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Social Development in Different Family Arrangements

Dale F. Hay and Alison Nash

Objectives

The aim of the chapter is to demonstrate the importance of studies of family arrangements for theories of social development. In line with the aims of the volume, we focus on early and middle childhood, asking how family arrangements affect children's social development, that is, their abilities to relate to others, to regulate emotion, and to function competently in the social world, free of major mental health problems.

Although some investigators of family structure highlight psychological processes (e.g., Hetherington, 1998), most studies are guided by the methods and theories of demography, family sociology, and ethnography, and thus do not test developmental theory. Rather, the existing literature arises from concerns about the increased prevalence of "nontraditional" family structures. Investigators often apply a "deficit model," using the nuclear family (two biological parents and their children) as the standard with which other families are compared. This assumption is made explicit in newer studies that use statistical modeling procedures, where conventional nuclear families are set as the baseline value (e.g., Cleveland, Wiebe, Van den Oord, & Rowe, 2000).

These comparisons are challenged by the fact that nuclear families are increasingly unrepresentative. For example, the number of families headed by single mothers in the United States has increased 25% since 1990 (U.S. Census, 2000). Only about half the children in the United States live in homes that include only their two biological parents and any full siblings (Hernandez, 1997). UK demographers estimate that, by 2010, more children will live with stepparents than two biological parents (Office of National Statistics, 2000). In much of the world, the extended family is the norm. Even in the United States and Britain, single parenting and stepfamilies are not new phenomena, being quite common in the past as a result of death during childbirth (Muzi, 2000). Because contemporary families live in

diverse ways, the study of family influences on social development must draw upon representative samples, and go beyond simple pair-wise comparisons against a “normal” baseline.

Studies of family arrangements have critical implications for current theories of social development, as they provide the strongest tests of claims that family influences are not as great as once thought, in comparison with genetic predispositions (Scarr, 1992), sibling contributions (Sulloway, 1996), and the role of peers (Harris, 1998). Thus we describe how studies of family arrangements address theoretical issues in five perspectives in developmental psychology that emphasize family influences: (1) *the attachment model*, which highlights the importance of formative social experiences in very early life; (2) *the parenting model*, which is a contemporary heir to the long-standing tradition of the study of individual variation in childrearing strategies and the competence of individual parents; (3) *the nuclear family model*, which emphasizes the importance of both fathers and mothers in children’s lives; (4) *the family systems model*, which characterizes families as dynamic systems in which all members play important roles and there are important effects of relationships on other relationships; and (5) *the social networks model*, in which family relationships are seen in the context of wider social networks and cultural frameworks.

In the sections that follow we illustrate ways in which different types of families have been studied in each of these five perspectives. However, before highlighting key findings, it is important to introduce a note of caution. The body of evidence on family arrangements is weakened by many methodological flaws, so that few firm conclusions can be drawn (some common methodological problems are shown in Table 13.1). Most importantly, serious confounds in many research designs lead to alternative interpretations of many findings. These confounds are illustrated clearly by the literature on divorce and remarriage.

Confounds in the Study of Family Arrangements

Intergenerational continuities

An intergenerational link between parents’ and children’s traits (through heritable characteristics or socialization patterns in families) might account both for children’s behavioral problems and marital discord, divorce, and multiple transitions. For example, parents who are angry, aggressive, or abusive could transmit such behaviors to their children, either through genes or behavioral models, and also create a family climate that makes divorce likely (e.g. Emory, Waldron, Aaron, & Kitzmann, 1999). Evidence for genetic contributions is supported by the fact that effects of divorce are stronger in biological than adoptive families (O’Connor, Caspi, De Fries, & Plomin, 2000), and by comparisons of households containing one or two parents and sibling pairs who share both or one parent (Cleveland et al., 2000).

Table 13.1 Some Common Methodological Problems in the Study of Family Arrangements

	<i>Type of problem</i>	<i>Illustrative examples^a</i>
Sampling problems	Small, unrepresentative samples	Many studies of rare family structures, e.g., same-sex parents (Braeways et al., 1997), families who use fertility treatments (Golombok et al., 1999), and families who rear children communally (Hamilton, 2000) rely on small, volunteer samples who may not be representative of a general population
	Secular trends and cohort effects	Large cohort studies are rooted in time and place, and long-term effects found in studies begun in the 1950s (e.g., the British NCDS Sample) might not generalize to younger cohorts
	Attrition and selective participation	There is substantial attrition in the cohort studies (e.g., NCDS). Furthermore, selective participation may compromise results, e.g., in a comparison of same-sex and heterosexual couples, all lesbian couples who were contacted agreed to participate but substantially fewer fathers did. Fathers who used donor insemination were more willing to participate than normally conceiving fathers (Braeways et al., 1997)
	Problems with matching and case-control designs	Quasi-experimental case-control designs have often been used to compare family arrangements. Matching on some variables may lead to systematic unmatched on others; problems may be exacerbated when control groups are constructed long after the original observations were made (e.g., Wallerstein, Lewis, & Blakeslee, 2000)
Measurement problems	Defining and categorizing family arrangements	Families are very fluid, shifting arrangements over short time periods (Muzi, 2000; Seltzer, 2000). Definitions are problematic. The concept of “parent” in the case of fostering, adoption, fertility treatments, and same-sex relationships is not always clear, and the concept of “family” does not always equate to “household,” especially with respect to extended families and contexts such as the Bahamas, where fostering arrangements and time spent in different households are familiar parts of children’s lives (Dean, personal communication)
	Informant biases	Large, representative studies often use single informants, most commonly mothers (e.g., Dunn et al., 1998). A single informant’s reports about children’s adjustment may be biased by the informant’s own mental health problems (see Boyle & Pickles, 1997; Hay et al., 1999) or continuing conflict with the spouse before and after divorce. Role relationships also affect reporting. Step-parents provide reports of children’s psychological adjustment that are much more negative than those from other informants (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992)

