01$). Time apart did not significantly differ between divorcing and NMPs for either fathers ($n = 204, p < .28$) or mothers ($n = 234, p < .84$) nor did amount of overnights (fathers, $n = 222, p = .56$; mothers, $n = 249, p < .94$).

Table 1a
 Frequency and Percentage Distribution of Ordinal Level Covariates Reported by Father's Marital Status

code	Categories	Marital Status of Father			
		Divorcing		Never Married	
		<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
Father's Ethnicity (Minority)*					
0	White-only	91	65.94%	50	53.19%
1	Minority	47	34.06%	44	46.81%
	Total	138	100.00%	94	100.00%
Father's Education Level ^b					
1	8th grade or less	1	.72%	0	.00%
2	9th-11th grade	7	5.04%	6	6.38%
3	High School graduate	16	11.51%	16	17.02%
4	GED	3	2.16%	12	12.77%
5	1 yr college, vocational/technical training	25	17.99%	19	20.21%
6	2 yrs college or technical, AA degree	30	21.58%	20	21.28%
7	3 yrs, but no college degree	18	12.95%	8	8.51%
8	Bachelor s Degree (BA, BS)	29	20.86%	10	10.64%
9	Master s Degree (MS, MA, MFA, etc.)	6	4.32%	3	3.19%
10	PhD, JD, MD, etc.	4	2.88%	0	.00%
	Subtotal	139	100.00%	94	100.00%
11	Other	0		0	
98	Refusal	0		0	
99	Don't Know	0		0	
	Total	139		94	
Gender of Oldest Child under 18 ^{ns}					
1	Male	70	51.09%	52	56.52%
2	Female	67	48.91%	40	43.48%
	Subtotal	137	100.00%	92	100.00%
8	Refusal	1		1	
9	Don't Know	0		0	
	Total	138		93	
Pre- Post-Decree ^{ns}					
1	Pre-decree	23	16.55%	20	21.28%
2	Post-decree	114	82.01%	73	77.66%
3	Other county	2	1.44%	1	1.06%
	Total	139	100.00%	94	100.00%

* $p < .05$ (χ^2); ** $p < .01$ (χ^2); ^{ns} Non-significant (χ^2);

^a $p < .05$ (Mann-Whitney U); ^b $p < .01$ (Mann-Whitney U)

Table 1b
 Descriptive Statistics of Interval/Ratio Level Covariates for Fathers

Covariates	Marital Status of Fathers					
	Divorcing			Never Married		
	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Father's Age**	134	38.60	8.09	91	32.81	7.69
Child's Age**	137	9.50	4.72	93	5.34	4.21
Length of Relationship (months)**	138	106.58	60.59	93	49.34	41.67
Time Apart (months) ^{ns}	125	50.07	44.84	79	42.75	42.41
Amount of Overnights per Month ^{ns}	132	11.74	8.90	90	11.03	9.39

Note: Mann-Whitney U test conducted for all variables

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; ^{ns}Non-significant

Table 1.5a
 Frequency and Percentage Distribution of Ordinal Level Covariates Reported by Mother's
 Marital Status

code	Categories	Marital Status of Mother			
		Divorcing		Never Married	
		<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
Mother's Ethnicity (Minority)*					
0	White-only	109	67.70%	57	53.77%
1	Minority	52	32.30%	49	46.23%
	Total	161	100.00%	106	100.00%
Mother's Education Level ^b					
1	8th grade or less	2	1.24%	1	.94%
2	9th-11th grade	7	4.35%	9	8.49%
3	High School graduate	18	11.18%	14	13.21%
4	GED	9	5.59%	6	5.66%
5	1 yr college, vocational/technical training	46	28.57%	38	35.85%
6	2 yrs college or technical, AA degree	21	13.04%	18	16.98%
7	3 yrs, but no college degree	12	7.45%	8	7.55%
8	Bachelor s Degree (BA, BS)	33	20.50%	7	6.60%
9	Master s Degree (MS, MA, MFA, etc.)	11	6.83%	4	3.77%
10	PhD, JD, MD, etc.	2	1.24%	1	.94%
	Subtotal	161	100.00%	106	100.00%
11	Other	0		0	
98	Refusal	0		0	
99	Don't Know	0		0	
	Total	161		106	
Gender of Oldest Child under 18 ^{ns}					
1	Male	83	51.88%	52	49.06%
2	Female	77	48.13%	54	50.94%
	Subtotal	160	100.00%	106	100.00%
8	Refusal	1		0	
9	Don't Know	0		0	
	Total	161		106	
Pre- Post-Decree ^{ns}					
1	Pre-decree	33	20.50%	18	16.98%
2	Post-decree	126	78.26%	88	83.02%
3	Other county	2	1.24%	0	.00%
	Total	161	100.00%	106	100.00%

* $p < .05$ (χ^2); ** $p < .01$ (χ^2); ^{ns} Non-significant (χ^2).

^a $p < .05$ (Mann-Whitney U); ^b $p < .01$ (Mann-Whitney U)

Table 1.5b
Descriptive Statistics of Interval/Ratio Level Covariates for Mothers

Covariates	Marital Status of Mother					
	Divorcing			Never Married		
	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Mother's Age**	143	35.43	6.98	101	29.78	6.82
Child's Age**	160	9.51	4.47	106	5.49	3.89
Length of Relationship (months)**	160	111.69	64.18	106	53.93	50.27
Time Apart (months) ^{ns}	144	48.90	44.15	94	47.82	41.43
Amount of Overnights per Month ^{ns}	145	18.46	9.35	104	18.35	9.64

Note: Mann-Whitney U test conducted for all variables
* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; ^{ns}Non-significant

Descriptive Statistics and Reliability for Chaotic Environment Covariates

The number of items, descriptive statistics, as well as reliability results, for child behavior problems and the four chaotic environment subscales are reported in Table 2. The child behavior problems scale, which was computed by averaging scores across eight items, had a mean of 1.48 and a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of .86, which indicates good internal reliability.

