PATHWAYS TO PARENTHOOD: AN ASSESSMENT OF FAMILY STRUCTURAL CONTEXT OVER THE TRANSITION TO PARENTHOOD

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by

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Abstract

by

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Most of the literature on the transition to parenthood focuses on changes in marital quality of first-time biological parents, with the structural context of the family prior to the transition largely left out of the analysis.

This research compares the trajectories of two marital quality variables between different family structural contexts: Families who have no children, families who have children, and stepfamilies. This research also compares the family experience of adding a child into these three main structures to determine whether family experience, initial family structure, or an interaction between the two has a greater impact on marital quality variables.

Multivariate analysis of variance (MANCOVA) results indicate that while family experience, in the form of the transition to parenthood, appears to impact later values of marital quality variables, initial family structure has an effect on initial starting values which also impact later marital functioning. Thus, the importance of family structure cannot be ignored when assessing relationship quality across the family experience of adding a child.
For Zachary, Jonathan, and Kelsey.
You are the sunshine, starshine,
and rainbows of my life.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Donna and Curtis have been married for two years and are expecting their first child. Mike and Janice have been married for twelve years, have two children, ages 8 and 6, and are expecting their third child. Sarah and Melanie have been partners for eight years; seven months ago Melanie underwent artificial insemination and the couple is now expecting their first child. Karen and Steve married three years ago; Karen has a daughter, age 9, that she brought to the marriage, and they are expecting a new child in the next month. The new child will be Karen’s second and Steve’s first biological child. What will happen to the relationship between the parents when these new babies arrive? How does the arrival of a child impact or change the quality of a marriage?

This question has been addressed in a multitude of sociological studies with most studies finding that there is a negative change in marital quality across the transition to parenthood. However, previous research on the transition to parenthood has narrowly assessed the “transition to parenthood” as the time surrounding the arrival of a first, biological child. Several areas that are often overlooked are how differences in family structural context impact the transition to parenthood and subsequent marital quality, how marital quality changes for childless couples compared to those with children, and, in general, how marital quality for couples from different family structures vary from one
another over time. This research attempts to separate out the effects of family structural context and the transition to parenthood, assessing how each factor plays a role in changing the quality of the relationship in a marriage.

The transition to parenthood is a type of family experience that every parent goes through. How well the parents, either individually or as a couple, adjust to the addition of a child is an important consideration in family studies. Poor adjustment may affect family functioning, creating stress between and among family members and within individuals. Conversely, high levels of adjustment may help the family function better overall and help them to better deal with other stressful occurrences. Adjustment to parenting therefore relates to stress levels within the marriage which in turn effect individual assessments of marital quality and the quality of couple interactions.

1.1 *Family Structure and Pathways to Parenthood*

Most research on the transition to parenthood focuses on one family structure: Families having their first biological child. However, family structures are more diverse today than ever before, and the structural context in which a child is added to a family is an important consideration that has been largely left out of transition to parenthood research.

The initial family form or structural context may influence how well a couple – or family – deals with the stress of the transition to parenthood. The lack of inclusion of structural context in prior research is based primarily on the belief that once a person or couple makes the transition to parenthood, they are there and forever a parent and cannot make that transition again. While it is true that, once having parented, a parent can never
really become a “non-parent,” it is possible that the path through the transition to parenthood varies, dependent upon the structural context of the family.

Conceptualizing the transition to parenthood as a sort of “umbrella,” under which there are multiple pathways to parenting recognizes that there are multiple ways in which a parents and families can “transition to parenthood,” as well as the fact that there are conceptual differences in family forms. A couple having their first biological child is just one conceptual family form, and viewing the transition to parenthood as only occurring for these first-time biological parents fails to acknowledge the multiple ways in which one can become a parent, the multitude of family structures that exist, and the fact that parenting two children is not the same as parenting one child. Thus, conceptualizing “transitions” to parenthood as a set of multiple pathways to parenthood allows for a fuller assessment of how the transition to parenthood affects marital relationships and how those effects differ between family structures. This research focuses on three initial family structural contexts – parents having their first biological child, parents having a second or subsequent child, and stepfamilies adding a first biological child to their family – to determine if, indeed, this conceptualization of multiple pathways is correct.

1.2 Stepfamilies

Members of stepfamilies differ significantly from members of more “traditional” families in that they bring different life experiences to the marriage and, if children are brought to the marriage, must establish different family relationships than couples in first time marriages. Stepfamilies are becoming an increasingly common family form. Census Bureau data show that 3.3 million children lived with a stepparent householder in
2000; however, as this number does not reflect the number of children living with a non-householder stepparent, the number of stepchildren in the United States is severely underestimated (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2004). Additionally, as increasing numbers of divorced people are cohabitating as a permanent alternative to marriage, this number further underestimates the number of children living in stepfamily-type households (Bumpass, Sweet, and Cherlin 1991; Bumpass, Sweet, and Castro Martin 1990).

Within these remarriages and remarriage-like relationships, new children are often born, and about half of women in remarriages give birth to at least one child (Wineberg 1990). Although exact numbers are hard to pin down, for many couples the new child may be one partner’s first biological child and the other partner’s second or subsequent child. In other words, there are many individuals for whom “actual parenthood” comes after a period of stepparenting or stepparent-like parenting. In other words, one member of the couple is transitioning to parenthood for the first time while the other is a second- or subsequent-time parent. The role of “parent” for a person who has spent time stepparenting is qualitatively different than the role of “parent” for someone who has never stepparented or parented before. In this sense, stepfamilies adding a child are a “hybrid” of first-time and second-time parents.

Although the transition to stepparenting has been assessed in some research (Ceballo, Lansford, Abbey, and Stewart 2004), no research has explicitly addressed how the birth of a biological child affects stepfamilies or how their marital quality experiences compare with those in other family structures. Stepfamilies structural contexts give them more interdependent familial relationships than first-time parents, and the roles between
the parents and children are differentially constructed than those in families with biological children. Both of these factors may impact how well a stepfamily adjusts to the addition of a child that is the second biological child for one parent, but a first biological child for the other.

1.3 Second- and Subsequent-time Parents

Since most research examining the transition to parenthood focuses on the birth of a first biological child, families having a second or subsequent child are often left out of the analysis. Despite the fact that families are having fewer children, the average number of children per family in the United States remains about 1.86 (U.S. Department of Census, 2004). This leaves many parents for whom the transition to parenthood is not a novel event; they may be transitioning through the birth of their second, third, fourth, or subsequent child. There are few studies that have explicitly assessed the transition to parenthood for second- or subsequent-time parents (Belsky, Spanier, and Rovine 1983). These families, when contrasted with the typical family portrayed in marital quality and transition to parenthood literature, can be considered another family structure whose developmental stage sets them apart from first-time parents. Their structural context, particularly characterized by an increase in the numbers and types of relationships within the family, may impact how well the parents adapt to the addition of a child.

1.4 Direct Comparisons Between Family Structures

One other deficiency in the body of research on both marital quality and the transition to parenthood is the failure to conduct direct comparisons between families
who do have children and families who do not. Some studies seem to indicate that the marital quality of marriages without children appear to follow similar patterns to the patterns found in marriages with children (Belsky, Spanier, and Rovine 1983; Bradbury, Fincham, and Beach 2000; McHale and Huston 1985; White and Booth 1985); however, direct comparisons between childless families and other families structures have not been comprehensively studied.

This research addresses the gaps in the literature by comparing three initial family structural contexts – parents having their first child, parents having a second or subsequent child, and stepfamilies adding a biological child – to assess if structural context impacts parents’ marital quality before the transition to parenthood, and how these different structural contexts interact with the experience of adding a child to the family to effect later marital quality levels.
CHAPTER 2
MARITAL QUALITY AND PATHWAYS TO PARENTHOOD

2.1 Marital Quality Conceptualization

Marital quality has long been a topic of interest to family sociologists. The problem with marital quality as a researchable variable is that it is one that is value laden: What, exactly, indicates a “high” quality marriage? Does a failure of a particular couple to divorce indicate that their marriage is one of “high” quality? Does the fact that they have divorced indicate “low” quality? Research over the past decades has indicated that conceptualizing marital quality is one of the largest challenges faced by social scientists, and a topic on which many social scientists differ.

Early research tended to focus on the level of happiness, success, and adjustment within a marriage and also the marriage’s stability. The term “stability” has had a fairly consistent definition on the dyadic level: whether the relationship is intact or nonintact (Lewis 1979), although stability can also be defined on an individual level as a comparison between an individual’s marital alternatives and marital outcomes (Lenthall 1977). The more problematic conceptualization of “marital quality” arises when
researchers are confronted with assessing the quality of the relationship within the marital dyad.

“Marital happiness,” “satisfaction,” and “adjustment” are terms often used to assess the quality of a marriage in family research. These terms, however, proved problematic in that they are value-laden and difficult to define, making direct comparisons between marriages and generalizations to other marriages difficult (Hicks and Platt 1970; Lively 1969). For example, it is difficult to determine the source of one’s “happiness” and whether it results from the marriage itself or from other, non-marital factors. Another issue is whether an individual’s assessment of “happiness” reflects their feeling at that moment in time or their overall marital interaction over a period of time (Lively 1969). It is also unclear as to whether these subjective terms refer to the couple’s joint assessment of their marriage or the individual’s assessment of the marriage. Some researchers characterize the conceptualization of marital quality as falling into one of two schools of thought – the “individual feelings” school and the “marital adjustment” school (Glenn 1990). The individual feelings approach views marital quality as a reflection of how a person feels about his or her marriage, while the adjustment approach assesses marital quality as a characteristic of the relationship between the spouses.

Over time, the conceptualization of marital quality has become increasingly complex. In recent research, different parameters of marital quality have been examined, conceptualizing “marital quality” as a composite of multiple measures. Included in the assessment of marital quality have been variables that relate to marital satisfaction or dissatisfaction, happiness in marriage, quality of marital interactions, marital functioning, feelings of love, and marital adjustment over time (Belsky, Spanier, and Rovine 1983;
Individual aspects of marital quality have also been used as outcome variables, such as individual satisfaction or disappointment with a marriage, conflict behaviors between spouses, marital happiness, and quantity of negative interactions (Cowan and Cowan 1995; Cox, Paley, Burchinal, and Payne 1999; Kluwer and Johnson 2007).

