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Family Stability and Childhood Behavioral Outcomes: A Critical Review of the Literature

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The link between family characteristics and childhood behavioral outcomes has been studied at length, specifically as it relates to adjustment and success later in life. Due to the implications that early childhood behavioral delays have on later adulthood success (Fronstin, Greenberg, & Robins, 2005), it is important to give attention to the issues surrounding familial characteristics and caregiver interactions. Predictability within in the family, the nature and quality of relationships among family members, and feelings of safety and security for children within a family unit are all concepts that have been examined and discussed in this area. It is imperative that all of these aspects be taken into consideration when examining and determining the impact that family interactions have on children as they develop and mature into later childhood and adolescence.

The purpose of this review is to analyze the body of literature surrounding the concept of family stability and its impact on later childhood behavioral outcomes. It is hoped that this analysis will point out the overall strengths contained within the literature but also bring to light some areas in which the literature is still lacking. This review aims to point future researchers toward a more centralized definition of the concept of family stability in order to facilitate more concise research and understanding around familial relationships and predictability. Finally, this review will conclude with implications for practice, policy, and research, which will be brought about by the discussion of literature.

Definitions

In order to fully grasp and comprehend what exactly impacts childhood success and behaviors, it is essential to define the terms and aspects contained in this review.

Family stability. One of the shortcomings of the cumulative body of literature is a vague and non-specific definition of the concept of family stability. By and large, researchers have traditionally not settled upon one singular definition of what a stable family is or is not. Many different authors view this concept through varying lenses; as discussed later in this review, this leads to inconsistency throughout the literature. As previously mentioned, one of the goals of this review is to examine the body of literature and help develop a more concise, concrete definition of family stability.

Traditionally, there have been two separate approaches taken when attempting to gain insight into family stability, specifically when

defining it: conceptual and empirical. This review will focus primarily on the empirical research surrounding this phenomenon.

Perhaps one of the most well-known researchers in this field is David Olson. Olson's Circumplex Model of Marital and Family Systems is the basis for much of the research conducted in recent history. Throughout his research, Olson has attempted to bridge the gap between theoretical/conceptual and practice/research (Olson, Russell, & Sprenkle, 1989). Olson (2000) discusses a continuum of family relationships that shifts from rigid to chaotic. Olson goes on to say that a family dynamic that is chaotic in nature is one in which there is little structure and one in which there are frequent changes and shifts in family relationships and predictability. Furthermore, in a chaotic household, roles tend to be unclear or frequently changing with little stable leadership. Olson theorizes that those raised in chaotic homes will have significant relational problems later in life.

Much research has been conducted supporting this concept. In order to take a closer look at this phenomenon, the question must first be asked: "What are the familial characteristics associated with chaotic home environments that are common among children with negative behavioral outcomes?" Some authors define family stability as frequent changes that lead to adversity in a child's life, such as frequent changes in employment, changes in caregiver relationships, and continual changes in stable residences (Ackerman, Kogos, Youngstrom, Schoff, & Izard, 1999). Other definitions include fluidity of family structure. Such fluidity in family structure includes divorce, single parenthood, cohabitation, remarriage, or a combination of these (Cavanagh & Huston, 2006). Finally, another aspect of literature surrounding familial stability focuses on the relational aspect of family interaction. These familial characteristics range from marital satisfaction or discord (Emery & O'Leary, 1982; Goldberg & Easterbrooks, 1984; Long & Forehand, 1987; Webster-Stratton, 1988), family cohesion or bonding (Cashwell & Vacc, 1996; Cooper, Holman, & Braithwaite, 1983; Lucia & Breslau, 2006; Olson, 2000), or family rituals/routines (Eaker & Walters, 2002; Kiser, Bennett, Heston, & Paavola, 2005; Schuck & Bucy, 1997). The purpose of this review is to determine if there is a consensus throughout the literature on what family stability is, to synthesize this information to help better understand the concept of family stability, and to determine which aspects of family stability are the strongest predictors of later childhood behavioral outcomes. Therefore, for the purpose of this review, family stability will be defined as frequent changes or levels in the dynamics listed above either in combination or singularly occurring multiple times.