Table 2
 Potential and Actual Minimum and Maximum Values, Descriptive Statistics and Cronbach Alpha Reliability Coefficients of Subscale

Subscale	No. of Items	Potential Range		Actual Range		<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	α
		<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>			
Child Behavior Problems	8	1	3	1	3.00	481	1.48	.86
Economic Strain	3	1	3	1	3.00	470	1.80	.87
Lack of Social Support	5	1	3	1	3.00	473	1.67	.84
Repartnering	4	1	3	1	2.50	467	1.63	.87
Relocation*	2	1	3	1	3	473	1.43	.29
Child Changed Schools	1	1	3	1	3	470	1.31	<i>NAP</i>
Parent Change Residence	1	1	3	1	3	473	1.55	<i>NAP</i>

*Causal indicator

The four chaotic environment composites were computed from varying number of items. For example, economic strain was averaged across three items, while lack of social support was computed by averaging across five items. The means for the four chaotic environment variables (economical strain, lack of social support, repartnering, and relocation indicators) ranged between 1.40 and 2.37. Three of the chaotic environment subscales had good reliability, with alpha coefficients ranging between .84 and .87. The relocation subscale had a poor reliability ($\alpha = .29$); accordingly, the composite score was not used. Instead, the two items, child change school and change residence were used as separate causal indicators.

Correlations among Children Behavior Problems and Chaotic Environment

Covariates

Pearson product-moment correlations between child behavior problems and the four chaotic environment variables, as well as among the chaotic environment variables, are reported in Table 3a, for Father Report, and 3b for Mother Report.

Table 3a
Correlations among the Key Constructs (Father Report)

Key Constructs	Key Constructs					
	1	2	3	4	5a	5b
1 Child Behavior Problems		.13	-.02	.15*	.31**	.09
2 Economic Strain	214		.28**	-.28**	.14*	.21**
3 Lack of SS	213	220		-.13	.00	.11
4 Repartnering Relocation	211	218	219		.06	-.10
5a Child Changed Schools	213	219	220	218		.13
5b Father Change Residence	214	221	222	220	221	

Note: Sample Size Reported in Lower Off- Diagonal

* Sig at .05 level

** Sig at .01 level

For Fathers, the child behavior problems subscale was not significantly correlated with economic strain or with lack of social support; however, it was positively correlated with repartnering subscale and with child changing schools. Economic strain was positively correlated with lack of social support, repartnering, and the two relocations indicators (children changing schools and father changing residence). However, there were no significant correlations

among the remaining three chaotic environment variables (lack of social support, repartnering & relocation indicators).

For Mothers, child behavior problems was positively correlated with economic strain and relocation and with child changing schools. Economic strain was correlated with lack of social support and mother’s residential relocation. Mother’s residential relocation was positively related with lack of social support.

Table 3b
Correlations among the Key Constructs (Mother Report)

Key Constructs	Key Constructs					
	1	2	3	4	5a	5b
1 Child Behavior Problems		.23**	.11	.06	.19**	.09
2 Economic Strain	243		.37**	-.10	.09	.16**
3 Lack of SS	243	251		-.01	.06	.13*
4 Repartnering Relocation	239	247	247		.09	.09
5a Child Changed Schools	241	249	249	245		.21**
5b Mother Change Residence	242	250	250	246	249	

Note: Sample Size Reported in Lower Off- Diagonal

* Sig at .05 level

** Sig at .01 level

Results for Hypothesis 1: Children of never married parents will have lower child wellbeing outcomes than children of divorcing families.

For both Hypotheses 1 and 2, the analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) analytic approach was employed, separately for fathers and mothers, to examine the effect of marital status (never married vs. divorcing parents) on child behavioral problems after covarying or partialling out the effect of the seven covariates (parent ethnicity, time since separation, parental age, education, gender of child, decree status, and length of relationship). The unadjusted means, as well

as the adjusted means (adjusted for differences on all the covariates), for child behavior problem are reported in Table 4 separately for mothers and fathers. After controlling for the covariates, the adjusted mean child behavioral problems for never married ($M = 1.39$) and divorcing ($M = 1.43$) fathers was not significantly different, $F = .49, p = .48$. As well, never married ($M = 1.51$) and divorcing ($M = 1.58$) mothers did not significantly differ in mean child behavioral problems either, $F = .04, p = .84$. Thus Hypothesis 1 was not supported.

Table 4.

Child Behavioral Problems by Marital Status of Parents and by Reporter

Reporter	<i>Never Married</i>		<i>Divorcing</i>		<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>		
Unadjusted Means						
Fathers	89	1.38	133	1.45	1.51	.220
Mothers	103	1.50	156	1.57	1.08	.299
Adjusted Means*						
Fathers	76	1.39	117	1.43	.49	.484
Mothers	88	1.51	132	1.58	.04	.844

*Means adjusted by partialling out all covariates

Results for Hypothesis 2: Never married parents will have higher means on each of the chaotic environment variables than divorcing parents.

The effect of marital status on the chaotic environment variables (economic strain, lack of social support, repartnering & relocation) was also analyzed by ANCOVA, controlling for the nine chosen covariates (parent

ethnicity, time apart, parental age, education, child gender, pre post-decree, length of relationship, age of child, and number of overnights). The results of these analyses are reported in Table 5, separately for mothers and fathers. Only lack of social support was significantly different for fathers ($F = 9.51, p < .01$), with the adjusted mean for divorcing fathers ($M = 1.74$) being higher than those never married ($M = 1.52$), contrary to the proposed directional hypothesis.

Table 5.

Chaotic Environment Variables By Marital Status of Parents and by Reporter (Means are Adjusted by Partialling Out All Covariates)

CE Variable	<i>Never Married</i>		<i>Divorcing</i>		<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>		
Father Report						
Economic Strain	78	1.71	122	1.78	.41	.522
Lack of SS	79	1.52	122	1.74	9.51	.002
Repartnering	79	1.64	120	1.64	.00	.956
Relocation						
Child Changed Schools	78	1.33	121	1.33	.00	1.0
Parent Change Residence	79	1.57	122	1.49	.65	.42
Mother Report						
Economic Strain	91	1.83	137	1.88	.94	.496
Lack of SS	91	1.67	137	1.70	.21	.646
Repartnering	90	1.65	134	1.65	.02	.894
Relocation						
Child Changed Schools	91	1.28	136	1.29	.02	.88
Parent Change Residence	91	1.61	137	1.57	.25	.62

Results for Hypothesis 3: Increases in each of the chaotic environment variables will be negatively associated with child wellbeing outcomes.

