

Stable Unions Matter for Children's Sake

by

Alan B. Feranil

University of San Carlos Office of Population Studies Foundation

Introduction

The child's environment is a major influence in determining its development. Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (1979) showed the different types of environment that influence child development. One of these environments is the home, which is largely influenced by the family structure, the composition and relationship to members in the households (Schneider et al., 2005).

Studies that focused on changes in family structure have yielded diverse results. Some have shown that children of intact families where both parents were present had less behavioral problems (Morrison and Cherlin 1995 in Aughinbaugh, et al., 2005) and performed better in cognitive and other achievement tests (Baydar and Brooks-Gunn, 1994, McLanahan, 1997 in (Aughinbaugh, et al., 2005). However, results of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth in 1997 showed that changes in family structure due to the marital status of parents were not significant factors associated with youth achievement (Aughinbaugh, et al., 2005) and divorce did not affect the cognitive stimulation nor emotional support of young children (Kowaleski-Jones and Dunifon, 2004). However, other studies have also shown that changes in family structure explained income inequality in families with children (Martin 2006). Similarly, family transitions involving the stability of relationships between parents (Brown, 2006) or growing with single divorced mothers (Biblarz and Gottainer, 2000) or in cohabitating relationships (Kalil, 2001) affected the development of children.

Contribution of this study

Although studies on changes in marital status may have been well explored in developed societies and to a limited extent in some developing societies, findings have been inconsistent. Moreover, studies on children from disadvantaged environments have been limited. Local studies (e.g. Save the Children, 2007) that examined the psychosocial development of children are limited and have not accounted for the changes in family structure due to transitions in marital status of parents on the psychosocial and cognitive development of children. This study sought to provide additional evidence on the effect of stability of marital unions on the child's well being.

Major Objective

The major objective of this study was to determine the influence of stable marital unions on the well being (i.e. overall development) of children from selected disadvantaged areas in the Philippines.

Methodology

Data

This study focused on a sample of 2,190 children who were followed up from 2001 to 2005 and were aged three to six years old in 2005 living in *barangays* (villages) in Western, Central and Eastern Visayas, the three major island groups in Central Philippines. These *barangays* were those identified to be at risk and in need¹ by the Philippine government's Department of Social Welfare and Development (Council for the Welfare of Children, 1999). Thus, the sample children from these *barangays* provided a different insight into the development of children living in a disadvantaged settings.

Variables

Outcome variable: In this paper, I used the overall development scores of children. This development index was derived using the Revised Early Childhood Development Checklist constructed, validated and normed by Drs. Lourdes Ledesma and Elizabeth Ventura of the Department of Psychology of the University of the Philippines. The checklist covered seven domains (gross, motor, fine motor, self help, receptive language, expressive language, cognitive and socio-emotional domains). Standard scores (encompassing all the domains) were derived and used in classifying development of children. In this paper, the overall development score was measured in all survey rounds, but the outcome variable of interest in this paper was the overall development score in 2005.

Main exposure variables: In this study, the stability of marital union referred to the mother's last marital status.. This would refer to stable unions (continued to be married either by law or by the Church in all survey rounds) or unstable (being consensual or having no spouse in any survey round, or changed marital status in any survey round).

Covariates

Individual, household and community characteristics that may influence the development of children were also included in the analysis. Characteristics like age and sex of the child, nutritional status (stunting) and attendance to day care or preschool activities and maternal characteristics (education and work status of mothers) were included. Household level variables, which measured the household environment, included the ownership of land and television sets at the onset. The community characteristic referred to whether the community where the child lives was a program area (where early childhood interventions were introduced) or not.

Tools for Analysis

Several statistical techniques were used in the analysis. Analysis was done for girls and boys to determine whether different factors affect the development of either gender.

Frequencies and cross tabulations were used to explore the characteristics of the sample children, the changes in the different domains of psychosocial and emotional development, stability of mother's marital status. Multivariate regression models were carried out to determine the effects

¹ Those in need include populations with children aged 0-5 who are at risk of dying or populations with children 6-12 years old who have dropped out of elementary school or who are underweight (less than 75% of the standard). Those at risk include populations with children aged 0-5 who are living in households with limited information, in households with low income per capita income or in a community with limited social services (Council for the Welfare of Children, 1999).

of the exposure variable on the outcomes and the effects of the other co-variates. STATA Statistical Software was used to carry out the statistical analysis.

Results of the study

The girls and boys in the study were on average five years old, but there were more boys than girls included in the study. Many of these children were normal (not stunted). Although these children were from disadvantaged areas, more than half of them attended day care or preschool.

For both girls and boys, more than half of them had mothers who had some high school education and about half of the children had mothers who were working. The children came from households where there were more than six persons on average. Less than half of these children were living in households with television and about three of every ten children were living in households where their parents owned the land on which their house was built. A considerable proportion of girls and boys were from program areas where the early childhood development initiatives were introduced.

As shown in Table 2, there has been an improvement on the overall development score of girls and boys (comparing 2001 and 2005 figures). The distribution of the sample in 2005 revealed that only a small proportion of girls and boys showed delays in overall development while almost all had average or improved overall development.

As shown in Table 3, nearly seven of every ten girls or boys were living with mothers whose marriages have been stable. More than a third of girls and boys were living in environments where mothers were in unstable unions.

Examining the influence of the stability of marital union on the overall development of girls and boys showed that children showed better overall development. if their mothers were in stable unions. For both girls and boys, apart from the stability of mother's marriage, their age, being normal (not stunted) and having a mother with high school education were associated with positive overall development. Moreover, girls and boys who lived in households with high school educated mothers, lesser number of residents, having television sets and where parents owned the lot were associated with their overall development.

Table 1. Selected Characteristics of the sample children, their mothers, and household environment.

