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Parental Relationship Churning and Adolescent Well-Being: Examining Instability Within Families

Objective: This study examines the association between parental relationship churning (i.e., the separation and reunification of one's biological parents) and adolescent well-being.

Background: Research examines how instability in parental romantic relationships is linked to adolescent well-being, but it has largely neglected instability and transitions that occur within, rather than between, relationships. Family stress and family boundary ambiguity theories suggest that adolescents from churning families will experience deleterious outcomes when compared with their counterparts in stably together families.

Method: In this article, the authors used data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (N = 3,327) to examine the association between parental relationship churning and adolescent socioemotional and behavioral outcomes (including internalizing behaviors, externalizing behaviors, depressive symptoms, anxiety, delinquency, and exclusionary school discipline experience).

Results: Adolescents who experience parental relationship churning between birth and age 9 had similar outcomes to their counterparts with

stably together parents or parents who dissolve their union and repartner, net of demographic and socioeconomic characteristics. Adolescents who experience parental relationship churning, compared with those who experience parental dissolution without repartnering, had more externalizing problems. The associations were similar for boys and girls.

Conclusions: Differences in adolescents' outcomes by parental relationship history were largely driven by the variation in parental characteristics. These selection factors, however, did not similarly explain all of the differences between adolescents with churning parents and adolescents who experienced union dissolution without repartnering. This underlines the potential importance of distinguishing between different types of family instability experiences.

With fewer permanent romantic relationships among adults today, many children experience an array of family transitions (Cancian, Meyer, & Cook, 2011; Cavanagh, 2008; Osborne & McLanahan, 2007; Ryan & Claessens, 2013). Research examines how instability in parental romantic relationships affects well-being among children and adolescents (Bronte-Tinkew, Horowitz, & Scott, 2009; Carlson & Furstenberg, 2006; Cavanagh, 2008; Cavanagh & Huston, 2006, 2008; Cooper, McLanahan, Meadows, & Brooks-Gunn, 2009; Fomby & Cherlin, 2007; Fomby & Osborne, 2017; Genetian, 2005; Halpern-Meehin & Tach, 2008; Lee & McLanahan, 2015; Magnuson & Berger, 2009; Osborne & McLanahan, 2007). Although

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this research advances our understanding of the consequences of family instability, it has largely neglected instability and transitions that occur within, rather than between, relationships (for exceptions, see Hernandez, Pressler, & Dorius, 2016; Nepomnyaschy & Teitler, 2013). Indeed, a substantial minority of youth experience parental separation and reunification, with one estimate showing that at least 16% of children experience parental relationship churning by age 5 (Halpern-Meeke & Turney, 2016). We know little about how this form of family instability—compared with other, more commonly studied forms of family structure transitions, such as repartnering—affects child and adolescent well-being.

Family stress theory and family boundary ambiguity theory suggest that parental relationship churning matters for adolescent socioemotional and behavioral outcomes, as family routines and roles are disrupted by the exit and reentry of a parent in the family system, with consequences that can cascade or persist into adolescence (Arditti, 2016; Boss & Greenberg, 1984). In this article, we use data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study to examine how parental relationship churning between birth and age 9—compared with other types of parental relationship histories, including stably together, dissolution without repartnering, and dissolution with repartnering—is linked to adolescent socioemotional and behavioral outcomes at age 15. We predict adolescent well-being using a set of outcomes that encompasses both socioemotional (internalizing behaviors, depressive symptoms, and anxiety) and behavioral indicators (externalizing symptoms, delinquency, and exclusionary school discipline—potentially an indicator of behavioral problems in school). This captures various facets of adolescent well-being as reported by both parents and adolescents (and with exclusionary school discipline, as indicated by the decisions of school personnel) to triangulate among reporters.

In this study, we are less focused on the consequences of current family structure (although we do adjust for this in some analyses), but rather, of exposure to family instability across childhood and the association between this instability and adolescent well-being. This allows us to examine whether exposure to parental relationship dissolution and reunification with a churning partner is linked to differential

adolescent outcomes than parental relationship dissolution with repartnering or parental relationship dissolution without repartnering, net of an array of characteristics associated with selection into relationship churning. By recognizing churning, we can analytically distinguish between instability itself and a change in the set of individuals in the family system (because churning only includes instability, whereas dissolution followed by repartnering includes both instability and the introduction of new household members, potentially within the same number of relationship transitions).

In addition to adding to our knowledge about youth exposed to parental relationship churning, this study also sheds light more broadly on how family instability is relevant for adolescent well-being, a critical life course period. Adolescence is a time of transitions and therefore the consequences of stressors may be uniquely expressed during this period (Graber & Brooks-Gunn, 1996). In addition, adolescent socioemotional and behavioral outcomes are predictive of outcomes in adulthood, including substance use, psychopathy, criminal involvement, and depression (Barrett & Katsiyannis, 2016; Lynam, Caspi, Moffitt, Loeber, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 2007; Steele, Forehand, Armistead, & Brody, 1995; Stoolmiller, Kim, & Capaldi, 2005), meaning any issues detected in adolescence can be a sign of future challenges rather than temporary troubles.