A two-step hierarchical multiple regression model was computed to predict child behavior problems. At step 1, all nine covariates (parent ethnicity,

time apart, parental age, education, child gender, pre post-decree, length of relationship, age of child, and number of overnights) were entered, while at step 2 the four chaotic environment independent variables (economic strain, lack of social support, repartnering, & two relocation indicators) were added. The regression model was conducted separately for fathers and for mothers. Tables 6a and 6b summarize the unstandardized (B) and standardized regression coefficients (β) for fathers and for mothers, respectively.

Table 6a
 Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Chaotic Environment
 Variables Predicting Child Behavior Problems, by Father Report

Predictors	<i>B</i>	<i>SE(B)</i>	β	Partial Correlation	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Step 1: Covariates*						
(Constant)	1.24	.21			6.02	.00
Parent is Minority	.06	.06	.08	.08	1.05	.29
Time Apart (months)	.00	.00	-.14	-.09	-1.24	.22
Parent Age	.00	.00	.00	.00	.01	1.0
Education	-.02	.02	-.09	-.09	-1.15	.25
Child Gender	-.07	.06	-.09	-.10	-1.29	.20
Child's Age	.04	.01	.45	.23	3.18	.00
Amount of Overnights	.00	.00	.05	.05	.67	.54
Pre- Post-Decree	.11	.08	.11	.10	1.37	.17
Length of Relationship	.00	.00	-.18	-.10	1.33	.19
Step 2: Chaotic Environment Variables						
Economic Strain	.11	.05	.17	.16	2.19	.03
Lack of Social Support	-.02	.07	-.02	-.02	-.32	.75
Repartnering	.16	.08	.16	.15	2.00	.05
Relocation						
Changed Schools	.14	.06	.19	.23	2.55	.01
Changed Residence	.04	.06	.04	.04	.59	.55

Note: For Step 1, $R^2=.12$, $F(9, 180)=2.757$, $p=.005$; for Step 2, $\Delta R^2=.08$, $F(5, 175)=3.528$, $p=.005$.

*Covariates are reported how they were arbitrarily entered into the regression analysis.

For fathers, the four chaotic environment variables (as a block) accounted for 8% of the variation of child behavior problem, over and above nine covariates, $\Delta R^2=.08$, $F(5, 175)=3.53$, $p < .01$. Within the block, three of the variables were

significant predictors. While controlling for all other variables in the model, changing schools (partial correlation=.23), repartnering (partial correlation=.15) and economic strain (partial correlation=.16) were significantly positively related with Child Behavior Problems, while lack of social support or father's changing residence were not.

Table 6b
 Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Chaotic Environment
 Variables Predicting Child Behavior Problems, by Mother Report

Predictors	<i>B</i>	<i>SE(B)</i>	β	Partial Correlation	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Step 1: Covariates*						
(Constant)	1.75	.25			7.06	.00
Parent is Minority	-.12	.07	-.12	-.13	-1.83	.07
Time Apart (months)	.00	.00	.04	.03	.41	.68
Parent Age	-.00	.01	-.04	-.03	-.42	.67
Education	.00	.02	.02	.02	.27	.79
Child Gender	-.12	.07	-.13	-.13	-1.88	.06
Child's Age	.03	.01	.26	.14	1.98	.05
Amount of Overnights	-.00	.00	-.13	-.13	1.95	.05
Pre-post Decree	.00	.09	.00	.00	.01	.99
Length of Relationship	.00	.00	.01	.00	-.08	.94
Step 2: Chaotic Environment Variables						
Economic Strain	.14	.05	.20	.19	2.74	.01
Lack of Social Support	.05	.08	.05	.04	.61	.54
Repartnering	.02	.09	.01	.01	.18	.86
Relocation						
Changed Schools	.15	.07	.15	.15	2.19	.03
Changed Residence	-.06	.06	-.07	-.06	-.88	.38

Note: For Step 1, $R^2=.11$, $F(9, 205)=2.868$, $p=.003$; for Step 2, $\Delta R^2=.067$, $F(5, 200)=3.256$, $p=.008$.

*Covariates are reported how they were arbitrarily entered into the regression analysis.

For mothers, the four variable block of chaotic environment variables also accounted for 6.7% of the variation, $\Delta R^2 = .067$, $F(5, 200) = 3.26$, $p < .01$. While controlling for covariates, as well as every other chaotic environment predictor, economic strain and children changing schools were significant predictors of child behavior problems (partial correlation = .19)

Results for Hypothesis 4: The correlations between chaotic environment variables and child behavior problems will be the same for NMPs and divorcing families.

The results of four separate hierarchical regression analyses for father's report are reported in Table 7a. Each analysis consisted of four hierarchical steps. For step 1, across the four analyses, the model incorporated the same covariates (minority, time apart, parent's age, education, child's gender, child's age, amount of overnights, pre-post decree and length of relationship) and in step 2, all of the analyses incorporated the same single predictor (i.e., marital status).

The step 3 predictors were the chaotic environment indicators, which varied across the four analyses. For the first three analyses, there was one predictor (either economic strain, lack of social support, or repartnering) and for the fourth analysis, there were two relocation indicators (i.e., children changing schools and fathers changing residence). On the final step, step 4, two mean centered predictors were made to enter: father's marital status and the cross-product of father's marital status with the respective predictor entered at step 3.

Because the results for the covariates in step 1 were already reported in previously, the below sections will focus on steps 2, 3 and 4. First I will report

the results of step 2, and then I will report the results for each of the four chaotic environment predictors and their interaction with father's marital status.