Because of conceptualization complexity, some researchers employ non-standard, global measures of marital quality (questions that inquire into an individual’s level of overall marital satisfaction) to determine the state or “quality” of a marital relationship (Bradbury, Fincham, and Beach 2000; Ceballo, Lansford, Abbey, and Stewart 2004; Knoester and Eggebeen 2006; Lansford, Ceballo, Abbey, and Stewart 2001). Due to the diversity in defining marital quality, and due to issues in the measurement of marital quality, which are detailed below, the conceptualization of marital quality currently resides primarily with the researcher. He or she must determine which aspect of marital quality to assess, why those aspects are important, and the relevance of those aspects to the theory behind their research.

2.2 **Marital Quality Measurement**

Whether researchers conceptualize marital quality as the sum or intersection of several concepts or as a few questions that determine a global measure of marital satisfaction, researchers must turn to the question of how to measure those variables they use. Because no consistent conceptualization of marital quality existed, early research in this area tended to rely upon operationalizations created by – and individual to – the researchers themselves. Marital quality was often equated with marital satisfaction, and a
determination of marital satisfaction was usually made based on respondent self-reports. Although the earliest marital quality scales included outsider’s reports of couples’ marital quality, such as those developed by Burgess and Cottrell, later scales have focused on the couple-member’s perceptions of dimensions of dyadic consensus, commitment, adjustment, conflict resolution, and happiness (DeOllos 2005; Sabatelli 1988). Of these later scales, the two most often used (at least historically) scales are the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test (Locke and Wallace 1959) and the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier 1976).

The Locke-Wallace scale consists of fifteen items that assess a spouse’s happiness with their spouse and marriage, level of companionship with their spouse, levels of agreement in the marriage, and conflict resolution (Locke and Wallace 1959). The Locke-Wallace test has been criticized for differential weighting of items and for conceptualizing marital adjustment as reflective of the ideals and standards of a middle-class marriage in the 1950’s rather than being able to reflect the ideas of marriages in more modern times (Sabatelli 1988).

A second, frequently used scale in assessing marital quality is the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) (Spanier 1976). The DAS uses thirty-two items to assess married couples by looking at differences between the spouses along with the domains of consensus, satisfaction, affectional expression, and cohesion. Although the DAS has been used in many studies (Belsky, Spanier, and Rovine 1983; Wallace and Gotlib 1990), it has also been criticized for being too undifferentiated to allow for a true multi-dimensional view of marriage and for confusing evaluations of a marriage with reports of specific behaviors, for using inappropriate weighting of items in summing scaled scores.
on various dimensions (Belsky, Lang, and Rovine 1985; Crohan 1996; Norton 1983; Sabatelli 1988).

While these composite scales have value in that they highlight the need for consistency in marital quality assessment measurement between researchers, one of the concerns voiced by critics of these scales are particularly relevant to this research, and relates to the question of whether adding within-scale items is appropriate. In constructing a total, composite score for marital quality in this way, marriages of very different quality can appear to be equal (Norton 1983). A related question is whether or not different dimensions of marital quality should intentionally be given different weights in a composite scale. For example, is the frequency of conflict a better or more accurate determinate of marital quality than overall marital satisfaction? If so, should it be given more weight in a composite scale? One recent study looked at this question of weighting aspects of marital quality in creating a summed or scaled score in the context of the transition to parenthood, finding that determinants of marital satisfaction differed between first-time parents and childless couples (Guttmann and Lazar 2004). Critiques of the various scales have led some social scientists back to researcher-specific operationalization of marital quality variables, with a potential result of atheoretical conceptualization and measurement (Sabatelli 1988).

Aside from the debate over whether or not – or which – marital quality assessment scales are appropriate, relevant, and conceptually accurate, the timing of marital quality measurement is also an issue that must be addressed. Initial marital quality research was cross-sectional in nature, focusing on measurements of marital quality at one point in time. While a “snapshot” of marital quality is of interest to
researchers, cross-sectional research fails to explore how marriages and marital quality change over time. The use of longitudinal research provides a fuller description of the marital process and is therefore a better research model choice when assessing marital quality (Hicks and Platt 1970; Karney and Bradbury 1995; Weishaus and Field 1988), although some critics have argued for the necessity of the use of more than two waves of data in order to gain a full picture of changes in marriages over time (Karney and Bradbury 1995; Rogosa, Brandt, and Zimowski 1982).

Marital quality can be a difficult concept to track using a longitudinal research model. The length of time of any given marriage can last may “outlive” the researcher, or at least the time a research can devote to a given research project (Spanier and Lewis 1980). Additionally, the costs of obtaining multiple waves of data for a given set of subjects can often far exceed a researcher’s budget. Due to these constraints, it is not uncommon for researchers to employ secondary survey data analysis methods to track marital quality over time. Problems with secondary data analysis arise in that survey questions are often not designed for the researcher’s specific purpose of assessing marital quality, which may therefore limit the ways in which the researcher conceptualizes and/or operationalizes their assessment of marital quality. This leads to the problem of balancing desired conceptualizations with available data and measures of marital quality.

2.3 Pathways to Parenthood

Some may consider that once a family has transitioned to parenthood there is no “second” transition with the addition of later-born children. This research disagrees with that premise and considers first that there are multiple pathways through which to
“transition to parenthood,” and second, that each of these pathways constitutes a type of transition that is unique and can therefore have a different effect on marital quality. If the transition to parenthood is considered a reorganization of the family system (LeMasters 1957), then a reorganization is required anytime a family adds a child, and the concept of “transition to parenthood” really encompasses a set of multiple types of transitions.

The addition of any additional members to a family constitutes a transition in that it has an effect of all other members and necessitates the creation of new family roles (Aldous 1996). The inverse is also true, wherein the removal of an individual from a family system causes the reorganization of family roles an relationships, such as would occur in divorce or with the death of a family member. Examples of different pathways to parenthood include, among others, the transition to first-time parenting, the transition to multiple parenting (i.e. with the birth of a second or subsequent child), the transition to stepparenting, the transition from stepparent to biological parenting, and the transition to parenting via adoption. Within these different pathways lie further sub-groups based on family structural context, such as transitions to single parenting and same-sex parents’ transitions to parenting.

Early research on the transition to parenthood focused on the amount of crisis first-time parents experienced subsequent to the birth of their child. For example, LeMasters’ 1957 study was one of the first to consider that the birth of a first child forced reorganization of the familial social system (LeMasters 1957). LeMasters characterized the addition of a child as a “crisis event,” and compared the transition to parenthood to the reorganization a family would face if one of the family members were removed, such as by death or marital dissolution.
In subsequent studies, the view that adding a child to a marriage constituted a “crisis” in the family was debated, with some supporting the “crisis” view (Dyer 1963; LeMasters 1957) and others positing that the addition of a child has both positive and negative effects upon a marriage (Hobbs 1968; Russell 1974). However one may view the addition of a child, it is accepted that the addition of a new child necessitates change in both family roles and the marital relationship (Aldous 1996; Belsky, Spanier, and Rovine 1983). These assumptions led to the assessment of marital quality, as opposed to just “crisis” or parental stress, as another means by which to assess how well parents had transitioned to parenthood. The leap is simple: if personal or interpersonal stress levels are high, it stands to reason that marital quality will decline and, indeed, stress has been implicated in lowering marital quality (Pittman and Lloyd 1988). Looking at crisis ratings simply tells the researcher how the parents perceive the stress, not how the stress affects the marital relationship. Marital quality is also a better indicator of the state of the family and can also be an indicator of family functioning as “spillover” from the marital relationship will effect others within the family (Cowan 1992). When marital quality is used instead of just a measure of crisis perceived relative to a child’s presence, the state of the relationship between the parents is addressed, which in turn will give a clearer picture of family functioning.

Longitudinal analyses have demonstrated that the addition of a child does indeed place a strain on the marital relationship, resulting in declines in marital quality and satisfaction, increases in frequency of conflict, increases in negative interactions, and lower levels of marital happiness (Belsky and Hsieh 1998; Belsky and Rovine 1990; Cowan and Cowan 1995; Crohan 1996; Lawrence, Nylen, and Cobb 2007; Perry-Jenkins,
Goldberg, Pierce, and Sayer 2007). Most researchers agree that although there is a
decrease in marital quality following the birth of a child exists, it soon levels off,
although whether or not later levels of marital quality reach earlier levels is still debatable
(Belsky, Lang, and Rovine 1985; Belsky and Rovine 1990; Cox, Paley, Burchinal, and
Payne 1999). Belsky and Rovine further conceptualized changes in marital quality
following the addition of a child by discerning four distinct patterns of change:
accelerating decline, linear decline, no change, and modest positive increase, finding that
prenatal marital quality scores assisted in the prediction of pattern of postnatal marital
change (Belsky and Rovine 1990). Other research has similarly found that postpartum
marital adjustment is best predicted by the quality of the prenatal marital relationship
(Curran, Hazen, Jacobvitz, and Sasaki 2006; Lawrence, Nylen, and Cobb 2007; Wallace
and Gotlib 1990).

Unfortunately, prior research has relatively ignored the birth of a second or
subsequent child as transition to parenthood literature has tended to focus on first-time,
biological parents, with few exceptions. Belsky and associates did assess second-born
children as part of a larger study, finding that while marital quality declines following the
birth of a first child, it declines even further following the birth of a second child (Belsky,
Spanier, and Rovine 1983). There may be several explanations for this phenomenon.
First, if the birth of a first and second children are close together, marital quality may not
have had enough time to “rebound” from the birth of the first child. Thus, at the birth of
the second child the parents’ marital quality is starting at a lower point than at the birth of
the first child. If this is true, the change in marital quality is what needs to be assessed,
not the absolute level. Another explanation is that having two children in the household creates stress at a multiplicative level, resulting in lower marital quality.

Along with failing to address the addition of a second or subsequent child to a family, alternative family structures have been relatively ignored in the transition to parenthood literature, again with a few exceptions, including studies of the transition to parenthood in same-sex families. Two recent studies examined these transitions (Goldberg and Perry-Jenkins 2007; Goldberg and Sayer 2006), finding that within-couple feelings of love decreased while conflict behaviors increased. While these studies are a positive addition to the body of literature on the transition to parenthood, it is still rare to find studies comparing the transition to parenthood across different family structures. The four studies discussed below are notable exceptions to this “traditional-family-structure-only” rule, and are particularly relevant to this research.