^a The studies cited are no more flawed than others in the literature, but rather provide clear illustrations of specific problems that are common to many other studies of family arrangements. It should be noted that even the best studies in this area must make “trade-offs” between large, representative samples and reliable and valid measurement. Thus, detailed qualitative and quantitative data of psychological processes in family life are more likely to be possible in smaller, selected samples, whilst large, representative cohort studies often use standardized questionnaires completed by single informants.

Conditions that predate changes in family arrangements

Pre-existing conditions may make it more likely that children have behavioral problems and that their parents will divorce. For example, marital conflict that predates divorce may be the primary cause of children's problems. Children whose parents eventually divorce are more likely to have shown problems years prior to the divorce (e.g., Amato & Booth, 1996; Cherlin et al., 1991; Shaw, Winslow, & Flanagan, 1999). Even economic disadvantage, a common consequence of family disruption (McLanahan & Teitler, 1999), may cause it as well: for example, African-American couples living in poverty more often separated whilst those with more financial resources tended to stay together (Shaw et al., 1999).

Socioeconomic status

The correlation between income and family structure is apparent. For example, in the United States in 1995, the median income for mother-headed families was \$18,000, compared to \$50,000 for two-parent families (McLanahan & Teitler, 1999). When income levels and family education are controlled, the effects of family structure are either negligible (e.g., Clarke-Stewart, Vandell, McCartney, Owen, & Booth, 2000) or much reduced (e.g., Amato & Keith, 1991). Furthermore, *perceived* income affects the parents' levels of stress and their manner of coping, which in turn influence parenting style (Brody, Flor, & Gibson, 1999). In general, it is important to integrate analyses of the different economic dimensions of family arrangements (e.g., DeGarmo, Forgatch, & Martinez, 1999) with assessments of parents' mental health and parenting style.

Social perceptions of family arrangements

A particular family structure is inevitably confounded with the views of that structure held by others. Families outside the "norm" may be perceived negatively and consequently receive less support than those who live in ways closer to cultural ideals. For example, 300 professionals and 300 lay observers watched videotapes of 10-year-old boys interacting with other children (Fry & Addington, 1984). The observers were randomly informed that boys were living either with divorced mothers, divorced fathers, or in "intact" homes. Boys thought to be from "intact" families were rated the *most* well-adjusted, boys from father-headed families the *least* so. Such perceptions can result in biased reports from informants such as teachers and care workers and create self-fulfilling prophecies.

It is important to measure family members' beliefs about their circumstances, as a mismatch between ideal and reality may have profound effects. For example, Pyle (2000) found that Korean and Vietnamese immigrants to the United States contrasted their own families of origin – characterized as overly strict, emotionally distant, and deficient – with the idealized American family. Beliefs that one's own family is not ideal may affect parents' feelings of efficacy, which then affects parenting style and children's competence (Brody et al., 1999). Departures from one's own ideals of family life may be painful. For example,

“loss of a cherished ideal” (such as an “ideal marriage”) is a life event capable of inducing depression (Brown & Harris, 1989).

Absence of guiding theory

Families cannot be randomly assigned to live in different ways. It is almost impossible to disentangle confounds and test alternative explanations in the absence of theoretical frameworks in which to evaluate the mass of correlational studies that are characterized by many methodological problems (Table 13.1). It often seems that a variety of standardized outcome measures have been chosen on an arbitrary basis, and few studies have attempted to examine the effects of family arrangements with respect to a coherent set of questions about social development. Thus, in the sections that follow, we identify conceptual issues and highlight illustrative findings that are pertinent to current theories of social development.

The Attachment Model

Of central importance to attachment theory is the early relationship between an infant and its primary caregiver, usually, though not inevitably, the mother (Bowlby, 1969). Infants are assumed to be “monotropic,” needing a focused attachment with a particular “mothering figure.” Family arrangements that disrupt the tie between infants and their mothers are thought to put children at risk. Thus, attachment researchers study the consequences of maternal employment and day care (e.g., NICHD, 1997) and communal experiences such as that provided in Israeli kibbutzim (Sagi, Lamb, & Gardner, 1986). Attachment theory makes no clear predictions about the consequences of father absence. For example, Bowlby (1969) argued that the natural unit was that between mother and child, with a male (though not necessarily the biological father) in a supporting role. The security of attachment with the father is less stable over time than that with the mother (Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985). Family structure is not associated with the quality of attachment relationships in early life, but *changes* in family life result in changes in attachment classifications, in both directions. If family arrangements change, some secure children become insecure, but some insecure children become secure (Thompson, Lamb, & Estes, 1982).

Long-term longitudinal studies of attachment highlight the influence of the quality of the child’s relationship with the parents in later years and the changes in family arrangements that take place after infancy (e.g., Hamilton, 2000). In one follow-up study, current feelings of security and divorce predicted adolescents’ psychological adjustment, but security measured in infancy did not (Lewis, Feiring, & Rosenthal, 2000). These findings show that classic attachment theory alone is not sufficient to explain social development in middle childhood and adolescence. Rather, parent–child relationships need to be studied over time.