Table 7a
 Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting Child Behavior Problems from
 Chaotic Environment Variables and their Interaction with Marital Status, by Father Report

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE(B)</i>	β	Partial Correlation	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Step 1: Covariates*						
(Constant)	1.31	.20			6.68	.00
Parent Ethnicity (minority)	.00	.04	.00	.00	.05	.96
Time Apart (months)	.00	.00	-.13	-.08	-1.15	.25
Parent Age	.00	.00	-.02	-.02	-.26	.78
Education	-.02	.02	-.11	-.11	-1.47	.14
Child Gender	-.06	.06	-.08	-.08	-1.13	.26
Child's Age	.04	.01	.43	.22	3.04	.00
Amount of Overnights	.00	.00	.05	.05	.72	.47
Pre-post decree	.12	.08	.11	.11	1.48	.14
Length of Relationship (months)	.00	.00	.16	.09	1.22	.22
Step 2						
Marital Status	-.05	.07	-.06	-.06	-.77	.44
Economic Strain						
Step 3 "Main Effect"	.09	.05	.14	.14	1.97	.05
Step 4 Interaction with Marital Status	.06	.09	.04	.04	.60	.55
Lack of Social Support						
Step 3 "Main Effect"	.02	.07	-.02	-.02	-.30	.76
Step 4 Interaction with Marital Status	.28	.14	.14	.14	1.92	.06
Repartnering						
Step 3 "Main Effect"	.11	.08	.11	.10	1.37	.17
Step 4 Interaction with Marital Status	-.14	.14	-.07	-.07	-.96	.34
Relocation						
Step 3 "Main Effect"						
Changed Schools	.16	.05	.21	.22	2.98	.00
Changed Residence	.05	.05	.06	.07	.87	.39
Step 4 Interaction with Marital Status						
Marital by Changed Schools	-.14	.12	-.09	-.09	-1.24	.22
Marital by Changed Residence	-.07	.11	-.05	-.05	-.64	.52

Note: Before interaction terms were created, the variables were mean centered

Fathers' marital status. Controlling for the nine covariates in step 1, father's marital status was not a significant predictor of child behavior problems, ($\beta = -.06, t = -.77, p = .44$).

Economic strain. Controlling for all the variables entered at steps 1 and 2, the effect of economic strain was significant, $\beta = .14, t = 1.97, p = .05$. That is, for every standard deviation increase in father's economic strain, there was a .14 standard deviation increase in child behavior problems. However, while controlling for the other predictors, the interaction between economic strain and father's marital status was not a significant predictor of child behavior problems.

Lack of social support. Controlling for all the variables entered at steps 1 and 2, neither lack of social support nor its interaction with father's marital status, was a significant predictor of child behavior behaviors.

Repartnering. Similarly, neither repartnering nor its interaction with marital status were significant predictors, over and above the effect of the nine covariates and father's marital status.

Relocation. Both cross-products were not significant predictors of child behavior problems. However one of the relocation indicators was a significant predictor of child behavior problems. While changes of father's residence was not a significant predictor, there was a significant main effect of children changing schools on their child behavior problems, $\beta = .21, t = 2.98, p < .01$. That is, while controlling for variables entered on step 1 and 2, for every one standard deviation

increase in children changing schools, there was a .21 standard score increase in behavioral problems of fathers' children.

Hierarchical Regression Results for Mothers (Hypothesis 4)

An analogous set of four separate 4-step hierarchical regression analyses for mother's report were conducted. That is, the same predictors were incorporated in steps 1, 2, 3 and 4, across the four analyses. Similarly, because the results for the covariates were already previously reported for mothers, the below sections will focus on the results for the predictors incorporated the last three steps.

Table 7b
 Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting Child Behavior Problems from
 Chaotic Environment Variables and their Interaction with Marital Status, by Mother Report

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE(B)</i>	β	Partial Correlation	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Step 1: Covariates*						
(Constant)	1.88	.24			7.81	.00
Parent ethnicity (minority)	-.12	.07	-.12	-.12	-1.78	.08
Time Part (months)	.00	.00	.05	.04	.57	.57
Parent Age	.00	.01	-.08	-.07	-.95	.34
Education	.00	.02	.02	.02	.25	.80
Child Gender	-.13	.07	-.13	-.14	-2.02	.05
Child's Age	.02	.01	.24	.13	1.88	.06
Amount of Overnights	.00	.00	-.13	-.13	-1.88	.06
Pre-post decree	.00	.09	.00	.00	-.03	.98
Length of Relationship (months)	.00	.00	.00	.00	-.04	.97
Step 2						
Marital Status	-.01	.08	-.02	-.01	-.20	.84
Economic Strain						
Step 3 "Main effect"	.14	.05	.20	.21	3.07	.00
Step 4 Interaction w/marital status	.01	.10	.01	.01	.10	.92
Lack of Social Support						
Step 3 "Main effect"	.13	.08	.12	.12	1.80	.07
Step 4 Interaction w/marital status	-.10	.15	-.04	-.04	-.65	.52
Repartnering						
Step 3 "Main effect"	-.03	.09	-.02	-.02	-.29	.77
Step 4 Interaction w/marital status	.40	.16	.17	.18	2.54	.01
Relocation						
Step 3 "Main effect"						
Changed Schools	.16	.07	.16	.15	2.24	.02
Changed Residence	-.01	.06	-.01	-.01	-.17	.87
Step 4 Interaction w/marital status						
Marital by Changed Schools	-.06	.16	-.03	-.02	-.35	.72
Marital by Changed Residence	.25	.12	.15	.15	2.16	.03

Note: Before interaction terms were created, the variables were mean centered

Mothers' marital status. Controlling for the nine covariates in step 1, mother's marital status was not a significant predictor of child behavior problems, ($\beta = -.01, t = -.20, p = .84$).

Economic strain. Controlling for all the variables entered at steps 1 and 2, the effect of economic strain was significant, $\beta = .20, t = 3.07, p < .01$. That is, for every standard deviation increase in mother's economic strain, there was a .2 standard deviation score increase in child behavior problems. However, while controlling for all the other predictors, the interaction between economic strain and mother's marital status was not a significant predictor of child behavior problems.

Lack of social support. Neither lack of social support nor its interaction with marital status significantly predicted mothers' report of the child's behavioral problems.

Repartnering. Controlling for all the variables entered at steps 1 and 2, the main effect of mothers' repartnering was not significant. However, the significance of the product term indicates a significant interaction; that is, the relationship between children's behavior problems and repartnering significantly varied with marital status, $\beta = 0.17, t = 2.54, p = .01$. As seen in Figure 1, the relationship between child behavior problems and repartnering decreases for divorcing mothers, but increases for never married mothers.