Characteristic	Girls (N=1,007)		Boys (N=1183)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Age (in months)	65.85	9.03	65.97	13.52
Nutritional status (not stunted)	0.63	0.48	0.53	0.50
Attended daycare or preschool	0.59	0.49	0.53	0.50
Number of persons in household	6.59	2.10	6.68	2.12
Mothers work status	0.46	0.50	0.48	0.50
Mother s education (high school)	0.54	0.50	0.57	0.50
Television ownership	0.47	0.50	0.51	0.50
Lot ownership	0.30	0.46	0.36	0.48
Program area	0.62	0.48	0.61	0.49

Table 2. Overall development of 3-6 year old boys and girls

Characteristic	Girls (N=1,007)		Boys (N=1183)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Year 1	97.78	15.83	98.31	16.31
Year 4	103.79	13.02	101.83	13.52
Status of overall development	Per cent		Per cent	
Suffered setbacks in overall development	5.86		6.17	
Average overall development	87.69		90.36	
Improved overall development	6.45		3.47	

Table 3. Distribution of Mother's Marital Status

Characteristic	Girls (N=1,007)	Boys (N=1183)
	Per cent	Per cent
Stability of mother's marriage		
Stable	69.99	68.56
Unstable	30.01	31.44

Table 4. Regression results showing the influence of stability of mother's marriage and co-variables on the overall development of 3-6 year old girls

Variables	Model 1 (Unadjusted)			Model 2 (Adjusted)		
	Beta	95 % CI		Beta	95 % CI	
<i>Family structure</i>						
Stability of mother's marriage	2.30	0.54- 4.05	**	1.86	0.16-3.55	*
<i>Covariates</i>						
Age of children				0.15	0.06-0.24	**
Nutritional status (not stunted)				3.18	1.54-4.82	**
Attendance in daycare				0.71	-0.95-2.35	
Mothers' education (high school)				2.13	0.95-3.30	**
Mothers' work status (working)				0.53	-1.03-2.08	
Number of persons in household				-0.40	-0.77-0.03	*
Television ownership				2.04	0.36-3.71	*
Land ownership				1.43	-0.27-3.13	
Program area				0.17	-1.44-1.78	

** Significant at the 1 percent level / * Significant at the 5 percent level

Table 4. Regression results showing the influence of stability of mother's marriage and co-variables on the overall development of 3-6 year old boys

Variables	Model 1 (Unadjusted)			Model 2 (Adjusted)		
	Beta	95 % CI		Beta	95 % CI	
<i>Family structure</i>						
Stability of mother's marriage	2.42	0.77-4.08	**	1.86	0.61,3.55	*
<i>Covariates</i>						
Age of children				0.15	0.06,0.24	**
Nutritional status (not stunted)				3.180	1.53,4.82	**
Attendance in daycare				0.71	-0.95,2.35	
Mothers' education (high school)				3.06	1.36,4.47	**
Mothers' work status (working)				0.53	-1.03,2.08	
Number of persons in household				-0.40	-0.77,-0.03	*
Television ownership				2.03	0.36,3.71	*
Land ownership				1.43	-0.27,3.13	
Program area				0.17	-2.43,2.78	

** Significant at the 1 percent level * Significant at the 5 percent level

References:

Aughinbaugh, A, C Pierret and D Rothstein, 2005 'The Impact of Family Structure Transitions on Youth Achievement: Evidence from Children of the NLSY79', Demography 42(3) 447-468.

Baydar, N and J Brooks-Gunn, 1994 'The Dynamics of Child Support and Its Consequences for Children', in Child Support and Well Being, I Garfinkel, S McLanahan, and PS Robins (eds), Washington DC: Urban Institute Press: 257-84

Biblarz, T and G Gottainer, 2000 'Family Structure and Children's Success: A Comparison of Widowed and Divorced Single Mother Families', Journal of Marriage and Family, 62(2): 533-548.

Bronfenbrenner, U. 1979 The Ecology of Human Development, Cambridge: Harvard University Press,

Brown, S. 2006 'Family Structure Transitions and Adolescent Well Being', Demography 43(3) 447-461.

Council for the Welfare of Children, 1999. The Early Child Development Program Infokit, Quezon City: Council for the Welfare of Children.

Gallahher, M and J Baker, 2004. 'Do Mothers and Fathers Matter? The Social Science Evidence on Marriage and Child Well Being', IMAPP Policy Brief, Washington: Institute of Marriage and Public Policy in www.imapp.org accessed March 20, 2004.

Kalil, A. (2001). 'Cohabitation and child development', in Just Living Together: Implications of Cohabitation for Children, Families, and Social Policy, A Booth and A Crouter (eds), Erlbaum; New Jersey.

Kowalski-Jones, L and R Dunifon, 2004 'Children's Home Environments, Understanding the Role of Family Structure Changes', Journal of Family Issues, 25(1): 3-28.

McLanahan, S 1997 'Parents Absence or Poverty, Which Matters More?', in Consequences of Growing Up Poor, GJ Duncan and J Brooks-Gunn (eds), New York:

Martin, M. 2006 'Family Structures and Income Inequality in Families with Children, 1976 to 2000', *Demography*, 43(3): 421-445.

Morrison, D and AJ Cherlin, 1995, 'The Divorce Process and Young Children's Well Being: A Prospective Analysis', Journal of Marriage and Family, 57: 800-812.

Save the Children, 2007. School Readiness of Children in Various Socio Economic Environments, Manila: Save the Children (Unpublished manuscript) in <http://www.cwc.gov.ph/ecdp.html> accessed May 20, 2007

Schneider, B and A Atteberry and A Owens, 2005, Family Matters: Family Structure and Child Outcomes, Birmingham: Alabama Policy Institute.