One recent study addressed the concept of family structural context for fathers over the transition to parenthood (Knoester and Eggebeen 2006). Using the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) Waves 1 and 2, Knoester’s study assessed structural contexts for fathers who lived with their biological children, fathers who lived with stepchildren only, fathers who had biological children living elsewhere, and fathers with no children. Findings indicate that the transition to parenthood has a different effect on fathers depending on whether the transition is one to resident fatherhood or nonresident fatherhood. Fathers of new children who reside in the same house as their child increase their time in paid work hours with first-time coresident children, but decrease their work hours upon the arrival of a new child if they are second- or subsequent-time fathers or stepfathers. New coresident children also appear to decrease fathers’ time in social
activities and increase their participation in service activities, while new nonresident children increase fathers’ time in social activities. In addition, fathers of new nonresident children appeared to increase their contacts with their own parents and siblings, while this increase in contact was not seen in new coresident fathers. While Knoester’s study did not look at marital quality or spousal relationships directly, the study does suggest that the structural context in which a parent finds him (or her) self is important to social interactions subsequent to the arrival of the child. Three other studies, also using the NSFH, further inform the perspective that family structural context matters.

The first of these studies compared gaining a child from three different perspectives – biologically, via adoption, and via marriage – focusing on the effect of adding a child to a family and on the reasons for adding a child (Ceballo, Lansford, Abbey, and Stewart 2004). Using a six-item, averaged scale of marital disagreements and a single measure of overall marital happiness, their findings indicate that changes in marital quality across the transition to parenthood differ by family structure. Those who added a child biologically experienced a decline in their overall marital happiness and an increase in their frequency of disagreements; those who gained a child via adoption also experienced an increase in the frequency of disagreements, but an increase in their marital happiness. Family structural context, then, plays an important role in determining marital quality subsequent to the addition of a child to the family. With regard to the research in this thesis, these findings lend support to the assertion that family structure and the addition of a child are both causes of changes in marital quality over the transition to parenthood; thus, failure to address family structural context across the transition to parenthood is an error.

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1 As those who gained a child via marriage between the two waves of data had no early measures of marital quality, they were not included in this portion of the analysis.
The second study assessed the structural context of parenthood by examining the quality of family relationships, including marital relationships, across two time points, again utilizing the NSFH Waves 1 and 2 (Lansford, Ceballo, Abbey, and Stewart 2001). Lansford and colleagues focused on marital and relationship quality for five different family forms: Adoptive families, biological families, divorced single-mother families, stepfather families, and stepmother families. Marital quality was measured using one item assessing the overall quality of the marital relationship, a six-item averaged scale of frequency of disagreements in different areas of marital life, and a Wave 2 eight-item averaged scale of satisfaction with spouse. While the Lansford study did not assess families over the transition to parenthood, their findings indicate that family structure has no impact on marital relationships and that, instead, family processes occurring in all family structures are more important. If this is true – that processes alone are the only things that influence marital relationships – then all families would experience the same or similar changes in marital quality over the transition to parenthood, regardless of structural context.

The last study addressed Cherlin’s “incomplete institutionalization” hypothesis, which posited that stepfamilies lack societal norms to guide them in dealing with family relationships, resulting in higher levels of interfamilial conflict (Cherlin 1978). MacDonald and DeMaris’ research challenged the incomplete institutionalization hypothesis by comparing perceived levels of conflict across three family structures – families with biological children, families with a stepchild and a biological child, and stepfamilies with no biological children (MacDonald and DeMaris 1995). MacDonald used the first wave of the NSFH and compared both husbands’ and wives’ responses to
questions regarding the frequency of conflict in seven areas. Findings indicate that there is no difference in the frequency of conflict between all three family structures and that, in the early years of marriage, couples who have only stepchildren in the family have significantly less conflict than those with biological children included in the family. Over time, however, levels of conflict in stepchildren-only households increases and eventually surpasses levels of conflict in households that include only biological children. These findings would suggest that family structural context is less important than how families experience parenthood, but the findings are somewhat limited in that they are cross-sectional rather than longitudinal.

These four studies looked at either family structure effects or the family experience of adding a child, with findings mixed as to which is more important to – or has more of an effect on – marital quality. This research examines both of these factors further to explore potential effects on marital quality, and presents two theories in the following chapter to potentially explain why one factor may be more influential than the other.
CHAPTER 3
THEORY

As this research seeks to explore whether it is family structural context or the experience of adding a child to the family – or an interaction of the two – that is most determinative of marital quality changes over the transition to parenthood, two theoretical perspectives are described below, with these perspectives informing competing hypotheses about how family structural context and the addition of a child may influence marital quality.

3.1 Systems Theory

One view of the family is as a system consisting of multiple, interdependent relationships. From this standpoint of interdependency, what affects one person in the family affects the others as well. Adding a new member to the family increases not only the number of people within the family, but also the number of interdependent relationships. For example, a married couple has three family subsystems: Each member of the couple and the relationship between the couple (Figure 3-1).
The addition of a child to this matrix creates seven family subsystems as illustrated in Figure 3-2. Each member of the family (relationships #1, 2, and 4), the relationship between the couple (#3), the relationship between each parent and the child (#5 and 6), and the whole familial relationship, as indicated by the dotted line around the family (#7).
The addition of a second child to a family creates eleven family subsystems, which are diagramed in Figure 3-3. Each member of the family (relationships #1, 2, 4 and 5), the relationship between the couple (#3), the relationship between each parent and each child (#6, 7, 9 and 10), the relationship between the siblings (#8) and the familial relationship as a whole, again indicated by the dotted line (#11). The structure of the family not only changes quantitatively with the addition of a child, but changes qualitatively as well because the roles each individual takes on is based in part on their relationship with others in the family system. For example, when a new child is added to the family, the mother moves from being “John’s mother” to being “John and Jane’s mother.” This new role of “parent of two” comes with new concerns, ideals, and, indeed, a different social script than the role “mother of one.” Although social roles are discussed in more detail below, suffice to say that how well the mother deals with and adapts to her new role as “mother of two” impacts all relationships within the family system.

Systems theory thus makes clear two of the main arguments in this research, namely, that there are multiple pathways to parenthood and that family structural context causes differences in how family relationships are affected by the transition to parenthood. First, most theorizing about the transition to parenthood considers multiple transitions redundant; once the transition is made an individual or a family cannot “transition” again. However, systems theory posits that the addition of a second or subsequent child to a family does not produce additive change.
Instead, the dimensions of change and corresponding increases in the number of subsystems increase with the number of members of the family. First-time parents move from three subsystems to seven; second-time parents move from seven subsystems to eleven. Changes in multiple dimensions of intra-familial relationships are likely to produce different levels – and types – of stress within the family, and it may be logical that the more relationships that are changed the more stress may be likely to occur.

Second, families in different structural contexts have qualitatively different relationships between and among family members. For example, the relationship between a stepfather and stepson is qualitatively different than the relationship between a father and son. If a stepfamily adds a biological child, the relationship between the biological child and the stepchild may be qualitatively different than the relationship between two biological siblings. As all of the familial relationships are intertwined,
subtle differences in relationships within a subsystem may create a “butterfly” effect, producing larger differences in the overall family functioning.

By way of example, consider the family systems diagrammed in Figure 3-4 and Figure 3-5.

Figure 3-4: Diagram of stepfamily system and familial relationships.

Although both of these family systems can be considered quadratic systems, each encompassing eleven subsystems, there is a qualitative difference in the subsystem #6 in each system. These are relationships between a stepfather and stepchild (in Figure 3-4) and a father and his biological child (in Figure 3-5). Few could argue that these relationships are not qualitatively different from one another.
The differences in these relationships, complicated by the arrival of a new biological child, affect the other family subsystems. Cowan and Cowan delineate a model that describes five relationships within and outside of a family that are affected by the addition of a child. In summary, these dimensions are the relationship between husband and wife\(^2\), the individual family members themselves, the relationship between the nuclear and the extended family, the balance between life stress and external social support, and the relationship between each parent and their child (Cowan 1992; Cowan, Cowan, Heming, Garrett, Coysh, Curtisboles, and Boles 1985). While it is beyond the scope of this research to conduct micro-level analyses of families across the transition to parenthood, changes in marital quality clearly need to be contextualized in order to fully

\(^2\) Cowan and Cowan also place special emphasis on the roles of each parent within the family, which will be discussed further in the following section.
assess the impact of the transition to parenthood for an individual family. Furthermore, examination of changes in the marital dyadic relationship due to the transition to parenthood is important as there can be “spillover” of distress from one domain to another (Cowan 1992). “Spillover” from the marital relationship may be the most affective of all relationships, influencing not only current parent-child relationships (Erel and Burman 1995; Grych and Fincham 1990), but also sibling relationships (Lindsey, Colwell, Frabutt, and MacKinnon-Lewis 2006; Richmond and Stocker 2006) and relationships children form later in life (Amato and Booth 2001).

From a family systems perspective, family structural context becomes important on two levels. First, the addition of a child increases the quantity of familial relationships within the family system. The complexity of these additional relationships increase the amount of stress experienced over the transition to parenthood, which is in turn reflected in negative changes in marital quality. Thus, second- or subsequent-time parents and stepfamilies should see more negative change in marital quality variable levels across the transition to parenthood than first-time parents. Second, the initial structural context of a family matters in that the quality of the relationships between and among family members may be more complex in stepfamilies, particularly when a new biological child is added to the family system. Within this context, stepfamilies should experience still more negative change in marital quality variable levels over the transition to parenthood than second- or subsequent-time parents.
3.2  Role Theory

Role theory proposes that people act out the different norms of a society according to scripts or expectations held within the societal structure. These social scripts specify to the individual what goals and tasks are to be performed in the course of enacting a particular role (DeLamater 2007). The acquisition of specific roles can take place in two ways: First, by norm-taking, or adherence to socially implied norms and values (Gage and Christensen 1991) and second, by role-making, wherein an individual learns normative guidelines for each role but personalizes the role according to situational demands (Aldous 1996; Gage and Christensen 1991). Both norm-taking and role-making, then, are important processes in the development of family roles, but it is likely that there are different degrees to which some families “make” more roles while others “take” more roles, and these differences may depend in part on the structure of the family. For example, a mother may take the role of “parent” from the norms and expectations of others, but re-make the role to fit the specific circumstances and social interactions within her family of procreation. While the situational demands may differ from mother to mother, such as being a working mother or a stay-at-home mother, having one child or four, or being a married or single parent, the broader role expectation of “mother” or “parent” remains the same throughout.