The Parenting Model

A dominant perspective in contemporary developmental psychology is one that focuses on parenting style as a characteristic of individuals. In this perspective, which follows from the earlier tradition of studying patterns of child rearing (e.g., Sears, Maccoby, & Levin, 1957), parents differ in skills, cognitions, warmth, and mental states (e.g., Baumrind, 1989; Bugental & Johnston, 2000; Maccoby, 2000). Individual differences in “parenting” are widely believed to mediate the effects of family arrangements on children’s lives, and interventions to improve parenting are of considerable interest for public policy (Cowan, Powell, & Cowan, 1998).

Theorists in this tradition argue that some family structures place parents at risk for poor parenting (see Hetherington & Stanley-Hagen, 1999a; Waite & Gallagher, 2000). The parenting model is often applied to studies of divorce and single parenthood, which were first cast in terms of questions about “father absence” (for a review see Herzog & Sudia, 1973). Current accounts emphasize variation in parenting skill within as well as across different family structures.

Never-married mothers

Never-married mothers are thought to be at particular risk for problems in parenting. Although a substantial number of children in single-parent families live with mothers who have never married, there are few studies of this family arrangement (for a review see Weinraub & Gringlas, 1995), and most focus on adolescent motherhood, which has its own unique set of issues. In the United States, 8% of all children live with never-married mothers as opposed to 14% who live with separated or divorced mothers (Hernandez, 1997).

Never-married mothers show higher levels of rejecting parenting compared to other types of families (Shaw et al., 1999) and lower supervision and control over their children than mothers in two-parent families (Thomson, McLanahan, & Braun-Curtin, 1992). The parenting style of single mothers reflects mental health problems and worries that transcend the mother–child relationship; for example, young single mothers behave in parallel ways with their infants and their boyfriends (Hart, Field, Jones, & Yando, 1999). In a study of a London birth cohort (Schmuecker, 1998), *all* single mothers in the sample had suffered from depression by the time the children were 4 years of age. The well-established links between maternal depression, parenting problems, and poor outcomes for children (e.g., Murray & Cooper, 1997) account for some of the risks attached to single parenthood (Dunn, Deater-Deckard, Pickering, & O’Connor, 1998).

Studies of never-married mothers provide important support for the parenting model, in that they clearly document sources of variation within such families. Not all single parents are unskilled. For example, studies of poor, single African-American mothers document considerable within-sample variation in parenting style and skill (e.g., Brody et al., 1999). In a sample of 193 single mothers, most provided nurturant or cognitively stimulating behavior to their children, though some women also expressed annoyance with their

children and their situations (McGroder, 2000). The minority of women who were not nurturant were themselves more likely to have had a history of abuse and a longer history of welfare dependency.

The effects of single parents' parenting difficulties on children's adjustment are unclear. As toddlers, boys living with never-married mothers had higher rates of externalizing and internalizing problems than did those from other family types, but no differences emerged beyond toddlerhood (Shaw et al., 1999). Longer-term follow-up studies of representative samples of never-married mothers are badly needed.

Divorced families

A major research question within the parenting model is the extent to which parenting deteriorates in the face of life changes, economic setbacks, and psychological stress. The study of divorce is therefore of particular interest within this perspective. Decades of correlational studies have shown that divorce is associated with deleterious outcomes for children (e.g., Hanson, McLanahan, & Thomson, 1998; Wallerstein, Lewis, & Blakeslee, 2000). The earlier "father absence" studies demonstrated social, psychological, and economic disadvantages for children whose parents divorced (Herzog & Sadia, 1973). More recent studies have demonstrated that, even under conditions of stress and turmoil, competent, emotionally responsive parenting provides opportunities for sound child adjustment (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagen, 1999a; Wyman et al., 1999). It thus becomes possible to design interventions to improve parenting skills and sensitivity (Cowan et al., 1998), even when marriages have moved beyond repair.

Distressed parents may find it very hard to provide competent parenting. Authoritative parenting helps children of divorced parents as much as those who live with both biological parents (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992), but divorced parents are often less able to be authoritative (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagen, 1999a). Parenting difficulties are bound up with the divorced parent's own emotional problems. The parent's mental state directly impinges on the parent-child relationship (e.g., Cummings & Davies, 1994) and some studies suggest that parents' own mental health problems often mediate the effects of divorce on children (e.g., Dunn et al., 1998). The evidence is unclear, however, in that informants who are depressed may exaggerate the extent of their children's problems (see Boyle & Pickles, 1997; Hay et al., 1999).

Some investigators have tried to observe the qualitative features of family life in different types of families, which provides interesting insights into the values held by parents in different circumstances. For example, children in divorced families participate more in family decisions and have more responsibility, which predicts higher levels of maturity, self-esteem, empathy, and androgyny (Gately & Schwebel, 1992). One study showed that single mothers read more to their children but eat fewer meals with them than do married mothers; remarried mothers spent little time either reading to or eating with their children (Thomson et al., 1992). Sometimes things can be simpler in single-parent families. For example, a study of effective single parenting showed that, under some circumstances, single mothers, who do not have to engage in conflict with a spouse who might hold different opinions and values about child rearing, provide a very peaceful, consistent fam-

ily climate (Morrison, 1995). In general, future research within the parenting model needs to concentrate on family activities and values as well as the skills used by parents in different arrangements.