Negative behavioral outcomes. Maladaptive behavioral outcomes are concepts that are also studied at large throughout the body of literature. There are many definitions as to what constitutes maladaptive behaviors or inappropriate behavioral outcomes in later childhood. Some of the more prevalent literature in this area uses a conjunction of different measures or indexes to define childhood behavioral outcomes and/or childhood problematic behavior. Much research relies on often used measures such as the Achenbach Behavioral Rating Scale (Ackerman, Brown, & Izard, 2004; Carlson, 2006; Carlson & Corcoran, 2001; Cavanagh & Huston, 2006; Gyamfi, 2004; Nelson, Stage, Duppong-Hurley, Synhorst, & Epstein, 2007). Other researchers depend not on measures of childhood adjustment and behavior but on actual diagnoses of behavioral disorders. The number of children who are being diagnosed with some sort of behavioral disorder continues to rise in the United States. Disorders such as Serious Emotional Disturbance (SED) are being diagnosed at a rate higher than ever before. It is expected that 1 in every 20 children currently meets federal criteria for SED (Costello, Messer, Bird, Cohen, & Reinherz, 1998). SED, like many other behavioral disorders, carries serious ramifications for a child. SED, a broad behavioral diagnosis, is the criterion many researchers use to operationalize negative behavioral outcomes for children. Diagnosis of SED, as determined by the U.S. government (1993), is given to children up to age 18 who currently (or at any time during the past year) "have had a diagnosable mental, behavioral, or emotional disorder of sufficient duration" (p. 29425).

Due to the prevalence of these definitions, this review will rely on literature that defines negative behavioral outcomes through both of these avenues.

Review of the Literature

Method

The review was conducted using the online search tools of Academic Search Complete, PsycInfo, and Social Work Abstracts databases with the following search terms in various combinations: behavior, outcome, family, characteristic, SED, structure, stability. Several articles focusing on a number of variables relating to the topic were chosen. Additionally, studies that were consistently cited throughout those articles were also considered for this review. General concepts agreed upon by those studies were then researched specifically to find additional studies

focusing on more specific criteria. Only studies conducted within the last 15 years, found by electronic search, were chosen. A few citations older than 15 years but consistently cited throughout other studies were also included.

Results

The findings of the research review are quite broad; however, they are fairly consistent. The research yields a continuum of results, ranging from concrete to more abstract or conceptual. The concrete indicators tend to be more nominal and measured in a quantifiable manner, while the conceptual variables lean more toward relational aspects of family functioning.

Concrete (static) variables. Although measured differently on an operational level, conceptually many authors tend to have a relative consensus about what family instability is. Most studies examining the simple concrete (or static) variables surrounding family instability conceptualized it (at least on some level) as persistent inconsistence within family functioning and makeup. This inconsistence can be manifested as frequent changes in parenting makeup (e.g., frequent change in father figures in and out of the home), infrequent discipline techniques, unpredictable living situations, constant change in location, and so forth (Ackerman et al., 1999; Cavanagh & Huston, 2006; Ram & Hou, 2003; Nelson et al., 2007). These authors hypothesize that, when all of these key aspects of child rearing and parenting are not consistent and/or predictable, the child is more likely to engage in problematic behaviors, possibly due to feelings of unease or insecurity. Changes in family structure (inconsistency) aggravate children's behavioral and emotional outcomes (Ram & Hou, 2003). Instability (chaos and unpredictability) within the familial unit significantly predicts internalization of behaviors as early as 5 to 6 years old, both at home and in school environments. This instability is also a predictor of children's inability to adjust to new environments throughout their childhood and into adulthood (Ackerman et al., 1999; Cavanagh & Huston, 2006). Instability within the home from birth has a significant impact on many different aspects of childhood problematic behavior, many times manifesting when the child transitions to elementary school (Ackerman, Brown, D'Eramo, & Izard, 2002; Cavanagh & Huston, 2006), possibly because inconsistency within the parenting construct or within the household suppresses a child's ability to trust the family environment to provide safety and protection (Forman & Davies, 2003). This distrust can easily be generalized across settings outside of the home environment,

namely school environments or other environments in which a child may interact socially.

Other common changes in a child's family or household that could be considered more concrete have also been studied. Specifically, frequent relocation has been tied to behavioral outcomes (Ackerman et al., 1999; Adam & Chase-Lansdale, 2002; Hoglund & Leadbeater, 2004; Humke & Schaefer, 1995, Milan & Pinderhughes, 2006). These studies found that children, especially school age, struggle more when moving, possibly due to the inability to build and maintain consistent and constructive friendships in the short time they are in one location. Additionally, Hoglund and Leadbeater (2004) found that frequent transitions had greater behavioral ramifications for students who were reportedly shy or socially withdrawn. This is important primarily because relocation is one of of the most common events—if not the most common event—occurring in families within the construct of family stability (Milan & Pinderhughes, 2006).

A different yet common concept identified throughout the literature was the effect of the mental well-being/functioning of the maternal figure on childhood outcomes. This concept has a two-pronged effect on the issue of family stability. Although maternal stress and well-being is independently predictive of behavioral outcomes, it also accounts for partnership instability, which will be discussed later in this section (Osborne & McLanahan, 2007). Either way, children whose mothers display a higher risk of depression or have generally lower psychological functioning are more likely to display behavioral difficulties (Carlson & Corcoran, 2001; Halligan, Murray, Martins, & Cooper, 2007; Nelson et al., 2007). The time in which children are exposed to maternal depression also plays a role in development of adolescent psychiatric disorders and/or behavioral disorders. Younger adolescents exposed to maternal depressive symptoms show elevated rates of affective disorder by their early teen years (Halligan et al., 2007).