Role transitions are necessary for all family members during transitions to parenthood. The transition to parenthood has been characterized as a more serious role transition than the transition to marriage (Aldous 1996). During a transition to parenthood, parents must adjust to parenthood via the role-making and norm-taking process, and the ease or difficulty encountered in making and taking new roles can
depend on the structure of the family. For example, first- and second-time parents can more easily assimilate existing social roles regarding parenthood than a stepparent, who may have to engage in more extensive role-making in order to make the parental role fit the stepfamily’s needs and circumstances. Encountering more difficulty in the role-making process may lead to higher levels of stress and, in turn, lower levels of marital quality, than a less-intensive norm-taking process. High stress levels related to the transition to parenthood, then, can result from little experience in the role of parent, while lower stress levels may result from parents being able to “practice” or rehearse the role of parent prior to the transition to parenthood. How much “training,” or parental role socialization an individual has can play an important part in the role-making process, and levels of parental role socialization can be related to family structural context.

Parental role socialization is the process by which parents obtain or enhance resources that enable them to better act out their parental roles (Gage and Christensen 1991). Gage and Christensen characterized parental role socialization as falling into two general categories, anticipatory socialization and concurrent socialization. Within the context of parental role socialization, anticipatory socialization is parental role rehearsal, which results from direct experiences in parenting-like activities such as babysitting or assisting with the care of siblings. Concurrent socialization includes activities that provide feedback, such as talking with others about their parenting experiences or attending parenting classes. Gage’s research found that higher levels of socialization overall, regardless of type, resulted in higher parental and marital outcomes, such as greater parental self-concept and higher levels of marital satisfaction.
Although both anticipatory and concurrent socialization contributed to the higher outcomes, concurrent socialization had a stronger impact on the outcome. One explanation for this finding is that concurrent socialization allows for feedback from others; feedback from others is an important factor in role making, thus resulting in a higher degree of acclimation to parenting. If this is true, then any activities that provide immediate or constant feedback may increase parental role socialization. Concurrent socialization is also generally more recent than anticipatory socialization.

With respect to family structural contexts, different family structures have differing amounts and types of parental role socialization. First-time parents may only receive their parental role socialization through outlets external to the family, such as parenting classes, reading books, discussion with friends, babysitting siblings earlier in life, and the like. These activities may be considered concurrent socialization, especially if they are recent activities, but the feedback provided by activities external to the family is more likely to be sporadic or disperse in nature.

By contrast, families who are expecting the birth of a second or subsequent child receive parental role socialization within their own family through feedback to and from one another as well as through external sources. This “internal” socialization is more likely to be immediate, constant, and concentrated. In addition, external parental role socialization for this family group may be more focused or specialized as the parents know what to expect, what to ask, and where they might find external resources.

Stepfamilies differ from first-time parents in an important way which might align them more closely with families expecting a second or subsequent child. Parents who are stepparents experience both anticipatory and concurrent socialization internal to their
family, similar to the socialization received by second-time parents. Regardless of whether the stepparent experienced anticipatory socialization in their past (i.e. by babysitting or caring for siblings), a stepparent rehearses the role of parent by “parenting” their stepchild. At the same time, the stepparent experiences concurrent socialization via feedback from the biological parent regarding their stepparenting activities. Furthermore, in anticipation of the birth of their biological child, many stepparents will experience even more external concurrent socialization and feedback in the form of parenting classes, parenting books, or more frequent discussions of parenting with others.

As with a systems theory perspective, a role theory/socialization perspective points to family structure as an important consideration, but for different reasons and with the suggestion that family structural context will result in different outcomes than those suggested by systems theory. If parental role socialization is an important factor in mitigating the stress of the transition to parenthood, then those with the most parental role socialization will experience the least stress when adding a child to their family. Thus, families adding a second or subsequent child will have the easiest adjustment, experiencing the least amount of change in marital quality levels. Stepfamilies, where one parent has had a great deal of parental role socialization and the other has had some parental role socialization, should experience more stress than second-time parents but less stress than first-time parents, resulting in moderate amounts of negative change in marital quality. First-time parents, for whom parenting is an entirely novel event and who have presumably had the least amount of parental role socialization, would then experience the most difficulty across the transition to parenthood. This difficulty would be reflected in high amounts of negative change in marital quality levels.
3.3 \textit{Hypotheses}

This research seeks to fill a gap in both marital quality and transition to parenthood literature by exploring whether initial family structural context or the experience of adding a child to a family has a greater influence on marital quality. To compare structure and experience, marital quality levels are assessed for three different initial family structural contexts: Families with no children, families with at least one biological child, and stepfamilies. Marital quality variables used in this analysis, which are detailed more fully in the following chapter, are the frequency of disagreements between the couple and overall marital happiness. These variables are assessed at two points in time and, in addition to the main structural contexts, families are further divided into those who add a biological child to their family between time 1 ($T_1$) and time 2 ($T_2$) and those who do not, creating six sub-groups of families.

As described earlier in this chapter, two theories provide different hypotheses about changes in marital quality. A systems theory perspective posits that the more complex the interdependent relationships within the family system, the more stress there may be on the marital relationship, resulting in lower marital quality levels. Thus, the complexity of the initial structure is very important in determining marital quality levels. The addition of a child is also important, as adding a member to the family increases the complexities of the relationships, but less important than initial family structure as the initial structural context of the family creates a “baseline” from which the relationships within the family can only grow more complex.
Alternatively, a role theory/parental socialization perspective locates changes in marital quality on the difficulty of the making or taking on of a specific role or role set. The more difficult it is for a member of the marital relationship to take on the parental role after the addition of a child, the more negative change will be seen in marital quality variables levels. Within this context, the addition of a child is the catalyst to negative change in marital quality. Family structural context, however, is still important as those who have parented before may have an easier time taking on the role of “additional parent.”

3.3.1 Specific Expectations: Family Structural Context

From a systems theory perspective, families in different structural contexts differ significantly from one another in terms of the complexity of family relationships. These different family relationships impact marital relationships and marital quality. Thus, between-structure comparisons are expected to demonstrate significant differences in marital quality variable levels between family structures both at $T_1$ and at $T_2$. If familial relationship complexity contributes to marital quality levels, then the more complex the system the more stress on the marital relationship.

As stepfamilies have the most qualitative complexity in their family relationships, their marital quality levels would be expected to be significantly lower than those of “biological families.” Between the two biological family groups, families with children have more quantitatively complex family relationships than those without. Thus, families with children are expected to have lower marital quality levels than those without children, but higher marital quality levels than stepfamilies.
Similarly, systems theory also holds that family relationships are not static but instead are dynamic, changing over time, with changes in one relationship influencing changes in another. As the structural context of a family determines the nature of the relationships inherent in that family system, it is expected that family structural context should also influence how marital quality changes over time. Marital quality change scores (i.e., the difference in levels between $T_1$ and at $T_2$) are therefore expected to differ dependent on initial family structural context. Again, the more family structural and relationship complexity, the more change is expected in marital quality, with stepfamilies having the most change, families with children at $T_1$ experiencing a “middle amount” of change, and families without children at $T_1$ experiencing the least change.

3.3.2 Specific Expectations: Family Experience

As described in the preceding chapter, it is well documented that adding a child to a family generally has a negative impacts the marital relationship. Thus, overall comparisons (comparisons between couples who add a child and couples who do not) are expected to demonstrate a decline in marital quality for couples who add children between $T_1$ and $T_2$. However, family structural context is expected to influence the amount of decline in marital quality variables experienced.

If changes in marital quality across the addition of a child are influenced more by the increasing complexity of relationships within a family (a systems theory perspective), then more negative change in marital quality should be experienced by those adding children to stepfamilies, where relationships may already be both quantitatively and qualitatively complex. Families adding a second or subsequent child have quantitative
complexity due to the number of interfamilial relationships within the family system, but are likely to have less qualitative complexity than stepfamilies; thus it is expected that this group will experience less negative change in marital quality. First-time parents, who have the least qualitative and quantitative complexity in their family systems, would experience the least negative change in marital quality.

If instead changes in marital quality across the addition of a child are influenced more by the ease with which parents can assume the parental role (a role theory/socialization theory perspective), those adding a second or subsequent child would have the easiest route to parenting and the least amount of negative change in marital quality, with first-time parents having the most difficult transition and therefore the highest levels of negative change in marital quality. As stepparents have more parental role socialization than first-time parents and less than second-time parents, their changes in marital quality would be expected to fall somewhere in the middle.
4.1 Data

The data used in this inquiry are taken from the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), Wave 1, compiled from 1987-1988, and Wave 2, compiled from 1992-1994 (Sweet and Bumpass 1996; Sweet, Bumpass, and Call 1988). Wave 1 includes interviews with over 13,000 households from a national sample, and Wave 2 is a five-year follow-up of over 10,000 the original interviewees. Both waves include an extensive interview with a primary household respondent. The NSFH was chosen for this analysis as it includes questions detailing a broad spectrum of the respondents’ lives, including questions regarding marital quality and because it provides information from two separate time points. Within this analysis, Waves 1, and 2 are referred to as time 1 ($T_1$) and time 2 ($T_2$), respectively. In order to simplify the figures that follow, all figure labels referring to the year the data were collected only refer to the first year of data collection for the individual wave.
4.2 Sample

A sample was constructed from the available respondent data to include people who met criteria relevant to this research. First, all respondents married at $T_1$ and married to the same person at $T_2$ were selected. The sample was divided into three main family structure samples as follows:

Families with children at $T_1$: Respondents who had a biological child under the age of eighteen and no step-, foster, or adopted children living in their home at $T_1$.

Families with no children at $T_1$: Respondents who had no biological, step-, foster, or adopted children living in their home at $T_1$ and indicated that neither they nor their spouse were stepparents.

Stepfamilies: Respondents who indicated they had a biological child that was not their spouse’s child or that their spouse had a biological child that was not their (the respondent’s) child living in their home at $T_1$. Stepfamilies also had no children in common to the parents at $T_1$. It is relevant to note that the stepfamily structure group only includes families within which one and only one parent is a stepparent; those families where both parents were stepparents were excluded from the sample ($n=19$). Out of the sample of stepparents, 46 of the respondents were the stepparent while 150 indicated that their spouse was the stepparent in the family. One concern about the stepfamily sample is that it is very small.

Each of the three main family structure samples was divided into two subgroups: those who added at least one biological child to their family between $T_1$ and $T_2$ and those who did not. Thus, six sub-samples were created as follows:

1. Families with children at $T_1$
a. Families with an additional child at \( T_2 \) (subsequent-time parents)

b. Families without an additional child at \( T_2 \)

2. Families with no children at \( T_1 \)

   a. Families with a child at \( T_2 \) (first-time parents)

   b. Families without a child at \( T_2 \) (families without any children through both time points)

3. Stepfamilies

   a. Stepfamilies with a biological child at \( T_2 \) (‘step-biological’ families)

   b. Stepfamilies without a biological child at \( T_2 \) (continuing stepfamilies)

The constructed samples and sub-samples provide an opportunity not only to assess marital quality variables at two points in time for the different initial family structures, but also to compare and contrast the trajectories for families over the transition to parenthood with those who did not have another child between time periods.