The Nuclear Family Model

An over-emphasis on parenting as an individual difference variable may limit our understanding of the dynamics of particular parent–child relationships (see also Russell, this volume). It is not clear whether the concept of parenting can completely account for the differential contributions of fathers and mothers to children’s social development. Child rearing is not necessarily a sexless enterprise. For example, Amato’s (1993) review of the divorce literature indicated that the presence of a father or stepfather added explanatory power to the prediction of boys’ psychological adjustment, beyond information about parenting style. Thus some theorists still emphasize the importance of a two-parent family for social development.

The nuclear family model has a long history and several contemporary versions, which owe much to earlier psychoanalytic writings. The attachment perspective draws on Bowlby’s (1958) interest in object relations and the early mother–infant bond, and studies of child rearing were influenced by concepts in ego psychology such as dependency (Cairns, 1979). In contrast, the nuclear family model is heavily influenced by another strand within psychoanalysis, Freud’s account of gender roles, identification, and moral development (e.g., Freud, 1938). Freud drew attention to children’s relationships with both biological parents and the effects of an initial attraction to the opposite-sex parent and a final identification with the same-sex parent. Implicit in the theory was the notion that identification with the same-sex parent occurs in the context of a stable marriage between the biological mother and father. In this perspective, boys who do not live with their fathers are thought to be at risk for identity problems and atypical gender role development. Thus the central question is not simply, are children mentally healthy and well adjusted, but also, are they acting in ways that are deemed appropriate for members of their sex? Family arrangements of particular concern here are those of separated or divorced families, single-parent families, and families headed by two same-sex parents.

Freud’s concern with the dynamics of the nuclear family is echoed in current views emphasizing the importance of fathers as well as mothers (e.g., Cabrera et al., 2000), showing that positive interactions with both parents enhance development (e.g., Harris, Furstenberg, & Marmer, 1998; Hart, Nelson, Robinson, Olsen, & McNeilly-Choque, 1998; Isley, O’Neil, Clatfelter, & Parke, 1999). Although much of this work concentrates on mother–child and father–child relationships within nuclear families, rather than comparisons across family structures, these studies draw attention to the unique features of each relationship, and raise questions about “father absence.” The evidence suggests that positive interactions with fathers are better than negative ones, but what are the effects of positive and negative interactions with fathers, compared to no or little interaction?

Deviation from the nuclear family structure takes different forms. “Illegitimate” children may be seen to be at some degree of social disadvantage, which may affect their social

development and eventual well-being. Thus there is interest in comparing the children of married couples with those whose parents are cohabiting (Seltzer, 2000). Arrangements that include biologically unrelated family members, such as stepparent families or those created through donor insemination, also deviate from the nuclear family model. Risk here is sometimes seen to go beyond issues of social adjustment and gender identity. For example, sociobiological accounts suggest that children's lives are actually endangered when they live with unrelated individuals (Daly & Wilson, 2000). Issues concerning the importance of the nuclear family structure for children's social development often become intertwined and confounded in studies that merely compare children in nuclear families against one particular alternative. Here we highlight some current findings that bear on the importance of same-sex role models, the advantages of legal marriage and the dynamics of children's relationships with genetically unrelated family members.

Parental sex and gender role development

Father absence versus father presence. A meta-analysis of 67 studies comparing children in father-absent and father-present families indicated that girls' sex-typed behavior appeared unaffected by the absence of fathers, whereas preschool-aged boys were less stereotypical in categorizing toys (Stevenson & Black, 1988). A more direct test of Freud's (1938) claim that identification with the same-sex parent is critical for healthy psychological development is provided by comparisons of children living with same-sex as opposed to opposite-sex parents.

Same versus opposite-sex single parents. Very few empirical studies compare children from households with same-sex and opposite-sex single parents, but those that do demonstrate that children are *not* advantaged by living with same-sex parents (Downey & Powell, 1993). Nevertheless, strong cultural beliefs that boys model themselves after and identify with their fathers and girls with their mothers, and that same-sex parents better understand the feelings and needs of their children, are reflected in the courts, which are increasingly willing to grant same-sex requests for custody. Consequently, more sons than daughters live in single-father households (Muzi, 2000).

Relationships with non-custodial fathers. Relationships with fathers who do not have custody differ, depending on whether the parents have ever been married or cohabiting. For example, Coley (1998) found that children of divorced mothers reported higher levels of warmth from noncustodial fathers than children from never-married mothers. Although these differences disappeared when SES was controlled, the link between paternal warmth and control and children's school achievement was greater for divorced or separated fathers than for never-married fathers, especially for girls. Thus daughters who live with their fathers for part of their lives are more influenced by them, and so the study of paternal influences needs to go beyond the issue of same-sex role models.

Same-sex parents. Studies of families with two female parents or two male parents also provide a test of the necessity of having a parent of each sex. Earlier work in this area

focused on children of heterosexual couples who subsequently divorced and forged same-sex relationships (Patterson, 1992); more recent work focuses on the children born to same-sex partners, often with the help of new reproductive technologies (Patterson, 2000). More studies focus on the children of lesbian couples than on those of gay men.

The children of lesbian mothers are not usually compared to the “baseline” of heterosexual, married biological parents. When the focus was on the children of divorced women who were now in lesbian relationships, the comparison group was single heterosexual women (Golombok, Spencer, & Rutter, 1983). Now that there is increased interest in the families created by lesbian couples with the aid of donor insemination, comparison groups include heterosexual couples who similarly availed themselves of reproductive technologies (e.g., Braeways, Panjaert, Van Hall, & Golombok, 1997). These comparisons reveal no deficiencies in parenting or the quality of the parent–child relationship in families headed by lesbians (Golombok, Tasker, & Murray, 1997; Patterson, 1992).