BACKGROUND

Prevalence and Correlates of Churning Relationships

Previous research on parental relationship churning finds that one in six children experience parental relationship dissolution and reunification by age 5 (Halpern-Meeke & Turney, 2016); among children of cohabiting parents, about one in four experience parental relationship churning by age 9 (Nepomnyaschy & Teitler, 2013). Therefore, although research on relationship churning is fairly limited, it is not an uncommon experience for children and their families. This research further indicates that churning parents have a particularly high likelihood of experiencing disadvantages, especially on socioeconomic indicators such as employment and material hardship (Halpern-Meeke & Turney, 2016).

A small body of research examines the dynamics in churning families with children. Although levels of father involvement remain higher among churning families than among families in which parents have dissolved their union (Nepomnyaschy & Teitler, 2013; Turney & Halpern-Meehin, 2017), both mothers and fathers in churning relationships are equally or more likely to report parenting stress than their counterparts in other family structures (Halpern-Meehin & Turney, 2016). This offers contradictory indications for the present study. On one hand, parental relationship churning, insofar as it increases father involvement, may be protective for adolescents. On the other hand, the parenting stress stemming from parental relationship churning may impair adolescent well-being. The present study speaks to the implications these previously investigated family dynamics among churning families have for adolescent socioemotional and behavioral outcomes.

Family Instability, Transitions, and Adolescent Well-Being

Two primary theories shed light on why family instability and transitions may have deleterious consequences for adolescent socioemotional and behavioral outcomes at age 15 (including internalizing behaviors, externalizing behaviors, depressive symptoms, anxiety, delinquency, and exclusionary school discipline): family stress theory and family boundary ambiguity theory. Family stress theory focuses on the stress associated with transitions, which can affect parental mental health, parenting quality, parent-child relationships, and family resources such as money or time (Arditti, 2016; Fomby & Osborne, 2017; McCubbin & Patterson, 1983; Umberson, Williams, Powers, Liu, & Needham, 2005; for a summary, see Malia, 2006). Research documents that parental relationship transitions are associated with more mental health struggles, lower parenting quality, strained parent-child relationships, and more limited family economic resources. In turn, these additional stressors from parental relationship transitions can have negative consequences for adolescent socioemotional and behavioral outcomes (Ackard, Neumark-Sztainer, Story, & Perry, 2006; Conger, Conger, Matthews, & Elder, 1999; Harris & Marmer, 1996).

Family boundary ambiguity theory also predicts a negative association between parental relationship transitions and adolescent well-being but posits a different pathway through which this association occurs. This theory explains how family transitions require changes in family roles and responsibilities and, potentially, a reconceptualization of who is in and out of the family unit (Boss & Greenberg, 1984; Ginther & Pollak, 2004; Hetherington, 1999). The resulting confusion, and the related stress, impair family functioning and the well-being of family members. Although not often considered, family boundary ambiguity may occur among churning parents. That is, even without introducing a new partner into the family system, the lack of clarity about the parents' relationship status may disrupt the family system's functioning, including who counts as an insider or an outsider to the immediate family unit and who is responsible for which activities of daily living. These challenges could translate into impaired socioemotional and behavioral outcomes among adolescents via their impact on dyadic relationships in the family and disruptions in parental supervision (Gosselin, 2010).

A large literature examines how family instability and transitions affect youth, generally finding that family instability is associated with negative outcomes (Cavanagh, 2008; Cavanagh & Fomby, 2012; Cavanagh & Huston, 2006; Cavanagh, Schiller, & Riegle-Crumb, 2006; Cooper, Osborne, Beck, & McLanahan, 2011; Dorius & Guzzo, 2013; Fomby, 2011; Fomby & Bosick, 2013; Fomby & Osborne, 2017; Fomby & Sennott, 2013; Heard, 2007a; Lee & McLanahan, 2015; Meadows, McLanahan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008; Osborne, Berger, & Magnuson, 2012; Ryan & Claessens, 2013; Sun & Li, 2009). Specifically among adolescents, this includes associations between family instability and educational attainment, childbearing, labor force participation, delinquency and other problem behaviors, and substance use (Cavanagh, 2008; Cavanagh & Fomby, 2012; Cavanagh et al., 2006; Fomby & Bosick, 2013; Fomby, Mollborn, & Sennott, 2010; Fomby & Sennott, 2013; Heard, 2007b; Ryan & Claessens, 2013). Importantly, previous research finds that family transitions are associated with adolescent socioemotional and behavioral well-being (Fomby & Cherlin, 2007). Also, as research has advanced, it has become clearer that counting

all types of transitions equally is not supported theoretically or empirically (e.g., moving from a single-parent household to a married vs. a cohabiting stepfamily are distinct; Brown, 2006; Lee & McLanahan, 2015).

Importantly, the deleterious consequences of family instability for adolescent well-being persist despite the fact that these studies vary in the age of the children examined, the cross-sectional versus longitudinal nature of the data, the dependent variables used (e.g., behavioral, school achievement, socioemotional), and the operationalization of family instability (e.g., a count of all transitions vs. a dichotomous measure of any instability or not). In addition, the negative consequences of family instability for adolescent well-being persist despite the fact that these studies have attempted to account for parental characteristics that could cause differential selection into unstable family forms (Cavanagh et al., 2006; Cavanagh & Huston, 2008; Fomby & Cherlin, 2007; Fomby et al., 2010; Forman & Davies, 2003; Heard, 2007b; Magnuson & Berger, 2009; Milan, Pinderhughes, & Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 2006; Osborne & McLanahan, 2007). However, prior research has largely neglected to distinguish the experiences of children in churning families from others.