Intellectually, mothers with higher scores on standardized IQ tests, as well as mothers with higher educational attainment, tend to have children with higher developmental levels (Crockett, Eggebeen, & Hawkins, 1993).

Studies also indicate that children from chronically poor families exhibit greater behavioral difficulties and problems than those who are not from such families (Carlson & Corcoran, 2001, Ackerman et al., 2004). Persistent poverty is a likely predictor for externalization of problematic behaviors (Ackerman et al., 2004); however, it is important to note that lack of financial resources alone is not at all related to other aspects of

family instability (Ackerman et al., 1999). Although involved in the construct of family stability, low socioeconomic status (SES) cannot stand alone as a single indicator for the predictability or stability within a familial unit (Milan & Pinderhughes, 2006).

There are several explanations to why low SES does relate in some way to behavioral outcomes in children. Gyamfi (2004) points out that caring for a child with a behavioral disorder adds stress to family interactions; this could compound the effect of behavioral outcomes. Additionally, families with a higher SES could possibly have more or better resources to obtain medication/treatment for the disorders, minimizing the behavioral consequences. On the other hand, families with lower SES may not have the ability or knowledge (due to lack of access to resources) to obtain help for the identified child(ren). Finally, although poverty has been linked to negative behavioral outcomes, it has been shown to be less of a predictor than frequent changes in family structure (Herrenkohl, Herrenkohl, & Egolf, 2003).

The number of relationship changes by a primary caregiver is also an indicator of behavioral maladjustment. One change in partner predicts only minimal amounts of behavioral outcomes; however, multiple partner changes by a primary caregiver predicts depression and aggressive behaviors in young children (Osborne & McLanahan, 2007).

Along those same lines, a significant focus is placed on families without a continuous father figure and serious behavioral and emotional issues in children in those families. A commonly accepted goal for children is to live in a stable household. Historically, this is considered to be a household consisting of a traditional nuclear family with both a mother and father figure (Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998). Studies indicate that a child in a mother-only family, or in a family that does not have one father figure throughout the key developmental years of that child, is more likely to suffer from behavioral difficulties (Carlson, 2006; Carlson & Corcoran, 2001; Teachman, Day, Paasch, Carver, & Call, 1998). Furthermore, the lack of a continuous “traditional” family (one consisting of two parenting figures) or multiple disruptions within a family structure may also be an indicator of antisocial, aggressive, drug-related, and other problematic behavioral outcomes (Ackerman et al., 2002; Carlson & Corcoran, 2001; Herrenkohl et al., 2003; Osborne & McLanahan, 2007; Teachman et al., 1998, Thornberry, Smith, Rivera, Huizinga, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1999). The differences between child behavioral outcomes measured across time between one and two parent families is very stable (Teachman et al., 1998). Father involvement within a family significantly reduces almost all statistically significant family

structure effects on negative adolescent behavioral outcomes (Carlson, 2006).

Relational (dynamic) variables.

It is impossible to have a discussion of family stability and functioning without giving proper attention to the relational (or dynamic) aspect of family life. Logically, a researcher cannot simply look at concrete information and state that family structure or makeup alone impact behavioral outcomes. Olson (2000) argues that the quality of relationships and the interaction of family members is what truly impacts child development.

Perhaps one of the most common issues faced by children in today's society when considering relationship within a family is that of parental separation. Divorce or separation is determined to have an almost immediate effect on behavioral outcomes for children. If divorce occurs anytime other than immediately after birth, there is also a detrimental impact on the child(ren) in that children removed from a major primary caregiver are found to suffer immediately from attachment-related issues (Fanshel, Finch, & Gundy, 1990; Sroufe & Rutter, 1984). Research continues to indicate that the earlier these issues begin to take form, the more detrimental they can be for later childhood outcomes.

Divorce or separation alone cannot be completely to blame for these outcomes. This could be likely due to the assumption that most families facing divorce or separation are already in some amount of relational distress prior to the parents' breakup (Ram & Hou, 2003). Marital satisfaction has long been tied to emotional and behavioral development in youths (Emery & O'Leary, 1982; Long & Forehand, 1987; Webster-Stratton, 1988). Children who are in a family in which there is a high amount of conflict between partners are much more likely to experience feelings of unease and uncertainty, leading to unpredictability within the family's daily living. Marital distress is easily transferred onto children, resulting in development of maladaptive feelings or behaviors, depression, or other forms of behavioral difficulty. Conflict between parental figures that cannot be resolved tends to be projected upon children; this places stress on the child, increasing the likelihood of anxiety, stress, and depressive symptomology with that child, possibly leading to externalizing behaviors (Wang & Crane, 2001). Furthermore, the quality of relationship between husband and wife has been tied to the development of task-behaviors of younger children (Goldberg & Easterbrooks, 1984). Children developing in a home with a lower quality

of relationship between parents are more likely to experience attention- or task-related delays or difficulties.