For example, in a European study of 4 to 8 year olds, there was no difference in the quality of the interaction between biological mother and child in three different groups: lesbian couples who had used donor insemination; heterosexual couples who had used donor insemination; and heterosexual couples who had conceived their child in the ordinary way (Braeways et al., 1997). Some comparisons favored the lesbian couples. For example, the quality of parent–child interaction was significantly more positive between children and their “social mothers” in lesbian couples than between children and fathers in the other two groups. Children in all three sets of families, boys as well as girls, expressed stronger positive feelings for their biological mothers than for the mothers’ partners.

Although research on same-sex parenting has been criticized for methodological limitations (Cameron, 1999; Lerner & Nagai, 2001), the existing studies on families with same-sex parents have revealed no significant effects on the quality of parent–child interaction, on children’s peer relations, or on the child’s own sexual identity (Golombok et al., 1997; Patterson, 2000). Children who grow up with same-sex parents have more flexible views about gender roles, are more tolerant of homosexuality and unconventional family arrangements, and are somewhat more likely to engage in sexual experimentation with members of their own sex. However, they are no more likely than members of the population as a whole to identify as lesbian or gay (Golombok, 2001; Golombok et al., 1997).

The importance of legal marriage

Recent societal changes reflecting a decline in legal marriages are of increasing interest to researchers and policy makers. For example, U.S. 2000 census data confirm that the number of unmarried partners living together has increased 72% over the past decade (mainly opposite-sex couples). Married couples with children now account for less than a quarter of all U.S. households. Historically in the United States and in many societies, the nuclear family has not been just a social but a legal arrangement, and so-called illegitimate children have been seen as disadvantaged (e.g., Collishaw, Maughan, & Pickles, 1998). Comparisons of the children of cohabiting versus married couples thus help to specify the key elements in the lives of nuclear families that benefit children. If what is important is the presence of same- and opposite-sex parents, and the complementary skills and contributions

of fathers and mothers, legal status should not matter. Alternatively, marriage as a social institution may have important effects on parents' behavior and children's lives.

Little evidence addresses this issue (see Seltzer, 2000). Many studies do not distinguish between those two-parent families where the parents are married and those where the parents' relationship has not been legalized; others do not distinguish between single mothers who are or are not living with the fathers of their children. The sociological emphasis on household structure, rather than interpersonal relationships, has identified very heterogeneous groups of cohabiting couples (Seltzer, 2000). However, many of the children who are officially born to single mothers have parents who live in stable partnerships. For example, in an urban community sample of children born in South London in the late 1980s, 63% of the mothers were married, 8% were single, and 29% were cohabiting at the time of the child's birth (Hay et al., 2001). Similar proportions were found in a large British community sample, in which there were no clear differences between married and cohabiting families (Dunn et al., 1998). However, cohabiting families are more likely than married ones to experience negative life events that could facilitate negative outcomes in children (Schmuecker, 1998). Cohabiting couples are also more likely than married ones to separate (Seltzer, 2000), though it is not clear that the legal status of the prior partnership adds to the risks associated with parental separation.

The importance of genetic relatedness

Tests of a third implication of the nuclear family model – that *biological* parents are advantageous for children – are provided by studies comparing nuclear families with stepfamilies, and with families using reproductive technologies.

Stepparent families. The strongest claim regarding the importance of genetic relatedness is provided by Daly and Wilson (2000), who present an evolutionary argument for the adaptive value of biological parents raising their children. They support this theory with evidence of increased rates of abuse for children who live with stepparents. Thus, in this view, children are actually in danger if they live with *genetically unrelated* parental figures.

Other studies indicate that the introduction of a stepparent may solve some problems associated with divorce but creates others (Deater-Deckard & Dunn, 1999; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagen, 1999b). For example, stepchildren find it difficult to balance their relationships with biological parents and stepparents; this balancing act appears to be especially difficult for girls living with fathers and stepmothers, particularly if they spend greater amounts of time with their noncustodial biological mothers (Clingempeel & Segal, 1986). In general, meta-analyses have suggested that stepparenting has stronger negative effects on girls than on boys (Amato & Keith, 1991; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagen, 1999b).

It is not always possible to disentangle the effects of genetic relatedness from the other factors associated with stepparenting. Stepparent families do not restore the conditions existing in the original family prior to divorce. For example, stepfamilies are not necessarily likely to enjoy higher income levels and social status than families headed by single parents (Deater-Deckard & Dunn, 1999). Stepfamilies may also be more likely than "intact" families to experience life events and stressful experiences. For example, one-parent families move

house more frequently than original two-parent families, but stepparents move even more often (McLanahan & Teitler, 1999). Moving house can cause disruptions for children and parents, loss of support networks, adjustment to new schools for children and new jobs for parents.

It is not clear how much *additional* risk accrues when a child acquires a stepparent, which is an event that has usually been predated by exposure to marital conflict, separation of the parents, and the exigencies of life after divorce. In a large, representative New Zealand sample, 18 year olds who had grown up in stepfamilies were at elevated risk for juvenile offending, substance use, leaving school without qualifications, and early, promiscuous sexual relationships (Nicholson, Fergusson, & Horwood, 1999). However, when factors antecedent to the experience of stepparenting were taken into account, the odds ratios were no longer significant.