Churning as a Distinct Form of Family Instability

Previous research suggests that adolescents from churning families could have better, worse, or similar outcomes to adolescents in other families who have experienced transitions. On the one hand, adolescents with churning parents might have more favorable outcomes when compared with adolescents with repartnered parents because their family dynamics have not been disrupted by the introduction of a new person into the family system and because the person reentering the family unit is a biological parent, rather than a stepparent, which is associated with more parental investment in children (Coleman, Fine, Ganong, Downs, & Pauk, 2001; Hofferth & Anderson, 2003). In this way, their outcomes might be similar to adolescents who experience parental relationship dissolution without repartnering. Furthermore, fathers in churning relationships remain more involved with their children than do fathers in other families in which parents have dissolved their union

(Turney & Halpern-Meehin, 2017). Therefore, adolescents in churning families may receive the protective benefits of having a more involved father (Amato, 1994; Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Carlson, 2006; Flouri & Buchanan, 2003; Jaynes, 2014; Williams & Kelly, 2005).

On the other hand, there are reasons to expect that adolescents who experienced parental churning will have outcomes that are similar to those whose parents repartnered. Although adolescents in churning families see the same parent exiting and entering the family system, as opposed to a new person as in the case of repartnering, this could nonetheless cause the same set of disruptions to the family system, as family members struggle to find an equilibrium and trust in their daily relationship patterns, family responsibilities, and other role-related behaviors in the family. First, previous research shows that parents in churning relationships report similar or more parenting stress as their counterparts in other family structures (Halpern-Meehin & Turney, 2016), which is associated with children's well-being (Crnic, Gaze, & Hoffman, 2005; Magill-Evans & Harrison, 2001). Second, research on parental relationship transitions and instability suggests that the mechanisms through which such experiences are linked to impaired adolescent well-being include stress and confusion around family roles and dyadic relationship functioning in the family system (Berger & Bzostek, 2014; Cherlin, 1978; Hetherington, 1999; McLanahan, 2011; Stewart, 2005). This suggests that adolescents in repartnered and churning families will have similar outcomes to one another and worse outcomes than their counterparts in stably together or single-parent families.

To our knowledge, only two previous studies investigate how churning, as a specific form of family instability, is associated with offspring well-being. First, one study finds that although 9-year-old children of churning cohabiting parents are more likely to be held back a grade, they do not differ in their health, verbal ability, or behavior (aggression, internalizing, and rule-breaking) from their counterparts in other unmarried family forms (Nepomnyaschy & Teitler, 2013). We extend this research by examining churners across married, cohabiting, and nonresidential relationships, which is important given that a majority of births occur within marriage and approximately two fifths of nonmarital births occur outside cohabiting

unions (Manning, Brown, & Stykes, 2015). We also build on this research by examining the consequences of parental relationship churning for adolescents, as these consequences may be distinctive at different developmental stages.

Second, another study using a sample of teens born predominantly in the 1980s finds that teenage girls (but not boys) in stably together or churning families reported a lower incidence of depressive symptoms when compared with those in other family forms (Hernandez et al., 2016). We extend this research by using a contemporary data source with a more racially/ethnically and socioeconomically heterogeneous sample and by considering a wider range of outcomes. We also extend this research by capitalizing on having a direct measure of churning (as opposed to relying on changes in household rosters to proxy this kind of family instability).

METHOD

Data

We examined the association between parental relationship churning and adolescent well-being with data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (<https://fragilefamilies.princeton.edu>), a cohort of 4,898 U.S. children born in urban areas between 1998 and 2000 and followed through age 15 (Reichman, Teitler, Garfinkel, & McLanahan, 2001). Mothers and most fathers completed baseline interviews in the hospital shortly after their child's birth. Parents completed follow-up telephone interviews an additional five times (when their children were 1, 3, 5, 9, and 15 years old). Children were also interviewed in the two most recent waves.

Fragile Families, designed to understand the correlates and consequences of family instability, provides an excellent opportunity to understand how parental relationship churning is linked to adolescent well-being. First, these data include information about churning, in addition to more commonly examined measures of relationship instability (e.g., relationship dissolution, repartnering with a stepparent). Second, these data include parent- and adolescent-reported measures of adolescent well-being. Some research finds that family structure has larger associations with adolescent-reported outcomes than with adult-reported outcomes (Langton & Berger, 2011) and, accordingly, we used outcomes

reported by both adolescents and parents. Third, these data include an array of demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, which helps isolate the association between parental relationship churning and adolescent well-being.

The analytic sample comprised 3,327 of the 4,898 observations (68% of the baseline sample). We first excluded the 1,469 (30%) observations in which the parent or adolescent did not participate in the 15-year survey (with 151 [3%] observations excluded due to parent nonparticipation, 15 [$<1\%$] observations excluded due to adolescent nonparticipation, and 1,302 [27%] observations excluded due to both parent and adolescent nonparticipation). We then excluded the additional 117 (2%) observations missing data on any of the six outcome variables. Note that observations in which the mother did not participate in all survey waves were included in the analytic sample, as we impute reports of churning (described later), although the findings were substantively similar if we instead removed these observations from the analytic sample.