Another relational aspect of family stability that has been examined by some is the idea that the time (actual clock hours) spent with families can impact development. This specific concept was not included in this review due to Olson's (2000) hypothesis that clock hours alone do not account for family development; instead, what is important are the bonds and cohesion formed as a result of what is done within the time families spend together. Family cohesion is an extremely important concept to include in any discussion of family stability. Any or all of the other indicators discussed in this review could impact perceptions of family cohesion and feelings of closeness.

Family cohesion can be explained as the closeness a family feels to one another or the bond and trust that is formed between parent and child(ren) on an emotional level. Family cohesion provides a strong influence on possible adolescent delinquent behavior (Cashwell & Vacc, 1996). Youths with higher levels of family cohesion have been found to experience fewer internalizing behavioral problems as well as attention-related problems as those who could be classified as more disengaged from their parental figures or primary caregivers (Lucia & Breslau, 2006). Classic studies, such as those done by Cooper et al. (1983), even found that perceptions of family cohesions lead to appropriate development of self-esteem in children. On the other end of that spectrum, children who are disengaged from their families or those who do not feel bonds of trust and closeness with a caregiver figure had a much higher probability or risk of developing negative or socially unacceptable behaviors.

Olson (2000) warns against both extremes of engagement or cohesion. He states that families who become too enmeshed are also in danger of developing inappropriate boundaries. The development of inappropriate boundaries or the complete lack of boundaries within a family is easily transferable into other aspects of a child's life, such as relationships with peers or future relationships in that child's life as he or she matures.

It is also important to examine how family cohesion is achieved. Although there is not a great deal of consistency among the literature about this concept, there is discussion about how families spend their time when they are together. This concept is largely identified as family routines or rituals. Family rituals can be defined as habits or behaviors families engage in together. These rituals or routines can be daily routines such as meals together, or they can be something classified as a tradition, such as celebrations or holidays. Research points to the idea

that engagement in and development of constant, predictable routines and rituals within a family lead to better social development and overall happiness (Eaker & Walters, 2002). Families who take part in family activities, or "quality time," together at an early onset in the child's life create a much more stable and much safer environment for the child to develop in. Participation in regular family rituals leads to development of identity and healthy behaviors (Schuck & Bucy, 1997). These behaviors can be something as simple as using appropriate social and conversation skills to development of appropriate boundaries. Families who engage in these regular behaviors and routines tend to have higher levels of functioning (both within the family as well as within other systems) and lower levels of problematic behaviors (Kiser et al., 2005). Family rituals assist in developing a sense of belonging and identity for family members (Viere, 2001). This sense of belonging to a family unit is hypothesized to be a strong predictor of development of appropriate relational qualities later in life.

When examining the results of the above review of literature, it is important to keep in mind that children/families from different cultures and backgrounds function differently in their day-to-day interactions. In his Circumplex Model of family interactions, Olson (2000) hypothesizes that families who are well balanced in these relational areas (communication and cohesion), no matter what their culture or ethnicity, will be the most successful. Olson theorizes that families who function within healthy levels of all of these relational components but are still flexible enough to function when these qualities are not always present will be the most successful and develop in the healthiest manners.

On the other hand, the higher the levels of instability are within a family, the higher the levels of maladjustment that can be expected (Milan & Pinderhughes, 2006). To compound these results, the amount of instability that occurs within one year, particularly in regards to the concrete indicators (e.g., the number of relocations, the number of times the maternal figure has been hospitalized, or the number of partners the primary caregiver has allowed into the family environment), specifically impacts the level of behavioral maladjustment exhibited by children.

Conclusion of Review

When examining the results of the review above, several conclusions may be drawn about the concept of stable families. First, taking into account all of the findings, it is fairly evident that the children who have been identified as the most successful throughout this body of research are from families in which there is a high amount of predictability and stability

present simply from a physical and concrete standpoint. These families optimally tend to be families in which children do not have uncertainty about who their primary caregiver(s) may be (Ackerman et al., 1999; Cavanagh & Huston, 2006; Nelson et al., 2007; Osborne & McLanahan, 2007; Ram & Hou, 2003;), children that have a predictability about where they will live (Ackerman et al., 1999; Adam & Chase-Lansdale, 2002; Hoglund & Leadbeater, 2004; Humke & Schaefer, 1995, Milan & Pinderhughes, 2006), children with a maternal figure who is functioning at a healthy, stable level (Carlson & Corcoran, 2001; Nelson et al., 2007), and children who have interaction with a continuous father figure (Ackerman et al., 2002; Carlson, 2006; Carlson & Corcoran, 2001; Halligan et al., 2007; Herrenkohl et al., 2003; Osborne & McLanahan, 2007; Teachman et al., 1998, Thornberry et al., 1999).