Families who use fertility treatments. Currently there is great interest in a group of families that might be characterized as “stepparenting from birth,” that is, those with children born through donor insemination or egg donation. In these procedures, one of the parents is not the biological parent of the child, in contrast to in vitro fertilization, where both parents are genetically related to the child. Unlike stepfamilies formed through remarriage, families formed through reproductive technology provide an opportunity for examining the influences of biological and *perceived* biological relatedness without the confounding effects of previous family disruptions.

In a study of families who had attended fertility clinics in the UK, with a comparison group of adoptive families, genetic relatedness affected dimensions of the parent–child relationship (Golombok, Murray, Brinden, & Abdalla, 1999). Mothers expressed less warmth when the child was not genetically related to the father, even when the mother herself was the child’s biological parent. Parents reported more cooperation in disciplining the child when there was a genetic relationship between the child and the father. Mothers who had experienced egg donation had more serious disputes with their children than did adoptive mothers; thus mother–child conflict was more intense if the father but not the mother was genetically related to the child. No effects of genetic relatedness were found on measures of the children’s behavioral problems. However, some emotional problems and issues regarding identity may later emerge, given the fact that the circumstances of the child’s conception were shrouded in secrecy. None of the families who had used donor insemination and only one of those who had used egg donation had told the child that one of the parents was really a stepparent.

The studies of stepparent and donor insemination families draw attention to the complexities of the different roles and relationships within families, and the changing dynamics of family life over time, issues of major concern to family systems theory.

The Family Systems Model

In family systems theory (e.g., Cox & Paley, 1997), families are seen as dynamic wholes. This perspective emphasizes the multifaceted roles played by all family members (not just

parents), including children themselves. Considerable attention is given to the dynamics of conflict and alliances across different relationships in the family. Furthermore, the idea that a family is a dynamic system incorporates the notion of change, as well as structure. Thus family systems perspectives are especially applicable to the study of the changing roles in separating or divorcing families, the balancing of roles within both heterosexual and same-sex couples, and the new alliances and animosities that emerge when families are blended together upon remarriage.

Although it seems apparent that family arrangements directly affect all family members, empirical research is rarely guided by systems theory. However, some findings in the literature on divorce provide examples of how relationships influence other relationships within a changing family system. Three illustrative examples include the effects of conflict in one relationship on the quality of other relationships in the family, children's effects on parents, and the importance of sibling relationships within the family system.

Effects of the marital relationship on parent-child relationships

Although divorce may in some circumstances place parents at risk for poor parenting, it can also provide the opportunity for increased parent mental health and better parenting through the reduction of conflict between the parents. Much research has demonstrated the negative effects of marital conflict on children (e.g., Fincham, 1998). Even the earliest relationships between parents and their infants are affected by marital conflict; taking individual differences in parents' psychological adjustment into account, both mothers and fathers interact more positively with very young infants when they are in close, confiding marriages (Cox, Owen, Lewis, & Henderson, 1989). Strong evidence for a *causal link* between conflict and parenting was provided by Kitzmann (2000), who manipulated spousal conflict experimentally, and then examined its effects on the couples' 6- to 8-year-old sons. After quarreling with their partners, fathers were less supportive of their sons, and the couples were less democratic in their parenting.

The long-term negative effects of divorce on children are primarily due to the nature of the couple's relationship prior to and following the divorce, rather than to parental absence and the change in family structure. High amounts of conflict prior to divorce mediate the link between divorce and negative child outcomes (e.g., Amato & Booth, 1996; Shaw et al., 1999). To the extent that divorce improves the custodial parent's mental state and frees children from an atmosphere of conflict, there are positive opportunities as well as risks in divorced families (see Morrison, 1995).

Children's *perceptions* of conflict between their parents may be more important than the actual extent of conflict that occurs (e.g., Harold & Conger, 1997). Furthermore, the effects of marital conflict on children's mental health are not always direct, but rather mediated by the parent-child relations; whether marital conflict has direct or indirect effects depends on whether the child in question is a girl or a boy (Paley, Conger, & Harold, 2000). Thus an understanding of gender differences in response to family change may be clarified by analyses of the family system as a whole.

Children's effects on the marital relationship

The literature on marital conflict shows that a couple's relationship affects their children's development; but children also influence parents. In divorced families, a cycle of influence could be observed in which problematic childrearing behaviors were followed by negative behaviors in children which, in turn, were followed by decreases in parents' psychological adjustment (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982). The fact that children's behavioral problems predate divorce (e.g., Amato & Booth, 1996) suggests that problems in children place additional strain on the relationship between the two parents, thus increasing the risk of divorce. Furthermore, vulnerable children may place extra strains on their parents; children who are high in impulsivity are especially likely to develop problems in response to divorce (Lengua, Wolchick, Sandler, & West, 2000).

The importance of siblings

Family systems often include more than one child. Family arrangements following upon divorce and stepparenting may have different effects on older and younger siblings in a family (e.g., Dunn et al., 1998). Patterns of conflict in the parent-child relationship may be mirrored in sibling interaction (Hay, Vespo, & Zahn-Waxler, 1998). Furthermore, the quality of relationships with siblings may either ameliorate or exacerbate the effects of parental conflict and divorce. For example, it has been observed that same-sex pairs of siblings become especially close after divorce (Kier & Lewis, 1999). It also seems likely that discordant sibling relationships, or alliances made by parents with one or another child, might add to the levels of family distress that accompany divorce and remarriage. Relationships between unrelated siblings may also contribute to problems in stepfamilies (Dunn et al., 1998).