The baseline and analytic samples were fairly similar with respect to observed demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, but there were some statistically significant differences. Mothers in the analytic sample, when compared with mothers in the baseline sample, were more likely to be non-Hispanic Black (51% compared with 48%; $p < .01$), less likely to be Hispanic (25% compared with 27%; $p < .01$), and less likely to be born outside of the United States (13% compared with 17%; $p < .001$). Mothers in the analytic sample also had higher educational attainment (with 32% of them, compared with 35% in the baseline sample, having less than a high school diploma; $p < .01$). They were also more likely to have at least two children with the child's father (59% compared with 55%; $p < .001$). There were no statistically significant differences between the baseline and analytic samples across parental characteristics such as age, relationship status, material hardship, and depression. There were also no statistically significant differences across adolescent characteristics, including gender and childhood temperament.

Measures

Adolescent Well-Being. Adolescent well-being was assessed with the following six measures at the 15-year survey: internalizing problems,

externalizing problems, depressive symptoms, anxiety, delinquency, and exclusionary school discipline.

Internalizing and externalizing problems were measured with primary caregiver responses to questions from the Child Behavior Checklist (0 = "not true," 1 = "sometimes true," and 2 = "often true"). Internalizing problems comprised an average of responses to eight statements such as "child cries a lot" and "child feels worthless or inferior" ($\alpha = .79$). Externalizing problems comprised an average of responses to 20 statements such as "child gets in many fights" and "child has temper tantrums or a hot temper" ($\alpha = .88$).

The remaining four outcome variables were reported by adolescents. Depressive symptoms were measured with a modified version of the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (Radloff, 1977). Adolescents were asked to report on the frequency that they had the following five experiences in the past 4 weeks (1 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree*): (a) I feel I cannot shake off the blues, even with help from my family and my friends; (b) I feel sad; (c) I feel happy (reverse coded); (d) I feel life is not worth living; and (e) I feel depressed ($\alpha = .76$). Anxiety was measured with a modified version of the Brief Symptom Inventory 18 (Derogatis & Savitz, 2000). Adolescents were asked to report on the frequency that they experienced the following six statements in the past 4 weeks (1 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree*): (a) I have spells of terror or panic, (b) I feel tense or keyed up, (c) I get suddenly scared for no reason, (d) I feel nervous or shaky inside, (e) I feel fearful, and (f) I feel so restless I can't sit still ($\alpha = .76$).

Delinquency was measured with adolescent responses to 13 statements about behavior in the past year (1 = "never," 2 = "one or two times," 3 = "three or four times," and 4 = "five or more times"; $\alpha = .75$): (a) paint graffiti or signs on someone else's property or in a public place, (b) deliberately damage property that didn't belong to you, (c) take something from a store without paying for it, (d) get into a serious physical fight, (e) hurt someone badly enough to need bandages or care from a doctor or nurse, (f) drive a car without its owner's permission, (g) steal something worth more than \$50, (h) go into a house or building to steal something, (i) use or threaten to use a weapon to get something from someone, (j) sell marijuana or other drugs, (k)

steal something worth less than \$50, (l) take part in a fight where a group of your friends was against another group, and (m) were you loud, rowdy, or unruly in a public place. These questions were adapted from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health.

Finally, exclusionary school discipline is a binary variable indicating the adolescent reported being suspended or expelled from school in the past 2 years.

Parental Relationship Churning. The key explanatory variable, parental relationship churning, was measured using mothers' direct and indirect reports of churning between the baseline and 9-year surveys. We used mothers' reports of relationship churning, following prior research (e.g., Halpern-Meekin & Turney, 2016). Substantially more mothers than fathers participated in all survey waves, facilitating less missing data on mothers' reports of relationship status than on fathers' reports of relationship status. We did not substitute fathers' reports when mothers' reports are missing because there can be discordance between partners in their accounts of these relationship events (Halpern-Meekin & Tach, 2013).

Direct reports of parental relationship churning included mothers' reports of being in an "on-again, off-again" relationship with the child's biological father. These direct reports were ascertained at the baseline, 3-, and 5-year surveys. Because direct reports were not available at the 1- or 9-year surveys, we supplemented direct reports of churning with indirect reports of between-wave churning. One example of indirect churning is when a mother reported a romantic relationship with the child's biological father at one survey, no romantic relationship with him at the subsequent survey, and a romantic relationship with him at the subsequent survey. Another example of indirect churning is when the mother reported no romantic relationship, a romantic relationship, and no romantic relationship with the child's biological father in three consecutive surveys. We considered changes in any romantic relationship (whether marital, cohabiting, or nonresidential) as opposed to changes in residential status (e.g., nonresidential to cohabiting) or legal status (e.g., cohabiting to married). Adolescents were considered to have ever experienced parental relationship churning if they experienced either direct or indirect churning by age 9 (with

supplemental analyses distinguishing between these two measures of churning).

We compared adolescents who experienced parental relationship churning to adolescents with the following three types of parental relationships: (a) stably together, when mothers reported any romantic relationship with the adolescent's father at every survey wave (and no relationship churning); (b) dissolution without repartnering, when mothers reported dissolving their relationship with the adolescent's father and no repartnering (and no relationship churning); and (c) dissolution with repartnering, when mothers reported dissolving their relationship with the adolescent's father and also reported repartnering (and no relationship churning). We excluded the 30 observations that do not fit in any of these four categories from the analysis.