These variables alone do not make sense as indicators of stability and cannot be considered to impact behavioral outcomes just by themselves. For example, the fact that a child does not have a consistent father figure alone does not impact his or her achievement. The emotional result of these factors must be considered when examining what a stable family is. This is why this review, unlike others, has taken into account some of the most frequently researched aspects of the relational variables surrounding family functioning. To continue the definition (as deduced from the findings of this review) of what a true stable family is, the definition should include children from a home in which there is a high level of marital/relationship satisfaction between partners (Emery & O'Leary, 1982; Goldburg & Easterbrooks, 1984; Long & Forehand, 1987; Wang & Crane, 2001; Webster-Stratton, 1988), in which there are children with high levels of cohesion and closeness with their caregiver(s) (Cashwell & Vacc, 1996; Cooper et al., 1983; Lucia & Breslau, 2006), and in which children take part in regular, predictable routines or rituals within their family unit (Eaker & Walters, 2002; Kiser et al., 2005; Schuck & Bucy, 1997; Viere, 2001).

It is extremely unlikely to have a family that fits into the criteria described above. This review has attempted to bring together the broad literature base surrounding the issues impacting behavioral development of children. Whatever the exact and precise operationalization of family stability throughout this body of research, whether it be measured structurally or relationally, there is fair agreement that on some level a combination of many of the aforementioned constructs do have a significant impact on childhood behavioral outcomes (Ackerman et al., 2004 Ackerman et al., 1999; Ivanova & Israel, 2006).

Critical Review

This body of literature, while very broad and diverse, contains several strengths that lend credibility to researchers and practitioners, as well as some limitations that call for caution to be used when relying on the results. Although the studies examine different aspects of family stability and include different definitions of family stability as well as behavioral outcomes, there are some common, cumulative strengths and limitations.

Identified Strengths and Limitations

One of the greatest strengths, especially when reviewing the more recent literature, is the fact that many of the authors have opted to conduct longitudinal studies when examining the impact of family stability on behavioral outcomes (Ackerman et al., 2004; Ackerman et al., 2002; Ackerman et al., 1999; Adam & Chase-Lansdale, 2002; Carlson, 2006; Carlson & Corcoran, 2001; Evans, Gonnella, Marcynyszyn, Gentile, & Salpekar, 2005; Halligan et al., 2007; Lucia & Breslau, 2006; Ram & Hou, 2003; Teachman et al., 1998). Until recently, many researchers have opted to conduct only cross-sectional studies; this focus on cross-sectional study does not lend itself to the validity and reliability of longitudinal studies. Examining the impact of family stability on the same cohort of participants goes much further in determining actual effects and ramifications than a cross-sectional or non-longitudinal design.

In addition to using a longitudinal design, several studies utilized a very large, representative dataset: the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (Ackerman et al., 2002; Carlson, 2006; Carlson & Corcoran, 2001; Ram & Hou, 2003). The NLSY is a nationally recognized longitudinal dataset with a very large sample size; this allows researchers to utilize valid and reliable measures for variables such as behavioral outcomes. Among the measures used in these studies is the Achenbach Behavioral Rating Scale (Ackerman et al., 2004; Carlson, 2006; Carlson & Corcoran, 2001). The use of this known and respected dataset is another strength that several of these studies share.

As mentioned before, possibly the biggest limitation to the cumulative body of literature is the lack of a consistent and coherent agreement on the concept of family stability or instability. Many different studies refer to family instability; however, the definition of this phenomenon is seldom agreed upon by multiple authors. To complicate the matter, while some authors elect to define family stability as multiple factors occurring in the family environment, other researchers focus only on one specific factor that could impact later childhood behavioral outcomes without controlling or accounting for other factors that may

coincide or co-occur with these singular factors. While many of the factors examined in the body of research impact behavior in some fashion, the lack of a definition of family instability, chaos, adversity, or change makes it difficult to state with any certainty what family instability is, much less whether it does or does not have a significant relationship either way with later childhood success or failure. Due to this lack of a concise, determinable definition, the remainder of this critical review will look at the different definitions of family instability given by the body of literature and examine the strengths and limitations of the studies based on these different definitions.

In the literature, one of the most consistent definitions of family instability is the idea that stable families are families in which there is not a lot of change. In addition, these families are typically families where there is predictability and consistency. This, in turn, would define family instability as persistent change and fluctuation of the familial environment (Ackerman et al., 2004; Ackerman et al., 2002; Ackerman et al., 1999; Adam & Chase-Lansdale, 2002; Carlson & Corcoran, 2001; Evans et al., 2005; Forman & Davies, 2003; Hoglund & Leadbeater, 2004; Ivanova & Israel, 2006; Nelson et al., 2007; Shanahan, Sulloway, & Hofer, 2000).