4.3 Variables

As detailed above, marital quality is generally viewed as multidimensional, following the belief that “marital quality” conceptualized as one variable does not provide a full picture of changes in a couple’s relationship. Three studies discussed in detail in the preceding chapter and all using the NSFH, guide the selection of variables in this research. Ceballo et. al.’s study comparing the addition of a child within different family structural contexts (Ceballo, Lansford, Abbey, and Stewart 2004) and Lansford et. al.’s research comparing relationship quality across different structural contexts (Lansford, Ceballo, Abbey, and Stewart 2001) both used measures of couples’ frequency
of disagreements along with a global assessment of happiness in the marriage as measures of marital quality. Additionally, MacDonald and DeMaaris’ study comparing conflict across different family structures (MacDonald and DeMaris 1995) used the same measure of couples’ frequency of conflicts. The use of these two measures also provides a depiction of the marriage from both the “individual feelings” school of assessing marital quality (happiness with the marriage) and the “marital adjustment” approach to assessing marital quality (frequency of conflict) and are consistent with previous research on marital quality using the NSFH (Voydanoff and Donnelly 1999; Webster, Orbuch, and House 1995). Furthermore, both variables are available in both Wave 1 and Wave 2 of the NSFH, allowing for a consistent measurement of marital quality at both time points.

Marital happiness levels are assessed as a response to a single question rated on a scale of 1 (very unhappy) to 7 (very happy). The higher the score, the happier the respondent is with the marital relationship.

A second variable, measuring the frequency of a couple’s open disagreements, was created by summing respondent answers to questions asking how often the couple openly disagreed over specific issues. Frequency of disagreements range from 1 (never) to 24 (almost every day). The higher the score, the more open disagreement the couple experiences. Within Wave 1 of the NSFH, questions are available that ask the respondent how often in the last year the couple had an open disagreement about one of seven issues. Of these seven issues, one question does not appear in Wave 2 (regarding disagreements over “having a(nother) child”). In order to maintain consistency in the summed scale between waves of data, this question was not used. A second question inquires into the amount of conflict the couple has over “the children.” As this research compares those
without children to those with children in their household, this question was similarly not included in the summed scale. A third question inquires into the amount of conflict the couple experiences over “in-laws.” This question was also dropped from the summed scale so that the resulting questions would focus on aspects of marital life within the nuclear family system. The resulting four questions, reflecting disagreements between spouses over household tasks, money, spending time together, and sex were summed into the resultant scale, with a Cronbach’s alpha of .767 for $T_1$ measures and .748 for $T_2$ measures. All questions used to create the variable scales listed in the Appendix A.

Pearson correlations between the two marital quality variables fall into the small to medium range, with significant correlations between earlier ($T_1$) measurements and later ($T_2$) measurements of marital happiness and significant correlations between the two different marital quality variables measurements taken at the same time. Table 4-1 details correlations for the overall sample used. It is interesting to note that there are no significant correlations between the frequency of conflict at $T_1$ and $T_2$. It is likely that the amount of time between the two waves of data (five to six years) may intervene, possibly smoothing over previous conflicts so that they do not affect later conflicts. More probable, however, is that the couples are fairly good at resolving conflict. To be included in the sample, couples had to be married to the same person at $T_1$ and at $T_2$. Couples who are clinically distressed – i.e., those who cannot resolve conflict successfully – are likely to have divorced between waves. Thus, the couples in the sample are, in a sense, survivors. Although significant moderate correlations exist between the variables, a decision was made to keep the variables separate rather than aggregate them into a composite scale because they represent two different ways of
conceptualizing marital quality (as a characteristic of the marriage or as an individual perception of the marriage).

### TABLE 4-1

**PEARSON CORRELATIONS OF MARITAL QUALITY VARIABLES FOR ALL FAMILIES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Overall marital happiness at $T_1$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Overall marital happiness at $T_2$</td>
<td>.055*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Frequency of disagreements at $T_1$</td>
<td>-.308**</td>
<td>.022</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Frequency of disagreements at $T_2$</td>
<td>-.015</td>
<td>-.302**</td>
<td>.018</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *$p<.05$, **$p<.01$ (two-tailed tests).*

All of the answers regarding the marital relationship come from the respondent, so only one view or perception of the marital relationship is available. While answers to the same or similar questions were available from some of the respondents’ spouses, the number of spouses responding is less than the total number of respondents and pairing answers in this way constrained the sample to the point where the ability to compare and contrast different family structures and sub-groups was diminished, particularly with stepfamilies.

### 4.4 Demographic Characteristics of the Samples

Table 4-2 describes the sample of respondents, including marital quality variable means and standard deviations, while Table 4-3 further details mean marital quality
variable scores for the different family sub-groups within structural contexts. Significant differences in marital quality variables between $T_1$ and $T_2$ are noted. It should be noted that although both male and female respondents are represented in the sample, all samples are weighted towards females (54.8% of respondents with children at $T_1$, 55.8% of respondents without children at $T_1$, and 70.4% of respondents in stepfamilies at $T_1$). When responses to marital quality questions are examined as individual as opposed to couple responses, gender differences in subjective evaluations of marital quality are noticed, with women experiencing more negative change across the transition to parenthood (Cowan and Cowan 1995; Cowan et al. 1985). Some studies have suggested that these declines are due to a different adaptation processes that men and women use over the transition to parenthood (Cox, Paley, Burchinal, and Payne 1999), while others suggest that higher declines for women result in part from the increased work load a child brings to women and the physical changes that accompany a transition to parenthood (Aldous 1996; Voydanoff and Donnelly 1999). Thus, although gender is controlled in the analyses that follow, the initial t-tests below between and within family structures do not control for gender and changes in marital quality over the transition to parenthood may be slightly exaggerated due to the overrepresentation of female respondents.
## TABLE 4-2
DESCRIPTIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF SAMPLE AT T₁

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>f</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Families with children at T₁</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>456</td>
<td></td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>552</td>
<td></td>
<td>37.8</td>
<td>27.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Added new child by T₂</td>
<td>190</td>
<td></td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of youngest child (years)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>34.9</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income (thousands)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of marriage (years)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of respondent (years)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall marital happiness at T₁ (a)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7.7***</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall marital happiness at T₂ (b)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5.8**</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of disagreements at T₁ (a)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of disagreements at T₂ (b)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Families with no children at T₁</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>365</td>
<td></td>
<td>38.0</td>
<td>28.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>461</td>
<td></td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>15.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Added new child by T₂</td>
<td>160</td>
<td></td>
<td>46.0</td>
<td>14.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income (thousands)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of marriage (years)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of respondent (years)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall marital happiness at T₁ (a)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7.9***</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall marital happiness at T₂ (b)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5.8**</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of disagreements at T₁ (a)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of disagreements at T₂ (b)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7.9***</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stepfamilies at T₁</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>58</td>
<td></td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>138</td>
<td></td>
<td>38.7</td>
<td>26.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Added new child by T₂</td>
<td>35</td>
<td></td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent is stepparent</td>
<td>46</td>
<td></td>
<td>34.6</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondents’ spouse is stepparent</td>
<td>150</td>
<td></td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of youngest child (years)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income (thousands)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of marriage (years)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of respondent (years)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall marital happiness at T₁ (a)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall marital happiness at T₂ (b)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of disagreements at T₁ (a)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of disagreements at T₂ (b)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Significance refers to significant differences at T₂ compared to the same variable at T₁.

*Higher scores reflect greater happiness with the marital relationship (1-7).
**Higher scores reflect more frequent disagreements (1-24).
***p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001 (two-tailed tests).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Families with children at $T_1$ who do not add a child by $T_2$</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall marital happiness at $T_1$</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall marital happiness at $T_2$</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of disagreements at $T_1$</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of disagreements at $T_2$</td>
<td>7.4***</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families with children at $T_1$ who add a child by $T_2$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall marital happiness at $T_1$</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall marital happiness at $T_2$</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of disagreements at $T_1$</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of disagreements at $T_2$</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families without children at $T_1$ who do not add a child by $T_2$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall marital happiness at $T_1$</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall marital happiness at $T_2$</td>
<td>5.8**</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of disagreements at $T_1$</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of disagreements at $T_2$</td>
<td>7.7***</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families without children at $T_1$ who add a child by $T_2$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall marital happiness at $T_1$</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall marital happiness at $T_2$</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of disagreements at $T_1$</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of disagreements at $T_2$</td>
<td>8.9***</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stepfamilies at $T_1$ who do not add a child by $T_2$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall marital happiness at $T_1$</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall marital happiness at $T_2$</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of disagreements at $T_1$</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of disagreements at $T_2$</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stepfamilies at $T_1$ who add a child by $T_2$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall marital happiness at $T_1$</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall marital happiness at $T_2$</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of disagreements at $T_1$</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of disagreements at $T_2$</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Significance refers to significant differences at $T_2$ compared to the same variable at $T_1$.

* Higher scores reflect greater happiness with the marital relationship (1-7).

** Higher scores reflect more frequent disagreements (1-24).

$p<.05$, **$p<.01$, ***$p<.001$ (two-tailed tests).
4.5 Analytic Strategy

Preliminary t-tests were conducted to compare mean scores for each marital quality variable across the different marital quality structure groups at each time point ($T_1$ and $T_2$) and also on change scores between the two time points.

One-way multivariate analyses of covariance (MANCOVAs) were conducted to examine whether differences in marital quality variable levels and change scores were due to family structural context differences (having children, being childless, or stepfamily status) or family experience (adding a child) when controlling for length of marriage, income at $T_1$, and gender. A multivariate analysis of variance is an appropriate statistical technique to use to determine group differences and as both dependent variables are modestly correlated with one another (Maxwell 2001).

Age of respondent was initially considered as a control variable, but because of a large correlation between respondent age and length of marriage (.808, $p<.001$), it was necessary to remove one of the variables from the analyses. As length of marriage has been found to be relevant to the frequency of conflicts in stepfamilies (MacDonald and DeMaris 1995), a decision was made to drop age of respondent as a control variable and use length of marriage instead. For marital quality variable levels at $T_2$, $T_1$ marital quality levels are included as control variables as later marital quality levels are believed to be predicated, at least in part, by earlier levels of marital quality.

