



A Correlational Study on Intact Versus Nonintact Family Structures and Life Decisions

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between childhood family structure and young adults' life decisions. Family structure was divided into two categories: intact families and nonintact families (divorced, divorced and remarried, single parent, and deceased parent). Life decisions included attitudes towards marriage, intent to get married, desire to have children, and likelihood of attending graduate school or a higher level of education. Participants' mental health was also assessed. Participants were 256 Amazon Mechanical Turk workers who completed the questionnaires in a random order. Participants from intact families reported greater intent to marry and more positive attitudes towards marriage than participants from nonintact families. Women also reported greater intent to marry, more positive attitudes towards marriage, and a greater desire for children than men. Women from nonintact families reported the highest levels of anxiety, with higher scores than all other groups. Family structure did not affect reported desire for children. Family structure did not affect likelihood to attain a higher level of education.

INTRODUCTION

Divorce has undesirable consequences on children's long-term well-being, with effects lasting throughout their lives. Boys and girls are both negatively affected by divorce; however, they experience different outcomes (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001). Boys are more affected by a divorce initially, but girls experience more difficulties later in life. Divorce also affects people's attitudes towards marriage: As discussed in Alquashan and Alkandari, individuals whose parents were divorced reported lower levels of marital commitment and more pro-divorce ideas than their peers from intact families. Divorce has also been shown to affect academic performance and achievement (Anthony, DiPerna, & Amato, 2014; Sun & Li, 2001). Parental death early in a child's life significantly predicts the development of mood and anxiety disorders (Aderka, Bryant, Hinton, Hofmann, & Nickerson, 2013). There is a lack of data collected on long-term maternal death; however, Hamilton (1977) suggested that an increase in poor decisions and bad behavior occurred in men who were paternally deprived as children. There are also few studies completed on long-term effects of children growing up in single-parent homes. The findings of studies that have been completed suggest that living in single-parent or stepfamilies or parental death has fewer negative effects on children living in single-parent or stepfamilies because of divorce (Borgers, Dronkers, & Van Praag, 1996). This study attempts to help fill some of these gaps in the literature.

METHOD

Participants:

- 256 Amazon Mechanical Turk workers paid \$0.85 for their participation
- 144 women (54%) and 110 men (46%). Data were excluded for 2 participants who identified as "other"
- Participants were currently in or had recently completed college
- Age ranged from 18 to 25 ($M = 22.22$; $SD = 1.84$)

Materials:

- **Depression Anxiety Stress Scales-21** (DASS-21; Henry & Crawford, 2005): Assesses symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress within the last week.
- **The Marital Scales:** A set of 3 scales designed to assess general views of marriage (Park & Rosén, 2013). Two of the scales were used in this study:
 - **General Attitudes Towards Marriage Scale (GAMS):** Assesses positive and negative attitudes toward marriage
 - **Intent to Marry Scale (IMS):** Assesses participants' intentions to marry
- **Desire to Have Children Scale** (Rholes, Simpson, Blakely, Lanigan, & Allen, 1997): Assesses participants' desire for children
- **Family Structure Question:** Participants indicated which type of family structure they grew up in. Options were married, divorced, divorced and remarried, single parent, and deceased parent.
- **Demographics Questionnaire:** The demographics questionnaire included a question about intent to attend graduate school or a higher level of education

Procedure:

Amazon Turk workers consented to participate in a study involving family structure and later life decisions. Participants then received a link to the Qualtrics survey via Turk, then they completed the questionnaires in randomized order.

HYPOTHESES

It was hypothesized that...

- Participants from intact families would report more positive attitudes towards marriage, a greater intention to marry, and a greater desire to have children than would participants from nonintact families.
- Participants from intact families would desire children more than those from nonintact families.
- Participants from nonintact families would report less interest in obtaining a higher level of education beyond college and would score lower on measures of mental health (the DASS-21) than would participants from intact families.

RESULTS

ANOVAs were 2 Family Structure (intact, nonintact) x 2 Gender (male, female) between subjects analyses. Significant interactions were analyzed with *t*-tests.