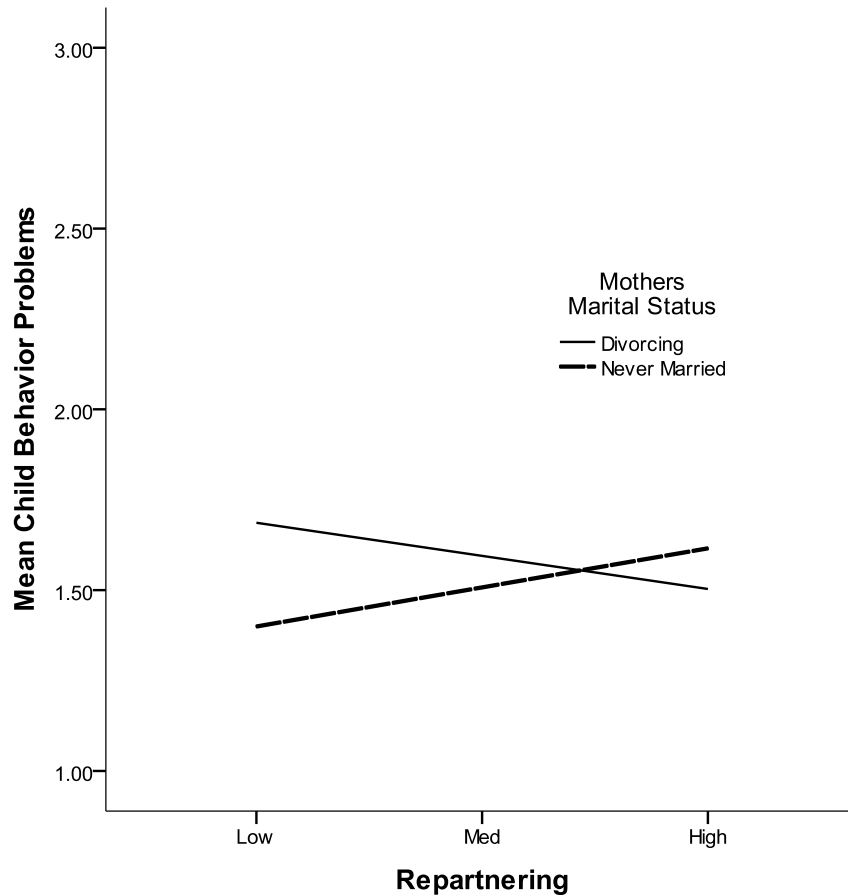


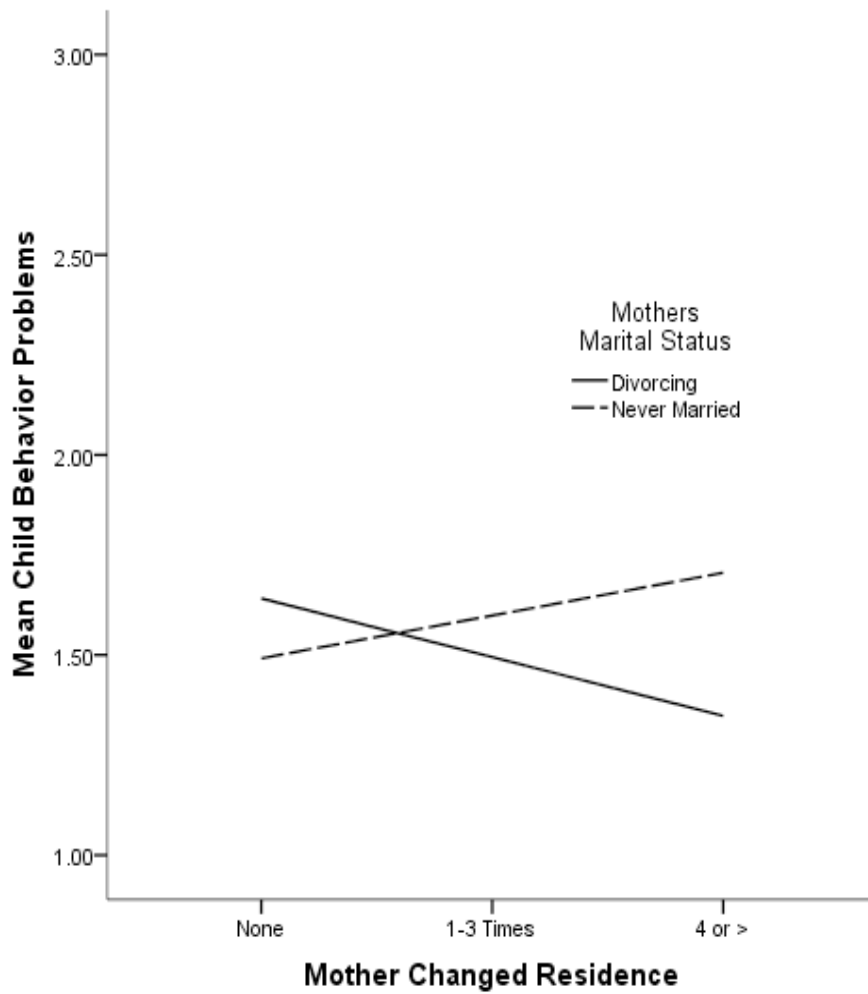
Figure 1.

Relocation. The cross-product of changing schools with mothers' marital status was not a significant predictor of child behavior problems; however, the main effect of changing schools was significantly related with child behavior problems, $\beta = 0.16$, $t = 2.24$, $p < .05$, controlling for other variables in the model. That is, the more children changed schools the greater the child's behavior problems.

Moreover, while controlling for all other variables, the main effect of mother's changing residence was not a significant predictor of children problem behaviors. However, there was a significant interaction effect, $\beta = 0.15$, $t = 2.16$,

$p < .05$. That is, the relationship between changing residence and child behavior problems varied by mothers' marital status (see Figure 2). It appears that for divorcing mothers, the more times they change residences, the lower the child's behavior problems, whereas, for the never married mothers, the more times they change residences, the higher the level of child's behavior problems.

Figure 2.