Two-way MANCOVAs were conducted to explore the possibility of an interactive effect of family structure and family experience across the addition of a child. Control variables used in the MANCOVAs were the same as those used in one-way analyses.
5.1 Family Structure Comparisons

One purpose of this analysis is to explore whether family structural context had an effect on marital quality variable levels at both $T_1$ and $T_2$, and also whether changes in marital quality variable levels between the two time points differ by structural context. It was hypothesized that families in different structural contexts would have significantly different marital quality variable scores at both time points and significant differences in the amount of change experienced between the two time points. Marital quality variable levels are diagramed below in order to provide a visual picture of differences that exist between family structures.

Preliminary independent sample t-tests of mean differences were performed to determine if differences exist and one-way multivariate analyses of covariance (MANCOVAs) were conducted to test the hypothesis that family structural context effects marital quality. Unless otherwise indicated, parenthetical probabilities represent outcomes of t-tests of the means. All MANCOVA analyses control for gender of respondent, length of marriage, and household income. Gender is insignificant across the analyses, while significant main effects are seen from household income and length of
marriage. Univariate tests reveal that the length of the marriage and income effects extend only to the frequency of conflict experienced by the couple. As the frequency of conflict variable is a summed scale that includes as one of its components a question about how often the couple openly argues about money (see Appendix A), it is not unexpected that the overall income of the household would show a significant effect on the frequency of conflicts experienced. The fact that the frequency of conflicts is also strongly associated with the length of the marital relationship is also not surprising. The length of time a couple is married may contribute greatly to – or be a result of – their problem and conflict resolution skills. Thus, the longer a couple is married the more adept they may be at negotiating conflict in their relationship. Detailed table of univariate test outcomes can be found in Appendix B.

Analysis of marital quality variables showed small yet, in some cases, significant variation between family structures. Figures 5-1 and 5-2 detail differences in marital quality variable trajectories between distinct family structures.

Figure 5-1: Marital happiness trajectories for all families within each family structure.
5.1.1 *T*<sub>1</sub> Marital Quality Differences by Family Structure

With respect to absolute levels of marital quality variables at *T*<sub>1</sub>, it is immediately apparent that there are differences in marital quality variable levels between family structures at *T*<sub>1</sub>. For marital happiness values, these differences are significant between those with children at *T*<sub>1</sub> and those without children at *T*<sub>1</sub> (*p*<.001 for both variables) and between those with no children at *T*<sub>1</sub> and stepfamilies (*p*<.001), while differences between frequency of disagreement levels at *T*<sub>1</sub> are significant only in comparisons between those with no children at *T*<sub>1</sub> and stepfamilies (*p*<.001).

A one-way MANCOVA was conducted, controlling for respondent gender, income, and length of marriage, to further investigate whether family structural context had an effect on marital quality variables levels at *T*<sub>1</sub>, with results detailed in Table 5-1. There was a significant main effect of family structure on marital quality at *T*<sub>1</sub> (Wilks’
Lambda = 14.795, \( p<.001 \), and follow-up univariate tests reveal that this effect is significant for both overall marital happiness (\( F = 12.319, \ p<.001 \)) and frequency of conflict (\( F = 24.512, \ p<.001 \)) at \( T_1 \). These significant effects tend to confirm the hypothesis that family structure impacts marital quality levels.

**TABLE 5-1**

**MANCOVA OF MARITAL QUALITY AT \( T_1 \)**

**BY FAMILY STRUCTURAL CONTEXT**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Children at ( T_1 )</th>
<th>No children at ( T_1 )</th>
<th>Stepfamilies</th>
<th>( F )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital happiness at ( T_1 )^a</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of conflict at ( T_1 )^b</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Analyses controlled for gender, length of marriage, and income.

^a Higher scores reflect greater happiness with the marital relationship (1-7).

^b Higher scores reflect more frequent conflict (1-24).

\* \( p<.05 \), \** \( p<.01 \), \*** \( p<.001 \).

5.1.2 \( T_2 \) Marital Quality Differences by Family Structure

For both marital quality variables, all family structure trajectories seem to converge on similar points and, indeed, there is no statistical difference in \( T_2 \) marital quality variable levels between any of the family structural groups. One-way MANCOVA results, again controlling for gender, income, length of marriage and also marital quality variable levels at \( T_1 \), further confirmed that no difference exists between family structural contexts for marital quality variable levels at \( T_2 \). These results are
detailed in Table 5-2. Thus, although families start at different marital quality variable levels, they do not end up in different places. This may be due in part to differences in family experiences across the two waves of data, which are examined later in this chapter.

**TABLE 5-2**

MANCOVA OF MARITAL QUALITY AT $T_2$

BY FAMILY STRUCTURAL CONTEXT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Children at $T_1$</th>
<th>No children at $T_1$</th>
<th>Stepfamilies</th>
<th>$F$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital happiness at $T_2^a$</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of conflict at $T_2^b$</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Analyses controlled for gender, length of marriage, income, and $T_1$ marital quality levels.

$^a$ Higher scores reflect greater happiness with the marital relationship (1-7).

$^b$ Higher scores reflect more frequent conflict (1-24).

$p<.05$, **$p<.01$, ***$p<.001$.

5.1.3 *Changes in Marital Quality by Family Structure*

With respect to changes in marital quality variable levels between $T_1$ and $T_2$, significant differences in change scores are found between those with children at $T_1$ and those without for both marital happiness levels and the frequency of disagreements ($p<.01$ and $p<.001$, respectively), and, for frequencies of disagreements, between stepfamilies and those with no children at $T_1$ ($p<.01$). Interestingly, and perhaps importantly, no statistically significant differences are found for marital quality variable change scores between families with children at $T_1$ and stepfamilies, and no statistical
differences were found between these two structural contexts at $T_1$ or $T_2$ either. This may indicate that family processes are more important than family structure in determining family outcomes, similar to the results found by Lansford et. al. in their assessment of family relationships across different structural contexts (Lansford, Ceballo, Abbey, and Stewart 2001). Here, it may be that changes in marital quality are due to the presence of children in the household, not family structure; thus, marital quality in families with children at $T_1$ is indistinguishable from marital quality in families with stepchildren, but both differ from families without children.

Families with children at $T_1$ and stepfamilies differ from those with no children at $T_1$ in another respect. For those with children at $T_1$ and stepfamilies, marital happiness levels increase between $T_1$ and $T_2$ while there is a reduction in the frequency of conflicts for families with children at $T_1$ and a slight, non-significant increase in frequency of conflicts for stepfamilies. For families without children at $T_1$, the changes are exactly the opposite, with marital happiness declining and frequency of conflicts increasing. This further strengthens the idea posited above that it may be the presence of children that is more affective of marital quality as opposed to initial family structure.

A one-way MANCOVA (controlling for gender, income, and length of marriage) shows a main effect of family structure on changes in marital quality between $T_1$ and $T_2$ (Wilks’ Lambda = 8.241, $p<.001$), and follow-up univariate tests reveal that this effect is significant for both overall marital happiness ($F = 7.861$, $p<.001$) and frequency of conflicts ($F = 12.954$, $p<.001$) (see Table 5-3).
TABLE 5-3

MANCOVA OF MARITAL QUALITY CHANGES BETWEEN T1 AND T2

BY FAMILY STRUCTURAL CONTEXT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Children at T1</th>
<th>No children at T1</th>
<th>Stepfamilies</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change in marital happiness levels(^a)</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>1.84</td>
<td>-.25</td>
<td>1.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change in frequency of conflicts(^b)</td>
<td>-.69</td>
<td>4.74</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>4.59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Analyses controlled for gender, length of marriage, and income.  
\(^a\) Higher scores reflect greater happiness with the marital relationship (1-7).  
\(^b\) Higher scores reflect more frequent conflict (1-24).  
\(* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.\)

These findings confirm in part and refute in part the hypothesis that marital quality variable levels for different family structural contexts would be significantly different at both T1, T2, and in the amount of change experienced between T1 and T2. While significant differences do exist, they exist only at T1 and only between households with and households without children.

5.2 Family Experience Comparisons

The second purpose of this analysis is to confirm that the experience of adding a child to a family has a negative effect on marital quality variables. Based on a review of the literature, it was expected that marital quality variable levels at T2 would be lower for those families who added a child between T1 and T2, and also that changes in marital quality variable levels between the two time points would differ based on the addition of
a child to the family. Figures 5-3 and 5-4 describe the trajectories for families who did and did not add a child and show that this hypothesis is confirmed in part and refuted in part.

Figure 5-3: Marital happiness trajectories for all families based on the addition of a child between $T_1$ and $T_2$.

Figure 5-4: Frequency of conflict trajectories for all families based on the addition of a child between $T_1$ and $T_2$. 
5.2.1 \textit{T}_2 \textit{ Marital Quality Differences by Family Experience}

Those who experience the addition of a child to their family between \(T_1\) and \(T_2\) have significantly different levels of conflict \((p<.001)\) at \(T_2\) than those who do not add a child to their family, but similar levels of marital happiness to those who do not add a child. A one-way MANCOVA (controlling for gender, income, length of marriage, and \(T_1\) marital quality variable levels) shows a main effect of the addition of a child on changes in marital quality between \(T_1\) and \(T_2\) \((\text{Wilks’ Lambda} = 18.353, p<.001)\), and follow-up univariate tests confirm that this effect is significant only for the frequency of conflicts the couple experiences \((F = 32.695, p<.001)\) (see Table 5-4).

\textbf{TABLE 5-4}

\textit{MANCOVA of Marital Quality at \(T_2\) by Family Experience}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Added a child</th>
<th>Did not add a child</th>
<th>(F)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital happiness at (T_2)(^a)</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of conflict at (T_2)(^b)</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Analyses controlled for gender, length of marriage, income, and \(T_1\) marital quality levels.
\(^a\) Higher scores reflect greater happiness with the marital relationship \((1-7)\).
\(^b\) Higher scores reflect more frequent conflict \((1-24)\).
\(p<.05, \quad ^{**} p<.01, \quad ^{** *} p<.001.\)
The fact that the experience of adding a child only effects the frequency of a couples’ conflicts at $T_2$ may be due to the fact that the addition of a child increases the time spent in household chores for parents, places a financial burden on parents, and reduces the amount of time the parents are able to spend together, all of which are elements of the conflicts scale used in this research. It is also possible that the increases in marital happiness are due in part to the social bonding a family experiences with the birth of a child, which may lead to increases in feelings of happiness with one’s marriage.