Control Variables. The multivariate analyses adjusted for parent and adolescent characteristics, as prior research documents that parents in churning relationships experience disadvantages across an array of demographic, socioeconomic, and behavioral characteristics (Halpern-Meehin & Turney, 2016). These control variables were measured at the first time point when they were asked, at the baseline or 1-year survey unless otherwise noted. We adjusted for both parents' demographic characteristics including race/ethnicity (measured by a series of mutually exclusive indicators of mother's race [non-Hispanic White, non-Hispanic Black, Hispanic, non-Hispanic other race] and a binary variable indicating the parents are a mixed-race couple) and mother's and father's foreign-born status, age, and family structure in childhood (1 = "lived with both biological parents at age 15"). We adjusted for the parents' relationship status at the child's birth (married, cohabiting, nonresidential romantic relationship, no relationship), if the parents have additional children together, and mother's and father's multipartnered fertility. We also adjusted for mother's and father's socioeconomic characteristics, including educational attainment (less than high school, high school degree or GED, some college, college), material hardship (a sum of binary variables indicating hardship in the past year [such as "evicted from your home or apartment for not paying the rent or mortgage" and "moved in with other people even for a little while because of financial

problems"]), employment (1 = "worked for pay in the last week"), and income-to-poverty ratio. We adjusted for mother's and father's depression, measured by responses to the Composite International Diagnostic Instrument-Short Form (Kessler, Andrews, Mroczek, Ustun, & Wittchen, 1998); mother's and father's drug use (1 = "any drug use in past month"); mother's and father's impulsivity (Dickman, 1990); and mother's and father's cognitive ability (Wechsler, 2001). Adolescent characteristics included gender and childhood temperament (reported by the mother). Finally, we included a control for the person who responded to the 15-year survey (mother, father, other), as the nature of the relationship between this individual and the adolescent may structure primary caregiver responses to the outcome variables. Note that we included adolescents with nonparental caregivers in our analyses as they may have experienced parental relationship churning during their childhood, even if they now live with a nonparental caregiver.

Analytic Strategy

We estimated the association between parental relationship churning and adolescent well-being with ordinary least squares regression models (for the five continuous outcomes) and linear probability models (for the binary outcome, exclusionary school discipline). In these multivariate analyses, we standardized the five continuous outcome variables to facilitate interpretation. First, we adjusted for the control variables described previously (Model 1). To the extent possible, we establish proper time-ordering between our control variables (measured at the baseline or 1-year surveys), the explanatory variables (measured between the baseline and 9-year surveys), and the outcome variables (measured at the 15-year survey). Second, we further adjusted for parental relationship status at the 15-year survey (married, cohabiting, nonresidential romantic relationship, or no relationship), allowing us to isolate the association between parental churning and adolescent well-being net of parents' current relationship status (Model 2). Our modeling approach was applied to six outcome variables, increasing the probability of type I error, but the results held up to a Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons.

Relatively few observations in the analytic sample were missing data on the control variables. On average, the covariates were missing about 10% of observations (with missing data ranging from <1% to 8% for mother-reported covariates and 20% to 28% for father-reported covariates). We preserved these missing values using multiple imputation, producing 20 data sets with the multivariate normal method and pooling results across the imputed data sets.

Sample Description

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the analytic sample. Importantly, more than one fifth (20.5%) of the adolescents experienced parental relationship churning by age 9. Nearly one third (32.6%) of adolescents had stably together parents, 10.7% experienced parental relationship dissolution without repartnering, and 36.2% experienced parental relationship dissolution with repartnering.

Table 1 also presents demographic and socioeconomic characteristics. More than half (50.4%) of the adolescents had non-Hispanic Black mothers, one quarter (24.6%) had Hispanic mothers, and one fifth (21.5%) had non-Hispanic White mothers. On average, adolescents' mothers and fathers were, respectively, 25 and 28 years old at baseline. About two fifths of the adolescents' parents (41.8% of mothers and 44.2% of fathers) lived with both biological parents at age 15. At baseline, about one quarter (24.0%) of parents were married, with the remaining cohabiting (35.8%), in a nonresidential relationship (28.2%), or not in a romantic relationship (11.9%). Nearly three fifths (58.9%) of parents shared another child together (in addition to the focal child). The majority of primary caregiver respondents at the 15-year survey were mothers (88.0%), followed by fathers (7.1%) and others (4.9%).

RESULTS

Means of Adolescent Well-Being by Parental Relationship Churning

Table 2 presents the (unstandardized) means of the six indicators of well-being separately for the following four groups of adolescents based on their parents' relationship history: churning, stably together, dissolution without repartnering, and dissolution with repartnering. Adolescents

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of All Variables (N = 3,327)

Variable	M (SD) or %
Dependent variables	
Internalizing behaviors, parent reported, y15	0.255 (0.305)
Externalizing behaviors, parent reported, y15	0.220 (0.251)
Depressive symptoms, adolescent reported, y15	1.596 (0.598)
Anxiety, adolescent reported, y15	1.808 (0.649)
Delinquency, adolescent reported, y15	1.110 (0.198)
Exclusionary school discipline, adolescent reported, y15	26.8
Parental relationship history, b, y1, y3, y5, y9	
Churning	20.5
Stably together	32.6
Dissolution without repartnering	10.7
Dissolution with repartnering	36.2
Control variables	
Mother race/ethnicity, b	
White, non-Hispanic	21.5
Black, non-Hispanic	50.4
Hispanic	24.6
Other race, non-Hispanic	3.5
Mother and father mixed-race couple, b	
Mother foreign-born, b	13.3
Father foreign-born, b	14.5
Mother age, b	25.129 (6.006)
Father age, b	27.682 (7.229)
Mother lived with both parents at age 15, b	41.8
Father lived with both parents at age 15, b	44.2
Mother educational attainment, b	
Less than high school	31.7
High school diploma or GED	32.0
Some college	25.3
College	11.0
Father educational attainment, b	
Less than high school	30.9
High school diploma or GED	37.5
Some college	21.3
College	10.3
Mother and father relationship status, b	
Married	24.0
Cohabiting	35.8
Nonresidential romantic	28.2
Separated	11.9