Chapter 5

DISCUSSION

This study investigated the differences in child behavior problems in NMPs and divorcing families on measures of child behavior problems and on four variables, which were conceptualized as aspects of a chaotic family environment; economic strain, lack of social support, repartnering, and relocation. The analyses controlled for nine covariates: ethnoracial minority status of parent, parent age, level of education, child's gender, oldest child's age, length of parental relationship, time parents have been apart, and if families were pre- or post-decree. The specific questions that were investigated were: Do children of NMPs have more behavior problems than children of divorcing families? Do NMPs have higher means on each of the chaotic environment variables than divorcing parents? Are each of the chaotic environment variables positively associated with child behavior problems after controlling for the effects of each of the other variables? Do the correlations between chaotic environment variables and child behavior problems differ between NMPs and divorcing families? The findings for each question will be discussed in turn, followed by a discussion of the strengths and limitations of the current study and directions for future research.

Do children of NMPs have more behavior problems than children of divorcing families?

Children of NMPs were not found to have higher levels of behavior problems than those from divorcing families. Although the differences were not significant, children of divorcing parents had directionally higher mean scores on

measures of behavior problems than did NMPs. These findings were contrary to the prediction. One explanation for the lack of differences is that the children of NMPs and those of divorcing parents may have different risk factors that contribute to their development of behavior problems. For example, children of divorcing parents may have experienced more entrenched interparental conflict prior to separation and after divorce, given that divorcing parents were together twice as long, on average, as NMPs. On the other hand children from NMPs may be raised in families that are of lower SES, which is also a risk factor for child behavior problems. It may also be that other variables that were not addressed in this study but which have a significant impact on children's behavior problems, such as level of interparental conflict or the quality of parenting are comparable in NMPs and divorcing families, leading to comparable levels of child behavior problems. A third possible explanation is that NMPs children may be buffered by the fact that their parents separated when they were very young (significantly younger than children of divorce) and the parents had relatively short relationships. Thus, there are several possible reasons why the expected differences on child behavior problems between children from NMPs and were not found, and future research is needed to investigate these issues.

Do NMPs have higher means on each of the chaotic environment variables than divorcing parents?

NMPs only differed from divorcing parents on one of ten comparisons on chaotic environment variables. Lack of social support was significantly higher for divorcing fathers than for fathers in never married families. One possible

explanation is that because of the longer relationship status of divorcing families, the social networks of fathers in divorcing families may have centered more around childrearing and family issues than that of fathers in never married families. Thus, following the dissolution of the marriage divorced fathers may be more likely to have a smaller social support network than are fathers who had never been married. Furthermore, fathers who feel disconnected and isolated from their responsibility as caretaker and role model are more likely to feel the lack of social support, especially if a key component of their personal identity entailed experiences involving the intact family (Lamb, 2004; Amato & Dorius, 2010).

Is each of the Chaotic Environment variables positively associated with child behavior problems after controlling for the effects of each of the other variables?

In the analyses which involved father variables, higher levels of economic strain, more repartnering, and more changes in the school the child attends predicted higher levels of child behavior problems. For mothers, economic strain and the amount of times the child changed schools were found to predict child behavior problems. The literature indicates that single mothers experience some of the highest poverty rates in the US (Sigle-Rushton & McLanahan, 2002; Grall, 2009).

For fathers, economic strain may impact child behavior problems in that economic strain may occur in conjunction with fathers' repartnering. Economic status of the father may change when a father enters into another relationship and places financial and emotional resources into this new partnership. This can then

have a siphoning effect on what is available; i.e. time, money, attention; for the child of a previous relationship. The finding that economic strain with mothers is related to higher child behavior problems is consistent with a large body of literature that indicates that economic strain in the child's primary residence is related to child behavior problems (i.e., DeCarlo Santiago, Wadsworth, & Stump, 2011; Burrell & Lockhart, 2009; Barrera, Prelow, Dumka, Gonzales, Knight, Michaels, Roosa, Tein, 2002; Mistry, Vandewater, Huston, & McLoyd, 2002).

The finding that father repartnering is related to higher child mental health problems is consistent with prior literature that finds that children who experienced the remarriage of both their parents found their father's repartnering more stressful than that of their mother. Father-child relationship quality was found to be especially poor if remarriage occurred shortly after divorce (Ahrns, 2006). Men, regardless of marital status, are also more likely to enter into a second union than are women (Wu & Schimmele, 2005), which is often associated with a decline in income (Jansen, Mortelmans, & Snoeckx, 2009). For mothers, repartnering did not predict higher levels of child behavior problems, though as discussed below, the effects of repartnering appear to differ between never married and divorcing mothers.

Since most of the time, parents are not simultaneously relocating their child, changing schools is a shared variable (one which both father and mother can influence), hence it is not surprising that it was found to significantly predict child behavior problems for both fathers and mothers. School often provides a stable routine and a consistent and reliable source of social support, role

modeling, and accessible services for children. This, in turn, enhances their sense of community, which is correlated with increased wellbeing (Vieno, Santinell, Pastore, & Perkins, 2007). Hence, high mobility infers the converse effect.

Because social support and extra curricular activities are notable protective factors for children (Dumais, 2006), changing schools can impact children's ability to fully participate in both. Children experiencing more socioeconomic challenge experience increased benefits from participation in extracurricular activities than do more privileged children (Chin & Phillips, 2004), thus children of divorce and separation are at heightened risk given their increased levels of economic strain.

For both fathers and mothers, lack of social support did not predict child behavior problems. One possible explanation for this is that even though parents separate or divorce, they may continue to have social support in regards to childcare, as extended family and friends remain involved in the lives of their children, i.e. grandparents continue to spend time with children regardless of marital status. Another possible reason is that there may be other variables buffering children from the effects of lack of social support, such as strong relationships with one or both of their parents (Power, 2004) or positive family interaction patterns (Kliewer, Sandler, & Wolchik, 1994).

Parents changing their residence also did not predict behavior problems for both mothers and fathers. This may be because children's primary social environment is within the school setting, hence residence change only appeared to matter if the child changed school in the process. This may be a promising

protective factor for children, as low academic mobility may buffer high residential mobility.

Do the correlations between chaotic environment variables and child behavior problems differ between NMPs and divorcing families?