5.2.2 Changes in Marital Quality by Family Experience

Similar to the absolute values of $T_2$ marital quality levels, change score comparisons indicate significant differences only in the frequency of disagreements between those who do and do not add a child between $T_1$ and $T_2$ ($p<.001$). As shown in Table 5-5, this finding is confirmed by a one-way MANCOVA, with a significant main effect of a new child on marital quality (Wilks’ Lambda = 10.270, $p<.001$) and univariate analyses confirm that the effect is only on the frequency of disagreements ($F = 11.773$, $p<.01$). Again, this may occur because the addition of a child increases conflict in the domains assessed in this research, particularly in areas that deal with allocation of household tasks, time the couple spends together, and household finances. Were other domains or areas included in the summed conflict frequency scale, these effects might be lost or minimized.
TABLE 5-5
MANCOVA OF CHANGES IN MARITAL QUALITY BETWEEN $T_1$ AND $T_2$ BY FAMILY EXPERIENCE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Added a child</th>
<th>Did not add a child</th>
<th>$F$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital happiness at $T_2^a$</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>1.71</td>
<td>-.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of conflict at $T_2^b$</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td>4.86</td>
<td>-.18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Analyses controlled for gender, length of marriage, and income.

$^a$ Higher scores reflect greater happiness with the marital relationship (1-7).

$^b$ Higher scores reflect more frequent conflict (1-24).

$p<.05, \, **p<.01, \, ***p<.001$.

5.3 The Combination of Family Structure and Family Experience

The third purpose of this analysis is to explore the possibility of interactions between initial family structural context and the addition of a child to the family. In short, the question becomes whether there is a different effect from the addition of a child dependent on the initial family structure. Figure 5-5, below, depicts changes in marital happiness for the various sub-groups within family structures.

As can be seen in the graph, there is a decrease in marital happiness, but only for couples who had no children in the household at $T_1$. Comparisons between change scores for those who add children and those who do not produced no statistically significant differences in levels of marital happiness.
Of note, however, is the fact that the direction of change is markedly different for families with no children at $T_1$ and households with children at $T_1$, regardless of whether or not a child is added between the two data waves. Households who started with children at $T_1$ increased their marital happiness scores and those household without children at $T_1$ experienced a decrease in their marital happiness levels.

These findings are consistent with those in prior research, where couples adding a first biological child to their family have lowered marital happiness scores. It may be that the effect of adding a child to a family is mitigated by the presence of other children in the household. If this is true, second- or subsequent-time parents and stepfamilies will respond to the addition of a child with an increase in marital happiness levels while first-time parents will experience a decrease. However, a more likely explanation is that the possible declines in marital quality subsequent to the addition of a child to the family are masked by the length of time that has transpired between waves. While prior research
has captured a decline in marital happiness after the addition of a child to the family, this
decline is thought to be modest and to eventually level off (Belsky 1990; Belsky and
Hsieh 1998; Cowan 1992; Lawrence, Nylen, and Cobb 2007). As the data used in this
research was collected five to six years apart, it is possible that any declines in marital
happiness levels are simply not captured. Another interesting issue is why marital
happiness levels “converge” to statistically insignificant differences at $T_2$ from
significantly levels at $T_1$. This, too, may be a time effect. At $T_1$ approximately 40% of
all couples in this research had been married less than eight years. The fact that the two
waves of data are five to six years apart may give these “young” marriages time to
smooth through any rough spots they may encounter early in the marriage. The graphs as
presented do not control for the length of marriage, although it is controlled for within the
MANCOVA analyses.

With respect to conflict, the addition of a child to a family increases the frequency
of conflicts, regardless of initial family structure, as indicated in Figure 5-6.

![Figure 5-6: Frequency of conflict trajectories for sub-groups within family structures.](image-url)
All families who add a child between $T_1$ and $T_2$ experience more conflict at $T_2$ than at $T_1$, and this difference is statistically significant ($p<.001$). However, what is interesting to note is that all families who add children, no matter what their initial structural context, end up with similar conflict frequency levels at $T_2$, even though stepfamilies and families with children at $T_1$ differ significantly from families without children at $T_1$ ($p<.05$). Similarly, families who do not add a child between $T_1$ and $T_2$ have similar $T_2$ conflict levels, although they also started with disparate $T_1$ levels ($p<.001$ for comparisons between families with children at $T_1$ and those with no children at $T_1$ and between those with no children at $T_1$ and stepfamilies; $p<.05$ for comparisons between families with children at $T_1$ and stepfamilies).

Two-way MANCOVAs, including both family structure and family experience as fixed factors and controlling for gender, income, length of marriage, and $T_1$ marital quality variable levels were conducted to examine whether the two factors interacted to produce differential effects on marital quality. These analyses show a main effect of the addition of a child (Wilks’ Lambda = 8.49, $p<.001$) on $T_2$ marital quality scores. However, this effect only extends to the frequency of conflicts in univariate analyses ($F = 13.772, p<.001$) (see Table 5-6). Family structural context had no significant impact on $T_2$ marital quality variable levels, and no interaction effect was revealed.
TABLE 5-6
MANCOVAS OF MARITAL QUALITY AT T₂ BY FAMILY STRUCTURAL CONTEXT AND FAMILY EXPERIENCE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family structural context and experience</th>
<th>Marital happiness at $T₂^a$</th>
<th>Frequency of conflicts at $T₂^b$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children at $T₁$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Added a child</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not add a child</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No children at $T₁$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Added a child</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not add a child</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stepfamilies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Added a child</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not add a child</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Family structure: $F = .16$  Family experience: $F = .08^{***}$

Note: Analyses controlled for gender, length of marriage, income, and $T₁$ marital quality levels.

With respect to change scores, both family structure and family experience had a significant main effect on changes in marital quality variable levels between $T₁$ and $T₂$ (Wilks’ Lambda = 2.923, $p<.05$ for marital happiness; Wilks’ Lambda = 3.375, $p<.05$ for frequency of conflicts), but, again, no interaction effects were seen. Follow-up univariate tests show that family structure has an effect on marital happiness and frequency of conflict scores ($F = 3.705$, $p<.05$ for marital happiness scores; $F = 3.774$, $p<.05$ for frequency of conflicts), but the effect of adding a child to a family is limited to frequency of conflict change scores ($F = 3.875$, $p<.05$) (see Table 5-7).
TABLE 5-7

MANCOVAS OF CHANGES IN MARITAL QUALITY BETWEEN $T_1$ AND $T_2$

BY FAMILY STRUCTURAL CONTEXT AND FAMILY EXPERIENCE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family structural context and experience</th>
<th>Changes in marital happiness between $T_1$ and $T_2^a$</th>
<th>Changes in frequency of conflicts between $T_3$ and $T_2^a$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children at $T_1$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Added a child</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>1.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not add a child</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>1.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No children at $T_1$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Added a child</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>1.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not add a child</td>
<td>-.31</td>
<td>1.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stepfamilies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Added a child</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>1.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not add a child</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>1.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family structure: $F$</td>
<td>3.71*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family experience: $F$</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Analyses controlled for gender, length of marriage, and income.

*a* Higher scores reflect greater happiness with the marital relationship (1-7).

*b* Higher scores reflect more frequent conflict (1-24).

*p*<.05, **p**<.01, ***p**<.001.

Within family structure sub-groups, some other patterns emerge for both levels of marital happiness and frequencies of disagreements. All families who add a child by $T_2$ have lower marital happiness scores at $T_1$ than those who do not add a child and, with one exception (families who already had a child at $T_1$), families who add a child by $T_2$ have higher $T_1$ levels of conflict than those who do not add a child.

The tendency of those who add a child to have lower levels of marital happiness and higher levels of conflict may reflect a negative reciprocal relationship between conflict and marital happiness (Kluwer and Johnson 2007). For example, those with
lower levels of marital quality may be more likely to stress negative characteristics about their partners or negative events in the relationship, which leads to more conflict in the marital relationship and then to lower levels of marital happiness. The fact that a medium-strength correlation (−.308, \(p<.01\) at \(T_1\) and −.303, \(p<.01\) at \(T_2\)) exists between the two variables seems to support this relationship between the variables. Adding a child to the family, which has been shown to increase the frequency of conflicts between married couples, may exacerbate this relationship, leading to yet still higher levels of conflict. This may be particularly true with respect to conflicts assessed in this analysis, which are over household tasks, money, time together, and the couple’s sexual relationship. All of these areas are affected by the additional work load brought on by the addition of a child, along with the time and money constraints new parents may feel. At the same time, the addition of a child to the family may lead the couple may feel more bonded as a family, leading increases in marital happiness levels, which are constrained somewhat (and never rise to the levels of the aggregate scores of those who do not add a child) by increases in the frequency of conflict between spouses.

Another interesting tendency is that of marital quality variable levels for stepfamilies to fall between those of families with children at \(T_1\) and those without children at \(T_1\). This pattern persists at both time points and with respect to change scores for marital quality variable levels, with one exception; stepfamilies who add a child to their family have higher frequencies of conflict then all other family structures and subgroups. From a systems perspective, it was hypothesized that increasing the complexity of relationships within a family would induce negative change marital quality. Thus, adding a child to a stepfamily, where relationships are already likely to be more complex
than in “biological” families, would produce the most negative change in marital quality. Similarly, adding a second or subsequent biological child to a family would experience less negative change in marital quality, while couples having a first biological child would experience the least negative change.

Conversely, a role theory/parental role socialization perspective suggests that changes in marital quality are influenced more by how easily parents can take on the parental role. Within this perspective, those adding a second or subsequent child would have the easiest time assuming the parental role and thus the least negative change in marital quality, while first-time parents would have the most difficult time and stepfamilies would fall somewhere in the middle. Figures 5-7 and 5-8 isolate only families who have added children to their families between $T_1$ and $T_2$ from the Figures above, giving a picture of the effect of adding a child on marital quality.

![Figure 5-7: Marital happiness trajectories for sub-groups adding a child between $T_1$ and $T_2$.](image-url)
As illustrated in the figures above, there is evidence that supports both a systems perspective and a role theory/parental role socialization perspective. The marital happiness trajectories show that stepfamilies’ trajectories fall somewhere in between the trajectories for the other family structures, as was hypothesized by the role theory/parental role socialization perspective, even taking into account that the direction of change was expected to be negative rather than positive. The frequency of conflict trajectories, however, suggest that stepfamilies who add a child experience a higher level of conflict than the other family structures, which supports the systems theory hypothesis that stepfamilies have more complex family relationships to start with and that the addition of a child to that already complex relationship would decrease marital quality.
Changes in marital quality variable levels in this research were small yet at times significant. Family structure appears to have more of an impact on the starting level of the individual variables and less of an impact on the outcomes, at least when comparing mean scores of marital quality variables, while family experience has more of an influence on later marital quality variable levels. As both family structure and family experience contributes to changes in marital quality variables, both factors need to be taken into consideration in analysis of marital quality.