Table 1. Continued

Variable	M (SD) or %
Mother and father have another child together, y1	58.9
Mother multipartnered fertility, y1	35.9
Father multipartnered fertility, y1	32.2
Mother material hardship, y1	1.183 (1.640)
Father material hardship, y1	0.422 (1.108)
Mother employment, y1	55.2
Father employment, y1	76.3
Mother income-to-poverty ratio, y1	1.855 (2.237)
Father income-to-poverty ratio, y1	2.463 (3.061)
Mother depression, y1	15.8
Father depression, y1	11.1
Mother drug use, y1	2.2
Father drug use, y1	8.1
Mother impulsivity, y3	2.029 (0.609)
Father impulsivity, y1	2.017 (0.671)
Mother cognitive ability, y3	6.791 (2.645)
Father cognitive ability, y3	6.509 (2.737)
Adolescent is male, b	51.7
Adolescent childhood temperament, y1	3.398 (0.769)
Primary caregiver relationship to adolescent, y15	
Mother	88.0
Father	7.1
Other	4.9
Mother and father relationship status, y15	
Married	28.9
Cohabiting	4.7
Nonresidential romantic relationship or no relationship	66.7

Notes: b = measured at baseline, y1 = measured at 1-year survey, y3 = measured at 3-year survey, y5 = measured at 5-year survey, y9 = measured at 9-year survey, y15 = measured at 15-year survey.

with churning parents, when compared with adolescents with stably together parents, had more internalizing behaviors (0.262 compared with 0.232; $p < .01$), externalizing behaviors (0.264 compared with 0.161; $p < .001$), depressive symptoms (1.637 compared with 1.532; $p < .001$), delinquency (1.135 compared with 1.079; $p < .001$), and exclusionary school discipline (34.5% compared with 17.4%; $p < .001$). Adolescents with churning parents also had more externalizing behaviors (0.264 compared with 0.206; $p < .001$), delinquency (1.135 compared with 1.104; $p < .01$), and exclusionary school discipline (34.5% compared with 25.3%;

$p < .01$) than those who experience parental dissolution without repartnering. There were no statistically significant differences between adolescents with churning parents and adolescents who experienced parental dissolution with repartnering.

Estimating Adolescent Well-Being as a Function of Parental Relationship Churning

Table 3 presents the results from regression models that estimated adolescent well-being as a function of parental relationship churning. We present only the key coefficients of interest for parsimony (see full models in Appendix Table 1).

We first examined differences between adolescents with churning parents and adolescents with stably together parents. The prior descriptive table showed that adolescents with churning parents were disadvantaged across five of the six outcome variables (internalizing behaviors, externalizing behaviors, depressive symptoms, delinquency, and exclusionary school discipline). One of these five associations remained statistically significant in Model 1, suggesting that parent and adolescent characteristics largely explained these observed associations. Adolescents with stably together parents had fewer externalizing problems ($b = -0.200$, $p < .01$) than adolescents with churning parents. In the second model, which further adjusted for parental relationship status at the 15-year survey (contemporaneous to the outcome variables), this association was further reduced in magnitude and statistical significance ($b = -0.097$, nonsignificant). There were no statistically significant differences in well-being between adolescents with churning parents and adolescents with stably together parents once accounting for their characteristics and parents' current relationship status.

We next examined differences between adolescents who experienced parental relationship churning and adolescents who experienced parental relationship dissolution without repartnering. The prior descriptive table showed that adolescents with churning parents were disadvantaged across three of the six outcome variables (externalizing behaviors, delinquency, and exclusionary school discipline). In Model 1, which adjusted for parent and adolescent characteristics, adolescents who experienced parental relationship dissolution

Table 2. Means or Frequencies of Outcome Variables by Parental Relationship History Through 9-Year Survey (N = 3,327)

Variable	Churning <i>n</i> = 694	Stably together <i>n</i> = 1,077	Dissolution without repartnering <i>n</i> = 369	Dissolution with repartnering <i>n</i> = 1,187
Internalizing behaviors, parent reported	0.262	0.232**	0.272	0.266
Externalizing behaviors, parent reported	0.264	0.161***	0.206***	0.252
Depressive symptoms, adolescent reported	1.637	1.532***	1.629	1.620
Anxiety, adolescent reported	1.832	1.771	1.788	1.838
Delinquency, adolescent reported	1.135	1.079***	1.104**	1.126
Exclusionary school discipline, adolescent reported, %	34.5	17.4***	25.3**	31.4

Notes: Asterisks indicate statistically significant differences in outcomes between adolescents who experienced parental relationship churning and other groups of adolescents. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

without repartnering had fewer externalizing problems ($b = -0.186$, $p < .01$) than adolescents who experienced parental relationship churning. There were no statistically significant differences between groups across the other outcomes. The association for externalizing problems remains in Model 2, which further adjusted for current parental relationship status ($b = -0.186$, $p < .01$).