The relation of repartnering and mother changing residence with child behavior problems were found to differ by marital status for mothers. The more divorcing mothers repartnered, the lower they reported child behavior problems, whereas higher levels of repartnering by never married mothers was associated with higher child behavior problems. This may be because repartnering has different effects on the families of never married vs. divorced families. For divorcing mothers repartnering may involve remarrying (versus cohabiting), which may be associated with an increase in SES and social support, and a decrease likelihood of continued relocation. Remarrying can reduce the negative impacts of divorce for women (Amato, 2000) and improve economic conditions (Morrison & Ritualo, 2000). With that said, repartnering for divorcing mothers is not correlated with financial disadvantage (Graaf & Kalmijn, 2003). It should be noted that the mean number of times parents repartnered was relatively small, so that these analyses do not speak to the potential effects of multiple repartnering over time.

For NMPs, repartnering was associated with higher child behavior problems. Prior literature, though limited, indicates that each partner transition for never married mothers is associated with increased behavioral problems (Osborne & McLanahan, 2007). Never married mothers are also more likely to repartner

multiple times, while divorcing mothers generally experience one new union formation, which is often another marriage (Osborne & McLanahan, 2007). In the FF data set, 20% of unmarried mothers had a child by a new partner within five years (McLanahan & Beck, 2010), creating increased transition experiences for all children involved. Although in the current study NMPs did not have more repartnering than divorced mothers, it may be that repartnering is associated with a less stable family structure for NMPs than for divorcing mothers, thus increasing child behavior problems. A similar rationale may explain the differential effect of parent relocation on child behavior problems for NMPs and divorcing parents. When a custodial parent changes residence, it can also increase the likelihood of the child changing schools, which predicts higher levels of behavior problems. Residence relocation is associated with higher levels of parental stress, which diminishes parents' ability to give their children the necessary emotional support when transitioning to a new school (Norford & Medway, 2002). Because mothers often change residence when they repartner, these two variables may be interrelated, however the context for the residence changes are not known.

Strengths

The most notable strength of this study is that it is the first and only empirically-based study on high conflict litigating NMPs. Though cohabitation and nonmarital childbirth rates are steadily increasing, limited research exists on the NMPs and their children who are seen in the domestic relations court. The available data on NMPs through longitudinal data sets (i.e. Fragile Families,

National Survey of Families and Households, Current Population Survey), does not explicitly include information on the process or frequency of separations. While divorces are a regularly calculated indicator, separation and litigation of NMPs is much more difficult to track. This study specifically targeted a sample of litigating NMPs and divorced parents being seen in the Family Court. Because there are not national data banks that aggregate information on litigating NMPs (unlike divorces), there was no prior research on which to build this study. This study will hopefully add to the foundational knowledge on this population.

This study also evaluated what is anecdotally viewed as the most “high hanging fruit” in the Family Court system (Judge Norm Davis, 2005, personal communication)—the parents that litigate the most often, utilize Family Court resources and ancillary services in disproportionate amounts, and are deemed “high conflict” by a judicial officer. This is considered by court personnel to be the most problematic subset of parents. Understanding their demographics, needs, and the wellbeing of their children provides valuable information for service providers and prevention researchers.

Interesting findings apart from the main research questions included confirming what the literatures indicates about NMPs—that they are younger and less educated, with higher percentages of ethnoracial minorities than divorcing parents. The relationships between the mother and father were also shorter than that of divorced mothers and father (by nearly half) and their children were younger than their divorced counterparts. These findings are consistent with the

description of never married parents that are included in prior studies (Heiland & Liu, 2005; Carlson & McLanahan, 2004; Brown, 2004)

Another strength of this study is that the sample size made it statistically possible to control for multiple covariates. Children's age appeared to predict child behavior problems, with older children experiencing more child behavior problems. It can be deduced from both a developmental perspective and from the descriptive statistics, that the older the child is, the more pronounced the behavior problems (Miner & Clarke-Stewart, 2008; Gilliom & Shaw, 2004; Frank, Arlett & Groves, 2003).

Limitations

The limitations of this study parallel its strengths. The specific nature of this population (high conflict) may not reflect the general characteristics of NMPs, many of whom may be in families with lesser degrees of conflict. It may also be that in the broader population of NMPs there may be higher scores on the chaotic environment variables. Other studies of non-litigating NMPs indicate elevated risk (i.e., Beck & Cooper, 2010; Bronte-Tinkew & Horowitz, 2010; Cavanagh & Huston, 2006).

On the other hand, the likelihood of low-conflict NMPs entering the Court system is much lower than LDPs. Divorcing parents *must* present themselves to a judicial officer in order to dissolve their legal partnership, regardless of level of interparental conflict. There are no legal mandates, and there may be minimal incentive given costs and time, for NMPs to utilize the Family Court if they are already on good terms and coparenting effectively. Despite the selection bias,

this study did not examine conflict, mainly because the entire sample was deemed high-conflict by the Court. Thus conflict was not considered to be a variable that distinguished NMPs and LDPs in this study.

Future Directions in Research

Though the findings of this study make an important contribution to the literature, there are many aspects of litigating NMPs that remain unanswered. There needs to be further exploration into the distinct subpopulations that this study has drawn attention to, yet did not research directly. The two main categories of NMPs, cohabiters and non-cohabiters, are in need of further investigation. Cohabiters are different primarily in legal terms, i.e. having legal documentation of their union, rather than qualitatively, from the divorcing parents more traditionally seen in the Court system. However, non-cohabiters (about half of NMPs) may be more distinct from LDPs. They are extremely variable in terms of the length of the relationship between the parents, the degree to which they are co-parenting and their involvement with the child. Little is known about them, their relationship with their children, and with each other *after* they separate. For example, there are many studies on how marital conflict affected children before and after divorce (Grynych, 2005; Fabricius & Leuken, 2007; Fosco & Grynych, 2008; Shelton & Harold, 2008;), however there is relatively little literature on the effects of conflict on children of non-cohabiting NMPs.