When reviewing these studies, the main strength is the fact that these authors did not limit family stability to simply one factor but instead considered a broader definition of change and fluctuation in family occurrences. These studies took into account that much of the literature supports the concept that familial inconsistency impacts later childhood behavior, even if the literature does not always agree upon what that change is. The agreement that frequent changes can impact later behavioral success is a strength over the studies that examine only one aspect of familial change without accounting for other changes that could occur prior to or in conjunction with a singular change.

That said, there is still a large inconsistency within this cohort of studies of what changes should be considered when examining family stability. Many of these researchers included family moving and mobility as a major contributing factor to family stability (Ackerman et al., 1999; Forman & Davies, 2003; Hoglund & Leadbeater, 2004; Shanahan et al., 2000). However, the other factors included in these studies were not agreed upon; obviously, this could change the legitimacy of the argument that mobility has a singular impact on behavioral outcomes. For instance, two studies (Ackerman et al., 1999; Forman & Davies, 2003 included illnesses occurring in family members as a contributing factor in their studies, while Hoglund and Leadbeater (2004) as well as Shanahan et al. (2000) looked at mobility in conjunction with SES. All studies stated that

mobility had an impact on behavioral outcomes; however, the families included in each of these cohorts could have completely different dynamics. Families suffering from chronic or serious illness are likely facing completely different challenges and dynamics than families who are moving due to financial constraints. While mobility may in fact play a significant role in later childhood success, the other events that co-occur within these families will also play a role; this is not accounted for across these studies.

Another strength of the research that accounts for multiple changes is that a number of these studies rely on one another for a previous knowledge base. These studies do much to further the knowledge base already existing around the concept of family stability. While the earlier studies in this area focus specifically on explicit changes in the familial environment, later studies include a broader range of changes and chaos. One of the most encompassing studies that built upon previous knowledge was conducted by Forman and Davies (2003). In this study, the authors took what were previously identified as contributing factors and expanded them to include other common changes in the familial environment, such as the marital relationship between parents, other types of familial transitions, and caregiver status. These were all examined in relation to family cohesion and parenting quality, factors that had not previously been examined in this type of study.

One of the biggest criticisms of these articles is that they consider only physical factors of instability and pay little to no attention to the emotional or relational impact these issues have on children; this impact is arguably the biggest factor in healthy emotional and social development.

Evans et al. (2005) looked at this concept of change in a different light. Instead of examining changes in family makeup, mobility, and the like, these authors examined what “went on” in the home outside of the physical changes. Noise, foot traffic, crowding, and general confusion were all included as factors that contribute to socioemotional development and outcomes. This study opened the door to a much different and broader interpretation of family stability and chaos.

Given those strengths, the studies that include multiple aspects of family stability have some limitations; thus, caution should be taken when examining the actual research conducted. Many of the studies cannot be considered generalizable due to the sampling methods and the participants involved in the studies. Several of these studies elected to only include a certain demographic or group in their samples due to several factors such as convenience and/or response rate. Much of the research done included mostly or solely families from a specific SES,

namely those in poverty (Ackerman et al., 2004; Ackerman et al., 2002; Ackerman, et al., 1999; Adam & Chase-Lansdale, 2002; Carlson & Corcoran, 2001; Evans et al., 2005). Other studies included only specific populations based on other reasons, such as examining only participants who have received mental health services due to their behaviors (Ivanova & Israel, 2006), selecting only a certain sex (Adam & Chase-Lansdale, 2002, Carlson & Corcoran, 2001), or examining only a very specific age group of participants (Hoglund & Leadbeater, 2004).

Attrition was a noted concern in several of these articles (Ackerman et al., 2004; Evans et al., 2005). Authors noted that attrition was more than likely an issue due to the population being studied; this could be a concern for future studies in this area. Chaotic families tend to be much more mobile and inclined to relocate, possibly impacting the results of the studies.

The final limitation noted on the articles that account for multiple changes in their definition(s) of family stability is the lack of discussion of the possibility of a relationship between variables. When including many different aspects of family change and stability, there is a definite possibility that the variables could have a correlation, or even a reverse causal relationship, with one another. When including the variable of paternal presence in an unstable family, Ackerman et al. (2002) noted that there is a distinct possibility that the father leaving the family was not a contributing factor to the behavior outcomes but rather a result of the maladaptive behavior. In other words, there is a possibility that the father is no longer present in the family because he left due to the negative behaviors of the child(ren). This type of concern is a possibility for this entire body of literature. One aspect of change could easily lead to or be the cause of another major change. A father leaving the family could be a cause for the family being forced to relocate. Low SES could lead to significant illness due to lack of access to healthcare. Great caution should be exercised when interpreting the results due to possibilities such as these.

To combat these limitations, some authors have opted only to study certain aspects of family stability. The limitation to choosing this route was discussed earlier; however, there are definite advantages to this type of study as well. By examining only certain changes within a family, it is possible to determine what specific shifts in family dynamics cause behavioral changes in children. Examining singular factors could lead to a more specific definition of family stability in the future.