Finally, we examined differences between adolescents who experienced parental relationship churning and adolescents who experienced parental relationship dissolution with repartnering. The prior descriptive table showed no differences in adolescent well-being between these two groups. The lack of differences persisted across the multivariate models. Adolescents who experienced parental relationship churning and adolescents who experienced parental relationship dissolution with repartnering had similar levels of internalizing problems, externalizing problems, depressive symptoms, anxiety, delinquency, and exclusionary school discipline.

Supplemental Analyses That Consider Heterogeneity in Parental Relationship Churning

The measure of parental relationship churning, as described previously, captured both direct and indirect reports of churning. We conducted supplemental analyses that separately considered direct and indirect churning, substituting the four-category measure of parental relationship history with a five-category measure (direct churning [reference category], indirect churning, stably together, dissolution without repartnering, and dissolution with repartnering). These

models showed no statistically significant differences in adolescent well-being among those who reported direct and indirect churning (equivalent of Model 2: $p = .744$ for internalizing problems, $p = .758$ for externalizing problems, $p = .432$ for depressive symptoms, $p = .772$ for anxiety, $p = .897$ for delinquency, and $p = .133$ for exclusionary school discipline).

Also, the timing of instability in the life course may differentially affect adolescent well-being (Fomby & Bosick, 2013). Therefore, we conducted supplemental analyses that separately considered baseline relationship churning (i.e., direct churning reported by the mother on the survey at the child's birth) and nonbaseline relationship churning (i.e., direct churning reported by the mother at the 3- or 5-year surveys), again substituting the four-category measure of parental relationship history with a five-category measure (baseline churning [reference], nonbaseline churning, stably together, dissolution without repartnering, and dissolution with repartnering). These models showed no statistically significant differences in adolescent well-being among those who experienced baseline and nonbaseline churning (equivalent of Model 2: $p = .679$ for internalizing problems, $p = .465$ for externalizing problems, $p = .263$ for depressive symptoms, $p = .237$ for anxiety, $p = .877$ for delinquency, and $p = .530$ for exclusionary school discipline).

Supplemental Analyses That Consider Heterogeneity by Adolescent Gender

The association between parental relationship churning and adolescent well-being may vary by gender, as some research shows that

Table 3. Regression Models Estimating Adolescent Well-Being as a Function of Parental Relationship History (N = 3,327)

Variable	Model 1 Adjusted b (SE)	Model 2 Adjusted + Current Parental Relationship Status b (SE)
Internalizing behaviors, parent reported		
Stably together	-0.084 (0.063)	0.020 (0.071)
Dissolution without repartnering	0.042 (0.073)	0.016 (0.073)
Dissolution with repartnering	0.003 (0.055)	-0.028 (0.056)
Externalizing behaviors, parent reported		
Stably together	-0.200 (0.062)**	-0.097 (0.070)
Dissolution without repartnering	-0.156 (0.070)*	-0.186 (0.071)**
Dissolution with repartnering	-0.044 (0.057)	-0.078 (0.058)
Depressive symptoms, adolescent reported		
Stably together	-0.098 (0.063)	-0.011 (0.070)
Dissolution without repartnering	0.019 (0.072)	0.000 (0.073)
Dissolution with repartnering	0.006 (0.055)	-0.018 (0.056)
Anxiety, adolescent reported		
Stably together	-0.045 (0.064)	0.014 (0.070)
Dissolution without repartnering	-0.034 (0.074)	-0.044 (0.074)
Dissolution with repartnering	0.036 (0.056)	0.022 (0.057)
Delinquency, adolescent reported		
Stably together	-0.087 (0.063)	-0.022 (0.071)
Dissolution without repartnering	-0.095 (0.078)	-0.117 (0.078)
Dissolution with repartnering	-0.029 (0.057)	-0.053 (0.058)
Exclusionary school discipline, adolescent reported		
Stably together	-0.038 (0.027)	0.003 (0.031)
Dissolution without repartnering	-0.047 (0.031)	-0.058 (0.032)^
Dissolution with repartnering	-0.013 (0.025)	-0.026 (0.025)

Notes: All outcome variables except for exclusionary discipline are standardized. Ordinary least squares regression models are used to estimate all outcomes except for exclusionary school discipline, which is estimated with linear probability models. Churning is the reference category. Model 1 adjusts for mother race/ethnicity, mother and father mixed-race couple, mother and father foreign born, mother and father age, mother and father lived with both parents at age 15, mother and father educational attainment, mother and father relationship status, mother and father have another child together, mother and father multipartnered fertility, mother and father material hardship, mother and father employment, mother and father income-to-poverty ratio, mother and father depression, mother and father drug use, mother and father impulsivity, mother and father cognitive ability, adolescent gender, adolescent childhood temperament, and primary caregiver relationship to adolescent. Model 2 further adjusts for parental relationship status at the 15-year survey (when the outcome variables are measured). ^p < .10. *p < .05. **p < .01.

gender moderates the association between early family experiences and internalizing, externalizing, and behavior problems (Fearon, Bakermans-Kranenburg, van Ijzendoorn, Lapsley, & Roisman, 2010; Leadbeater, Kuperminc, Hertzog, & Blatt, 1999; Madigan, Atkinson, Laurin, & Benoit, 2013; Zahn-Waxler, Shirtcliff, & Marceau, 2008). We considered this possibility in supplemental analyses, estimating subgroup models for boys and girls. These subgroup analyses showed no statistically significant gender differences in the association between parental relationship churning and adolescent well-being.