Due to the focus on chaotic environment, this study primarily utilized a deficit-focused approach in attempts to assess risk factors for NMPs. This is parallel with the majority of research on NMPs, which focuses on their levels of

distress and what might be termed as their deficits and problems. Although a study of problems can assist in needs assessment, it does not highlight existing assets within these families. Future research should entail strength-based assessment of both parents and children and focus on such protective factors as hardiness (Maddi, 2002; Khoshaba & Maddi, 1999), coping efficacy (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Sandler, Tein, Mehta, Wolchik, & Ayers, 2000) and cultural capital (Silverstein & Conroy, 2009; Yoo & Younghee, 2006).

Several variables known to impact child wellbeing, such as quality of parenting by both mother and father (Vélez, Wolchik, Tein, & Sandler, 2011; Zhou, Sandler, Wolchik, Dawson-McClure, 2008; Stone, 2006) and interparental conflict (Sandler, Miles, Cookston, & Braver, 2008; Goodman et al., 2004; Buchanan & Heiges, 2001), were not included because of the theoretical focus on chaotic environment. Given that many parents undoubtedly have some level of contention during and after their separation, examining this construct offers the Court necessary insights into these families' experiences, particularly the most highly litigious. High conflict has been found to suppress the benefits of positive arrangements, i.e. joint custody (Lee, 2002), and negatively influences parent involvement particularly with fathers (Kelly, 2006). A research design empirically testing conflict as a mediator would be an effective model with this population, as well as evaluating the types, intensity, and duration of the conflict. This may particularly salient with NMPs, given the previously referenced path of entry into the Court system (i.e., voluntarily presenting with high levels of existing problems vs. forced "IV-D" litigants).

There is a growing population of NMPs who are utilizing the Family Court to develop a plan by which the mother and father will share parenting time. Of the litigants in this study, all of whom were deemed high conflict, approximately 40% were NMPs. If current trends continue and reflect the demographics of this study, the figure might well reach half in the next decade or so. However, there is a paucity of research on this population. One step that would facilitate developing a better understanding of this population would be to develop a national database on the prevalence of NMPs being served by the Family Court. Such a database might be built if courts systematically collected explicit indicators of marital status for families they see. Future research is needed with a larger, more diverse sample, as well as that includes longitudinal data regarding relitigation rates.

This study adds to the foundational literature, as well as draws attention to the lack of empirical data on litigating NMPs. Though a critical transition time for both parents and children, outcome studies are nonexistent. Hopefully, future research can lead to the development of services to better serve the needs of this diverse and burgeoning population.

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APPENDIX A
DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

What is your case number # or court ID?

_____ (this is on the sign-in sheet, in case you forgot)

Are you _____ Male _____ Female?

Your age? _____

Are you either Hispanic or Latino? By Hispanic or Latino we mean a person from Cuba, Mexico, Puerto Rico, South or Central America, or any other Spanish culture or origin. Please circle Yes or No

What is your race? You may circle one or more races from this list

a = AMERICAN INDIAN OR ALASKAN NATIVE (Origins in any of the original peoples of North, Central, or South America, and who maintains tribal affiliations or community attachment)

b = ASIAN (Origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent (i.e.. Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand & Vietnam)

c = BLACK OR AFRICAN-AMERICAN (Origins in any of the black racial groups of Africa)

d = NATIVE HAWAIIAN OR PACIFIC ISLANDER (Origins in any of the original peoples of Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, or other Pacific Islands.)

e = WHITE (Origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa)

Please circle the highest level of school you have completed. Include any college, technical or vocational training.

- | | |
|------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| a) 8th grade or less | f) 2 yrs college or technical, AA, degree |
| b) 9-11th grade | g) 3 yrs, but no college degree |
| c) High School graduate | h) Bachelor's (BS, BA, etc.) |
| d) GED | i) Master's (MS, MA, MFA, etc.) |
| e) 1-yr college, vocational/technical training | j) PhD, JD, MD, etc. |

Were you ever legally married to the other parent in this court case? Please circle Yes or No

When did you last live together with the other parent in this court case?
_____month _____year

(if never lived together, check here ___ and in the space above write the date
when you were last **in a relationship** with the other parent)

How long altogether were you in a relationship with the other parent? ____
years OR ____ months

How many children do you have with the other parent in this court case?

What is the age of your oldest child under 18 that you have with this parent?

What is the gender of this oldest child who is under 18? Male

Female

About how many nights in the average month (out of 30) does this child sleep
at your home?

_____ nights

APPENDIX B

CHILD BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS ITEMS

In the LAST THREE MONTHS, your child:

	Often True	Sometimes True	Never True
.. had difficulty concentrating, could not pay attention for long.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
.. bullied or was cruel or mean to others.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
.. felt others were out to get him or her.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
.. was disobedient at school.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
.. had a strong temper and trouble controlling temper.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
.. felt worthless or inferior.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
.. cheated or told lies.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
.. had trouble getting along with other children.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

APPENDIX C
ECONOMIC STRAIN ITEMS

**The next questions are about
YOU**

Often True Some-times True Never True

In the LAST THREE MONTHS:

...you worried that your family would have bad times such as poor housing or not enough food	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...you worried that you would have to do without basic things that your family needs	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
...you worried that you would have difficulty paying your bills	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

APPENDIX D

LACK OF SOCIAL SUPPORT ITEMS

**The next questions are
about the people in your life**

no one 1-3 people 4 or more people

	no one	1-3 people	4 or more people
How many people do you have that you can talk to about things that are personal and private?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
How many people do you have who would loan or give you money or valuable objects you needed?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
How many people do you have that you could turn to for personal advice if you needed it?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
How many people do you have that you could call to help you do things like watching the children, driving you someplace if you needed a ride, or things like that?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
How many people do you have that you can get together with to have fun or to relax?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

APPENDIX E
REPARTERNING ITEMS

	no one	1-3 people	4 or more people
Since you last separated from your child's other parent, how many people have you dated or been in a relationship with for one month or more?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Of the relationships you indicated in the previous question, how many of those people were around your child at least half of your parenting time?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Since you last separated from your child's other parent, how many people have you <i>lived with</i> in a marriage-like relationship for one month or more?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Of the live-in marriage-like relationships you indicated in the previous question, how many of those people were around your child at least half of your parenting time?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

APPENDIX F
RELOCATION ITEMS

**The next questions are about the
LAST YEAR**

none 1-3 4 or
times times more
times

How many times has your child changed schools?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
How many times have you changed where you live?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>