The Social Networks Model

Finally, some developmental theorists see family relationships, including those between parents and children, in the context of the greater social network in which the family resides (e.g., Dunn, 1993; Lewis, 1982; Rheingold & Eckerman, 1975). Peers, teachers, and other adults affect children's lives, and may serve to buffer children against the deleterious effects of family conflict, separation, and divorce. The phenomenon of "social support" has usually been studied as an individualistic variable, presumed to affect an individual's parenting skills. In contrast, the social networks model holds that it is necessary to study children's various relationships directly, so that the social and cultural framework surrounding family life may be understood. Cultural and subcultural arrangements such as child rearing in the context of extended families, fostering, and communal child rearing deserve study. Furthermore, parents sometimes function as "gatekeepers" of their children's networks, and the boundary with the outside world is more permeable in some types of families than others.

Multiple influences on children's lives

Relationships with individuals other than primary caregivers affect children's development (see Nash & Hay, 1993). Positive relationships with grandmothers, siblings, other relatives, friends, and other adults have been found to buffer the effects of family turmoil (Florsheim, Tolan, & Gorman-Smith, 1998; Gadsden, 1999; Hunter, Pearson, Ialongo, & Killam, 1999; Werner, 1995; Wyman et al., 1999). However, the availability of resilience-promoting social networks for single mothers and their children is often overlooked (Brody et al., 1999), and the impact of single parents' economic distress may be reduced with access to high quality school and community support programs (Guttman & Eccles, 1999). Support from friends and extended family members, including nonpaternal men (Coley, 1998), and families' community involvement are positively associated with children's functioning (Wyman et al., 1999).

Different types of families have different types of networks

The social support available to families and the type of networks they have vary across family structures. For example, the children of divorced women who entered into lesbian partnerships had more frequent and more positive contact with their noncustodial, biological fathers than did a comparison group of children whose divorced mothers remained heterosexual (Patterson, 1992).

Single parents may draw heavily on relationships with other extended family members and friends (Amato, 1995; Barbarin, 1999; Gadsden, 1999; McLanahan & Teitler, 1999). However, Hetherington (1998) suggested that support and involvement from extended family members, especially the lost parent's family, is greater following death of a parent than divorce. On the other hand, grandparents, and especially grandfathers, forge closer ties to grandchildren whose mothers are divorced and bringing up their children on their own (Clingempeel, Colyar, Brand, & Hetherington, 1992). Grandparents are less willing to "interfere" in the child rearing of married daughters, a judgment in line with research findings. Family relationships and social networks often promote positive outcomes for the children of single mothers (Brody et al., 1999; Wyman et al., 1999), but the close involvement of grandparents in married families can lead to stress and conflict, as in the case of Muslim mothers living in extended families in Britain (Sonuga-Barke, Mistry, & Qureshi, 1998).

Communal rearing

In some cultural and ideological contexts, children are reared communally. The greater tolerance of unconventional behavior and flexibility of views about gender roles shown by the children of same-sex parents (Golombok et al., 1997) also characterizes children who have been raised in communal arrangements, either in households shared for economic reasons or ideologically based communes (Weisner & Wilson-Mitchell, 1990). The nu-

clear family model would imply that the presence of multiple caregivers might disrupt identification with one's same-sex parent and therefore might produce confused sexual identities. This does not appear to have occurred in the sample of children born in varying circumstances in the early 1970s (the Family Lifestyles Project, Weisner & Wilson-Mitchell, 1990).

The study of communally reared children also poses critical questions for the attachment model. Issues about attachment relationships loom large in many other studies of children reared communally along a gradient that includes paid childcare (e.g., NICHD, 1997) and institutional upbringing (Hodges & Tizard, 1989). Such studies draw attention to the effects of quality of care in communal arrangements and also raise the methodological issue of the appropriateness of conventional assessments in different types of families. Additionally, they question a central tenet of attachment theory, that is, the formative influence of the early primary attachment relationship. A recent follow-up of the Family Lifestyles Project indicated that attachment security was associated with economic and social factors and later life events. Furthermore, there were no significant effects of family type on the distribution of secure and insecure attachments (though that might be due to lack of statistical power). Rather, later experiences seemed more important than early ones and the negative impact of divorce on security of attachment was no different in conventional and unconventional families (Hamilton, 2000).

The studies of communal rearing extend Bowlby's (1969) emphasis on the importance of *monotropic* attachments to primary caregivers (see Nash, 1988). Israeli kibbutz-reared children have qualitatively distinct attachments to mothers, fathers, and familiar caregivers, each relationship predicting different dimensions of the child's later functioning (Oppenheim, Sagi, & Lamb, 1988). Decades of research on kibbutz children yield very little evidence for ill effects, save a cautionary note regarding children who spend nights as well as days away from their biological parents (Aviezer, van Ijzendoorn, Sagi, & Schuengel, 1994).

Extended families

The nuclear family in the Western world is a phenomenon that is rooted in place and time. In other places and at other times, extended families are the norm. For example, in the Sudan, the nuclear family is a relatively new invention, associated with urbanization, social isolation, and disruption of important extended family ties. Children in the Sudan who lived in nuclear families had *more* psychological problems than those who lived in traditional extended families (El Hassan El Awad, & Sonuga-Barke, 1992). Grandmother involvement was the strongest predictor of normal social and emotional adjustment in the children. Similarly, schoolchildren in Korea who lived in extended families fared better than those who lived in nuclear families (Hwang & St. James-Roberts, 1998).