DISCUSSION

In this article, we used data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study to examine the association between parental relationship churning and the following six indicators of adolescent well-being: internalizing problems, externalizing problems, depressive symptoms, anxiety, delinquency, and exclusionary school discipline. The results suggest three main conclusions.

First, adolescents who experienced parental relationship churning had similar outcomes as their counterparts who had stably together parents, net of demographic characteristics,

socioeconomic characteristics, and current parental relationship status. The wide-ranging set of demographic and socioeconomic differences between these two types of families accounted for descriptive differences in adolescent well-being, which underlines the importance of addressing selection issues when studying the intergenerational consequences of family instability (see, e.g., Aughinbaugh, Pierret, & Rothstein, 2005; Ginther & Pollak, 2004; McLanahan et al., 2013). These findings, though, are inconsistent with the expectations of family stress theory and family boundary ambiguity theory, which suggest that adolescent well-being may be disrupted by the exit and reentry of a parent in the family system (Arditti, 2016; Boss & Greenberg, 1984).

Second, adolescents who experienced parental relationship churning had similar outcomes as their counterparts who experienced parental relationship dissolution with repartnering in both bivariate and multivariate models. The parent figure who is exiting and (re)entering the household is the same person for those in churning families (a parent exits and reenters) and different for those in repartnering families (a parent exits and a stepparent enters), but this was not associated with differences in the measures of adolescent well-being assessed here. This could suggest that the biological relatedness of the second parent is overridden by the experience of family instability. This contrasts with some previous research arguing that children's outcomes in two-biological-parent families may be better than those in stepparent families due to the biological relatedness of the child's second parent (Coleman et al., 2001; Hofferth & Anderson, 2003). The churning category allows us to analytically distinguish between adolescents' exposure to instability and the presence of a nonbiological parent, showing that it may be instability that is of primary importance.

Third, adolescents who experienced parental relationship churning had more externalizing behaviors and exclusionary school discipline than their counterparts who experienced parental relationship dissolution without repartnering (with the findings for exclusionary school discipline only reaching marginal statistical significance). The fewer transitions, or lower degree of instability, in the families without repartnering may be protective for these adolescents when compared with children in churning families. This is consistent with prior research

showing that not all family instability is similarly associated with children's well-being (Lee & McLanahan, 2015) and that being exposed to multiple transitions is associated with a higher likelihood of negative outcomes (Fomby & Cherlin, 2007). However, given that the point estimates have overlapping confidence intervals, and there were no group differences across the other four outcomes, this finding should be interpreted cautiously.

The present study builds on previous research in examining the association between parental relationship churning and offspring's outcomes. In keeping with previous research that examined the association between cohabiting parents' relationship churning and 9-year-old children's outcomes (Nepomnyaschy & Teitler 2013), we did not see differences between adolescents with churning parents and adolescents with stably together parents once we accounted for demographic and socioeconomic characteristics associated with parental relationships. Our findings contrast with a study of an earlier cohort of churning parents, in which girls (but not boys) in churning families reported fewer depressive symptoms than those in families in which parents stably broke up (Hernandez et al., 2016). We did not find gender differences in our more recent sample, and we found that it is youth whose parents stably separate who show more positive outcomes than those from churning families. Differences in the period or demographic makeup of the age cohort, or the use of a more direct measure of churning or a wider ranging set of controls for parental characteristics, could explain the variation in these findings across studies.

LIMITATIONS

These findings should be considered in light of several limitations. First, as direct reports of churning were only ascertained at the baseline, 3- and 5-year surveys, our measure of churning is likely underreported. We supplemented these direct reports of churning with indirect reports of churning, which helps minimize this underreporting, but it is likely we did not capture all churning relationships. Aspects of the churning experience—such as whether the churning was residential or nonresidential and the number of parental relationship disruptions the adolescent experienced—remained unresolved, and future data collection efforts should capture these and

other details of the churning experience. Likewise, we did not capture adolescents' experiences of family instability due to their fathers' repartnering after their parents separate or due to churning in parents' new partnerships. Second, the analyses only adjusted for observed differences between churning parents and other parents; unobserved parental or adolescent characteristics may alter the relationship between parental relationship churning and adolescent well-being. Therefore, we cannot speak to the causal nature of the association between churning and adolescent well-being. Third, although the sample includes a racially and ethnically diverse sample of adolescents, it is not nationally representative of all adolescents in the United States, a point that should be kept in mind when interpreting the results.

CONCLUSIONS

By incorporating the category of churning relationships into our research, we see how a period of deep instability within the family is similar in its association with adolescent outcomes to the instability that comes from moving across family units, as with parental repartnering. These findings extend prior research on family instability by taking into account instability that occurs within, rather than between, relationships. Furthermore, the findings emphasize the importance of properly controlling for the characteristics of parents and children that may select them into the experience of family instability and disadvantageous outcomes. Gaining clarity on the circumstances under which family instability does and does not have a causal influence on adolescents' well-being can help more properly target support to families and children.

Broadly, our research points to the utility of recognizing the churning dynamic in allowing researchers to gain analytic leverage in separating out experiences of family instability from the introduction of new members into the household. Future research should focus on exploring the pathways and family dynamics through which parental relationship churning might raise risks to adolescents' well-being, going beyond the socioemotional and behavioral outcomes assessed here. This work would help us better understand and support youth experiencing parental relationship churning while potentially revealing more about the nature of whether and how family instability can undermine adolescent well-being.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

Appendix S1: SUPPORTING INFORMATION.

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