One of the most discussed changes in family dynamics is the lack of a consistent parental figure or a change in family structure (Carlson,

2006; Cavanagh & Huston, 2006; Crockett et al., 1993; Osborne & McLanahan, 2007; Ram & Hou, 2003; Teachman et al., 1998). These studies elected to examine the relationship between family structure and behavioral outcomes. One of the biggest limitations to this research was previously discussed: the possibility of negative behaviors causing changes in family structure instead of the other way around (Carlson, 2006). Another limitation to these studies is the lack of generalizability due to the samples included in the cohorts. Several of the articles did not include a nationally or ethnically representative sample (Cavanagh & Huston, 2006; Crockett et al., 1993; Ram & Hou, 2003). Additional issues with sample size included the inability to distinguish between mothers who have been married, who have cohabitated, or who have never married (Teachman et al., 1998). Furthermore, issues could be raised over design methods in some of the studies, such as the study including in their sample only children who have faced adversity or changes in the first three years of their lives, ignoring changes that occur in later childhood (Osborne & McLanahan, 2007). On the other end of that spectrum, Teachman et al. (1998) included information on children only after their entrance into the school system, ignoring events occurring early in childhood.

As mentioned earlier, an aspect of family stability that has been examined at length is that of poverty and SES. Gyamfi (2004) elected to study only this aspect of family stability. In this study, the criterion chosen to evaluate childhood behavioral outcomes was the diagnosis of an emotional disturbance (ED). For the purpose of this study, examining only children diagnosed as ED allowed for a very concrete and measurable determining factor for which children were considered to have maladaptive or unacceptable behavioral outcomes. An obvious limitation to Gyamfi's study is the fact that family stability is based on more than SES; in other words, poverty alone does not indicate family instability. Questions could be raised as to whether the actual poverty leads to the diagnoses of emotional disturbance or if these children are being impacted by some other aspect of family chaos or family instability; low SES may simply be a symptom of other frequent changes or chaos occurring within the family.

Maternal well-being or maternal mental health is another aspect of family stability that some have elected to examine, specifically as it relates to the behavioral outcomes of children (Diaz-Caneja & Johnson, 2004; Halligan et al., 2007). A strength of Halligan et al. (2007) was its 13-year longitudinal design, which allowed for a very deep analysis of the data, lending to the credibility of the results. This study was limited, however,

by the modest sample size (61 participants), making the findings only preliminary.

The study by Diaz-Coneja and Johnson (2004) is different than other studies in this area in that it is solely qualitative. The information gathered throughout the study was rich and insightful. Due to the nature of qualitative research, however, several limitations are noted. The sample size of 25 is very small; this does not allow for generalization to larger populations. Furthermore, the sample of participants was taken only from one community agency, thus also decreasing the randomness of the sample.

Wang and Crane (2001) is a unique study in this body of literature; it focuses not just on the marital structure or lack of a caregiver but also on the actual marital relationship between non-separated parents. These authors focus on the impact of marital satisfaction and issues of family triangulation as predicting factors of childhood behavioral outcomes. Limitations to this study include the selection of mostly white, middle-class families. Additionally, the only behavioral indicator used in this study was the presence of childhood depression as indicated by an administered scale.

Of the factors included that discussed specifically the relational/dynamic aspects of stability, there were several strengths and limitations as well. Family cohesion is identified as a major contributing factor to future adolescent or adulthood success. The authors who chose to examine this concept took into account many of the concrete factors listed above (Cashwell & Vacc, 1996; Lucia & Breslau, 2006). Not all factors were included, however; indeed, Lucia and Breslau acknowledge that failure to include these factors could have skewed their results.

Overall, the strengths of this body of literature, including the literature that includes multiple changes in the definition of family stability, the articles that focus only on one aspect of this phenomenon, as well as the articles that examine the relational aspects of family stability include agreement on the idea that significant changes early in life, whether it be within the structure of the family, mobility, cohesion, and the like can have a great impact on later childhood behavioral outcomes. However, the research does not point to any one change that can be attributed with the highest amount of negative behavior outcomes. Furthermore, the biggest drawback to this lack of specificity is that no one can say with any amount of certainty what a stable family truly is. Articles that include relational/ dynamic components don't always include significant components of family structure, and vice versa. This leads to several implications that are evident for future research, practice, and policy.

Implications

Research

The body of research in the field of family stability and childhood behavior, as evidenced by this review, is very broad in nature. That said, the literature is anything but all-encompassing and complete. The lack of knowledge in this field calls for much research still to be completed. There are still great gaps in knowledge that need to be answered by future studies and researchers in this field.