- The interaction between family structure and gender for anxiety was marginally significant, $F(1, 250) = 3.79, p = .052$
- Women from intact families displayed lower levels of anxiety ($M = 2.90, SD = 4.13$) than women from nonintact families ($M = 4.65, SD = 5.16$), $t(142) = -2.24, p = .02$
- Women reported marginally higher levels of stress ($M = 6.16, SD = 6.30$) than men ($M = 4.65, SD = 6.53$), $F(1, 250) = 2.32, p = .06$
- Participants from intact families displayed more positive attitudes towards marriage ($M = 40.05, SD = 9.65$) than did participants from nonintact families ($M = 35.65, SD = 9.87$), $F(1, 250) = 11.95, p = .001$
- Women displayed marginally more positive attitudes towards marriage ($M = 39.09, SD = 9.81$) than did men ($M = 36.61, SD = 10.19$), $F(1, 250) = 3.79, p = .052$
- Participants from intact families reported a greater likelihood to marry ($M = 14.61, SD = 4.16$) than did participants from nonintact families ($M = 13.09, SD = 4.24$), $F(1, 250) = 7.66, p = .006$
- Women reported a greater likelihood to marry ($M = 14.62, SD = 4.20$) than men ($M = 13.07, 4.30$), $F(1, 250) = 8.05, p = .005$
- Women reported a stronger desire to have children ($M = 51.75, SD = 12.28$) than did men ($M = 46.76, SD = 12.76$), $F(1, 250) = 9.83, p = .002$

DISCUSSION

Overall the findings indicate a relationship between family structure growing up and later life decisions. Participants from intact families reported more positive attitudes towards marriage and greater intent to marry than did participants from nonintact families. (See also Alquashan & Alkandari, 2010; Long, 2001). There was no difference between intact and nonintact families on desire to have children, but there was an effect of gender. The lack of difference between intact and nonintact families on desire for children is surprising because nonintact families reported less positive attitudes towards marriage and less intention of marriage; therefore, one might expect them to report less desire for children. And although no studies have examined family structure and desire to have children, previous studies have reported other negative long-term effects among people from nonintact families (e.g., Amato & Keith, 1991 as cited in Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; McCabe, 1972; Scott & Warren, 2007).

Another possibility is that this study examined young adults who, regardless of family structure, may currently have a lower desire for children relative to older adults. The age at which people have children is older than in previous decades (Scott & Warren, 2007). Differences between people from intact and nonintact families may emerge at a later age. Family structure did not affect total DASS-21 scores. This finding contradicts previous studies which found effects of family structure on mental health (e.g., Amato & Keith, 1991 as cited in Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; Hetherington, Cox & Cox, 1985; Kalter, 1987 as cited in McCabe, 1997). Possibly, participants in this study were more resilient than those of previous studies, enabling them to experience fewer mental health issues. Participants from intact and nonintact families did not score high enough, on average, to be categorized beyond normal levels of depression, anxiety, or stress.

Cell sizes for the various nonintact family structures were too small to analyze separately. Future studies should attempt to collect data from people from more varied nonintact family structures such as divorced and remarried, deceased, and single parent.

FIGURE

Table 1
Means (and SDs) for Depression, Anxiety, and Stress (DASS-21)

	Intact		Nonintact	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Depression	5.27	4.60	6.70	6.58
	7.53	7.53	7.53	7.53
Anxiety	3.97	2.90	3.18	4.65
	4.92	4.92	4.92	4.92
Stress	4.38	5.18	4.91	7.13
	6.18	6.18	6.18	6.18

Table 2
Means (and SDs) for GAMS, IMS, Desire for Children

	Intact		Nonintact	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
GAMS	39.45	40.65	33.78	37.53
	9.62	9.62	9.62	9.63
IMS	14.01	15.19	12.13	14.05
	4.14	4.14	4.14	4.14
Desire for Children	47.83	52.00	45.70	51.51
	12.05	12.05	12.06	12.05

Note. This table displays the means of the General Attitudes Towards Marriage Scale (GAMS), the Intent to Marry Scale (IMS) and the Desire for Children Scale.

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