In this research two different theories were suggested to account for expected differences in marital quality due to the experience of adding a child to the family: Systems theory posited that differences in marital quality would be caused by the increasing complexity of family roles and role theory/parental socialization theory posited that differences in marital quality are caused by how difficult or easy it is to assume a parental role. Both of these theories were supported in part and disconfirmed in part. A systems theory perspective was supported, but only for the frequency of conflict experienced, where the frequency of conflict for stepfamilies who added a child was higher than levels experienced by first- and second-time parents. Conversely, a role
theory perspective was supported in that marital happiness levels for stepfamilies were between those of first- and second-time parents.

Clearly, families are multidimensional, with both the structure of the family and the number of people within that family creating or mitigating stress on the marital relationship. In addition, families do not operate in a vacuum and cultural forces may determine the ease with which a parent takes on specific parental role. For example, a couple that has never had a child has a family system with three interdependent relationships, as detailed in Chapter 3. When that family adds a biological child to the family system, they add to the complexity of the family relationships (there are now seven interdependent relationships), but the roles they are taking on are socially prescribed, which may make the transition to parenthood less stressful. Conversely, a stepfamily has seven interdependent relationships within the family system, but the roles at the onset are more complex than the roles held by the biological family who added a child.

The stepfamily roles – in particular the stepparent-stepchild roles – are qualitatively different than those in a biological family. Social culture may prescribe a very basic outline for a stepparent role, but the details of that role are really left up to the individual family. In essence, each stepfamily may have to “make” their parental role rather than “take” on a parental role. It may be the construction of the stepparent-stepchild roles depends greatly on the age of the stepchild when stepparenting began, the length of time spent stepparenting, the relationship between the stepchild and their non-resident biological parent, and the relationship between the stepchild and their resident biological parent; biological families do not have this added complexity. Adding a new
biological child to a stepfamily (creating eleven intrafamilial relationships) may further complicate those roles and family relationships, both inside and outside the household. As the quality of one relationship within a family “spills over” to other relationships, factors that influence the quality of the relationship between stepparent and stepchild should be viewed as contributing to overall marital quality in parents.

Similarly, the shift from parenting one child to parenting two children is one of the “pathways to parenthood” that is rarely addressed in the literature. There are quantitative and qualitative differences in parenting two – or three or four – children than there is in parenting one child. First, the intrafamilial relationships grow quantitatively as more members are added to the family, with more potential for “relationship problems” that can spillover into other areas of family functioning, including marital quality. Second, relationships between family members may qualitatively differ from one another. For example, a mother may have a qualitatively different relationship with her ten-year-old daughter than with her twelve-year-old son, simply because of shared interests and activities. While differences of this type may segregate based on gender, personality, or shared interests, the ages of the children in the family have an impact as well: Parents are more likely to engage in activities based on shared interests with an older teen than they do with a toddler, where “shared” activities are relatively forced by the age of the child.

Within the context of the transition to parenthood, family research has overwhelmingly neglected to view family structure as an important consideration in family studies, with relatively few exceptions. The lack of research and theory in this area results in a conceptualization of “the transition to parenthood” as only developmental, ignoring that the shift of roles required when adding further children may
be relevant and assuming that stepparenting is the same as “biological” parenting. This research has focused on three main family structures and their transitions to parenthood, but there are other structures that would also be qualitatively different, including the transitions to parenthood of same-sex partners to parenting and the transition of cohabitating heterosexual partners to parenting. When starting to conceptualize different family structures into the rubric of “transition to parenthood,” the dependent variable that is often used to determine how well a family transitions, marital quality, has to be carefully considered.

“Marital quality” has been conceptualized in a variety of ways over the past almost seventy years. While there have been controversies over the conceptualization of what constitutes a “high” versus “low” quality marriage, it is perhaps the very name of the variable that has constrained studies on the transition to parenthood to first-time, biological parents: To be included in a study of marital quality across the transition to parenthood, the couple must first be married. This definition of the dependent variable then excludes same-sex parents and cohabitating parents as they are, whether by choice or by law, unmarried. If structure does indeed make a difference in relationship quality, these different family structural contexts also need to be assessed to see where relationship quality may change over the transition to parenthood and a change away from assessments of “marital quality” to assessments of “relationship quality” needs to be made.

Measurement of relationship quality is also an issue. Meany different ways and methods of measuring marital quality have been proposed and used over the years. All of these methods have their strengths and weaknesses, but the inclusion of family structural
context into assessments of relationship quality may pose some additional problems. For example, different family structures may place different weights on items included in an analysis of relationship quality. A recent study comparing childless versus first-time parents assessed the weighting these couples put on marital satisfaction determinants, finding that the weighting differed depending on family structural context (Guttmann and Lazar 2004).

Further research is needed to assess whether or not the same variables impact different family structures in different ways. In this analysis only two elements of marital quality were assessed and the magnitude of change for both variables differed when comparing family structures with children and without. It is possible that, within the myriad of ways of conceptualizing “marital quality,” some marital quality dimensions may have different trajectories dependent on family structure. If these measures are summed into one composite measure of marital quality, differences between family structures may be lost.

Although this research demonstrates that both family structural context and the transition to parenthood have small but significant effects on marital quality, the limitations within this study merit discussion. First, changes found between $T_1$ and $T_2$ – even though significant in some instances – were extremely small and, arguably, of little practical significance. If a marital happiness score increases by .33 on a scale of one to seven, will anyone notice? One factor that constrains the findings here is the five to six years that intervened between collection of the two waves of data and the fact that only two waves of data existed for comparison purposes. Most prior research has determined that the addition of a child to a family has a greater impact on marital quality close to the
time of transition, at least for first-time parents (Belsky 1990; Belsky, Lang, and Rovine 1985; Belsky, Spanier, and Rovine 1983; Cowan et al. 1985; Cox, Paley, Burchinal, and Payne 1999; Lawrence, Nylen, and Cobb 2007; Wallace and Gotlib 1990). If marital quality declines with the birth of a child and then rebounds, it is likely that the two waves of data used here are separated by too much time to capture the full decline and do not allow for enough time points to capture the full trajectories of relationship quality variables. Ideally, data would be collected prior to the birth of the child and then every few months during the first two years or so after the child is born. Alternatively, accounting for the age of the youngest child in the family may provide an additional control for variations in marital quality. Due to methodological constraints, controlling for the age of the youngest child was not possible in this research, but should be accounted for in future studies.

Second, as mentioned above, it may be that the construction of parental roles, particularly in non-biological, first-time parent structures, is not best captured by quantitative data. The parental role may be deeply personalized, particularly for stepparents, and may be better captured through the use of qualitative interviewing and analysis techniques.

While differences in families due to their initial structures is at the forefront in this research, similarities between family structures also need to be addressed. One finding of note in this research is that stepfamilies and families with children at $T_1$ had changes in marital quality that were very similar and, throughout this research, no statistical differences between the two groups were found. These findings have important social policy implications that need to be considered.
As of this writing, courts rarely look at a stepfamily in the same terms as they view a biological family. Legal outcomes for stepfamilies and stepfamily-like relationships regarding custody, visitation, and child support rarely take into account the potential relationships that may exist behind the label “stepfamily.” Thus, stepparents and their stepchildren are considered legal strangers, without any of the benefits and responsibilities inherent in biological parenting. This means, for example, that in a relationship dissolution case, a stepparent who has parented their ten-year-old stepchild for eight years has an extremely low chance of receiving “parenting time” as part of their legal settlement. Those in same-sex relationships in states where partner adoption is not permitted face similar situations where they are considered “legal strangers” to the very children they have spent years parenting.

The similarity of values at $T_1$ and $T_2$ and of change scores for stepfamilies compared to families adding a second or subsequent child indicate that stepfamilies and families with children have similar experiences that affect marital quality and that the family structures are more alike than previously believed. Those similar experiences may rest on the fact that both families have children in the household at $T_1$ and the day-to-day effect of having or not having children in a household may be what differentiates marital quality, not whose children they are. One overarching reason for the existence of laws and policies is to “treat similarly situated persons similarly, not [to] engage in gestures of superficial equality.”3 If stepfamilies and families with children are similarly situated, experiencing similar familial situations, shouldn’t they be held in equal standing in matters of public policy?

Clearly, this research has some methodological weaknesses, but it does point to family structural context as an important factor in assessing relationship quality across different pathways to parenthood. Mixed-methods of research, combining both qualitative constructions of parenthood with quantitative methods of relationship assessment may assist in pinpointing the effect of family structure, both on its own and as an interactive factor with the transition to parenthood.
APPENDIX A

MARITAL QUALITY VARIABLE QUESTIONS AND SCALE CONSTRUCTION

Marital Happiness

Taking things all together, how would you describe your marriage?

1 = Very unhappy

to

7 = Very happy

Frequency of Disagreements

The following is a list of subjects on which couples often have disagreements. How often, if at all, in the last year have you had open disagreements about each of the following:

- Household tasks
- Money
- Spending time together
- Sex

1 = Never
2 = Less than once a month
3 = Several times a month
4 = About once a week
5 = Several times a week
6 = Almost every day
## APPENDIX B

### TABLE B-1

**UNIVARIATE EFFECTS OF CONTROL VARIABLES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Marital Happiness</th>
<th>Frequency of Conflict</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>( T_1 )</td>
<td>( T_2 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Structure</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender of respondent</td>
<td>( .233 )</td>
<td>( .397 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household income</td>
<td>( .010 )</td>
<td>2.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of marriage</td>
<td>5.64*</td>
<td>( .020 )</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Experience</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender of respondent</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>( .91 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household income</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>1.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of marriage</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>( .26 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Structure X Experience</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender of respondent</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>( .394 )</td>
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<tr>
<td>Household income</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>1.936</td>
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<tr>
<td>Length of marriage</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>( .017 )</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Numbers designate \( F \) test results for each variable at the time indicated.  
*\( p < .05 \), **\( p < .01 \), ***\( p < .001 \).
BIBLIOGRAPHY


-------. 1995. "Interventions to ease the transition to parenthood - why they are needed and what they can do." *Family Relations* 44:412-423.