One of the glaring questions that remains is: "What is family instability?" This review has provided a glimpse into what some consider stable, non-chaotic families, but there is hardly a consensus as to what a stable family truly looks like. It is clear that changes that occur frequently in life can have an impact on childhood behavior; however, there is no consensus on what changes really provide the greatest threat to behavioral outcomes. Research needs to be conducted on whether it is specific changes that cause the most significant behavioral changes in children or if it is the nature of change itself. Comparative studies examining the types of changes faced by similar families could take steps to identify whether change itself is a determining factor in behavioral outcomes. Based on the results of this review, it should be considered that changes happening at a high frequency in childhood could have a negative behavioral impact on children, even if the changes that occur are not always the same. Studies conducted in this area could begin to answer this question.

One of the most pressing issues for researchers in this area, according to this review, could be the development of a standardized instrument to measure family stability. The development of such an instrument could possibly help to develop a definition that could be accepted by researchers. Development of a valid and reliable scale would greatly help centralize research and aid in the understanding of this phenomenon in greater detail. While there are some existing tools and measures currently utilized by some to measure family dynamics, an instrument that measured the nature of changes in a family as they relate to the family dynamic as a whole and that is normed on appropriate populations could prove to be an invaluable tool in future family research. Taking into account everything that this review has revealed about what impacts children in families behaviorally, a measure that examines physical risk factors as well as emotional and relational risk factors is needed to determine which children are truly at risk for maladaptive

behaviors based on the level of stability or instability within their family units. As discussed in the practice section of these implications, this tool could create a great deal of change in the way helping professionals deal with families on a proactive basis.

Finally, the relationships between the different aspects of family stability need to be examined. As discussed in this review, it is highly probable that the variables surrounding family stability not only are predictors of behavioral outcomes but could very well have a correlation or causal relationship with one another. Studies examining which aspects of family stability addressed in this review impact and/or predict one another are needed. Examining whether families who have some aspects of family instability are likely to have others (e.g., likeliness of families who have inconsistent structure within the caregiver to be more mobile) would help combat the limitations and caution needed when interpreting the results in the current body of literature. Specifically, future research needs to address which physical or structural components in a family unit lead to relational or emotional issues (e.g., maternal mental health possibly leading to lower levels of family cohesion).

Practice

The practice implications brought about by reviewing the current body of literature are numerous. The problems faced by unstable families are issues that those working with families deal with on a daily basis. Issues such as poverty, lack of resources, mobility, and maternal mental health are issues that directly impact the field of social work. By knowing how these issues specifically impact children, particularly in regards to behavior, professionals can know exactly what steps need to be taken to help families set up stable, non-chaotic environments. Based on this review, helping professionals should help families stay in one residence for an extended period of time and should help clients develop stable, professional functioning.

These implications are possibly even greater for the field of child protection, adoption, and foster care. Family preservation workers need to understand the ramifications of frequent moves on children behaviorally and emotionally. Children removed from an abusive environment are more than likely the product of an unstable home as it is (Herrenkohl et al., 2003); therefore, adding even more instability with frequent moves from one caregiver to another could greatly compound the negative effects on children.

On a relational level, clinical professionals need to fully understand the results of this review. Clinicians working with families need to

understand the importance of creating a cohesive, trusting bond between family members. Clinicians also need to understand which therapeutic techniques are best to utilize when attempting to form these bonds between caregivers and children.

As stated previously, the development of a standardized measure to identify unstable families would be extremely useful and beneficial in practice. Practitioners in the field as well as clinicians could use such a tool to identify which children were at risk for behavioral difficulties based on levels of instability and tailor their interventions and techniques based on providing stability for families. This would strengthen the field specifically from an evidence-based perspective.

Professionals working with families or children should have a full grasp of family instability and how it impacts children's behavioral development. A true understanding of why it is important for children to be raised in a stable, non-chaotic environment would greatly benefit the clients these workers serve on a regular basis.

Policy

The implications for policy that this review yields are possibly much more complex than research or practice. Developing family policy is always a complicated process that will not impact all people and families the same. Likewise, if the results of this review are accepted as factual, there are some definite implications on the policy front that could impact families in a positive way.

One of the ways that formation of public policy could help families create a stable environment is the provision of in-home services for at-risk families. Children who are at-risk are currently evaluated on the campus level through public school systems. At-risk children include children who have a high mobility rate or are homeless. Currently, the only children who are mandated to receive in-home or parent training services at no cost through the school system are children diagnosed with autism. If similar funding could be used to provide in-home support for children from unstable homes, these families could receive much-needed education and help in developing a stable, non-chaotic home environment for their children. Providing a policy that would allow for this support could have a positive impact on millions of families and children throughout the nation.

A broader economic policy could also assist families in development of a stable home environment. Federal or state policies that let families in danger of having to move due to financial constraints or even due to change in parental makeup (e.g., death of caregiver) keep their primary residence would greatly cut down on the number of

chronically mobile families. Stricter child-support laws requiring parents to help families stay in one primary residence could also do much for creating stable family environments.

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