The comparison of nuclear and extended family structures thus needs to be undertaken with reference to the values and ideals of different cultures. For example, the importance of grandmothers for children growing up in the Sudan (El Hassan Al Awad & Sonuga-Barke, 1992) may partly derive from the twofold role of the grandmother (*haboba*) in that culture. She provides social and practical support to inexperienced mothers and transmits cultural values to the new generation. The Sudanese nuclear families were shorn of much

needed practical support and a culturally valued childrearing mechanism. Thus, in general, the social networks perspective does not just identify complex structures and webs of relationships, but also the values and cultural ideals that underpin child rearing in different communities.

Conclusions

Current research on family arrangements is fraught with conceptual and methodological problems (Table 13.1), but has nonetheless advanced considerably since the early days of studies of “father absence.” Most differences between family types are accounted for by a host of mediating and moderating variables (see Baron & Kenny, 1986), including economic, social, and psychological factors (Clarke-Stewart et al., 2000; Dunn et al., 1998; Nicholson et al., 1999). The wide adoption of multivariate modeling procedures and a concomitant tendency to report effect sizes, not just significant group differences, has uncovered important mechanisms and demonstrated the rather modest contribution of family structure variables to children’s social development.

We concur with other reviewers’ recommendations to concentrate attention on underlying processes responsible for variation within as well as across different family arrangements (e.g., Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999a). Such process-orientated research has important implications for public policy and clinical interventions. At the same time, we have argued that the research on family arrangements is of great importance for “mainstream” theories of social development. The topic poses important challenges for each perspective on social development, but also highlights prospects for synthesis across different theories.

For example, the study of divorce shows that attachment relationships do not always remain as they were in infancy, but rather change, for better or worse, in the face of changing family arrangements. Furthermore, studies of children reared communally draw attention to the qualitatively different consequences for social development that derive from different attachment relationships. These data extend attachment theory beyond Bowlby’s original speculations (see also Waters & Cummings, 2000). At the same time, the emphasis on cognitive representations and emotional regulation that derives from attachment theory provides a theoretical language in which some consequences of family disruption can be analyzed.

The studies of different family arrangements provide considerable support for the parenting model, as they demonstrate the importance of parenting style rather than family structure for many aspects of social development (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999a). At the same time the qualitatively unique features of different family arrangements, and the clear evidence for the importance of social, economic, and ideological pressures on parents’ own feelings of competence and self-esteem, extend the perspective beyond classic typologies and standardized assessments. Most critically, studies of different family arrangements have challenged the notion of parenting as a gender-neutral activity, and drawn attention to the differential contributions made by fathers and mothers, both when living together and after marriages have been dissolved.

Although it is never safe to accept null hypotheses, particularly when the power to reject the alternative hypothesis is far too low, the studies of children living in nontraditional arrangements do not show dramatic changes in gender development or psychological adjustment. The effects so far identified seem to be rather subtle ones. At the same time, research on the children in stepfamilies and those born with the aid of reproductive technologies draw attention to the importance of genetic relatedness, or at least attributions made on the basis of genetic relatedness. The meager findings with respect to cohabiting families remind us that children may be affected by marriage as a social institution as well as by their parents' overt behavior. Thus studies of family arrangements have both revived and extended the classic nuclear family model, in some cases refuting its strong claims, but, most importantly, drawing attention to the importance of parent-child relationships, not just the individual characteristics of particular parents (see also Russell, this volume; Parke this volume).

Studies of changing families, in terms of divorce and remarriage, offer some of the strongest empirical support that exists for the abstract principles outlined by family systems theorists. Family alliances and coalitions, and the effects of relationships on other relationships, are thrown into sharp relief in the context of divorce and remarriage. Studies of extended families and those that adopt communal rearing are also likely to provide data that challenge and extend current versions of family systems theory. Most importantly, family systems theory reminds us that families do change, and children do exert influence on other members of their families.

Finally, the study of different family arrangements in the context of wider social networks lends much-needed empirical support to this broader view of influences on social development. The social networks perspective has often been offered as a critical framework, providing a theoretical alternative to attachment theory (Dunn, 1993; Lewis, 1982; Nash & Hay, 1993; Rheingold & Eckerman, 1975). As an organizing framework for the analysis of children's social development in the context of different family arrangements, with access to different networks and cultural institutions, these critiques take more solid form as a developmental theory in its own right.

The study of family arrangements encourages constructive synthesis across these various theoretical perspectives. The findings call for a unified theory, which would emphasize emotion and representation; variation across individual families; unique properties of particular relationships, including those with siblings (Sulloway, 1995) and peers (Harris, 1998) as well as with parents; relationships amongst those relationships; and attention to the social and cultural context in which families reside. In other words, we require a general theory of social development, the like of which has not been seen since the rise of social learning theory in the mid-twentieth century, when child rearing was assumed to be a topic of fundamental importance for developmental psychology as a whole. The behaviorist assumptions of classic social learning theory are no longer adequate to explain social development, but a full understanding of the ways in which families affect children's development will certainly require a synthesis of existing mini-theories.

We hope that the next wave of research on children and their families will focus on mutual activities, beliefs, traditions, and individual ways of dealing with the inevitable dilemmas of family life in all sorts and conditions of families. We hope to see more emphasis on the web of important relationships that surround children and their families. Newer

statistical procedures such as hierarchical linear modeling allow us to study family influences at different levels of analysis. Thus the theoretical synthesis proposed here is testable. It is surely time to move beyond the static and methodologically inadequate comparisons of different family structures that dominated research on this topic in the late twentieth century.

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