

**THE IMPACT OF FAMILY STRUCTURE ON ADOLESCENT AND  
MATERNAL VALUES FOR FAMILY ROLES**

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## THE IMPACT OF FAMILY STRUCTURE ON ADOLESCENT AND MATERNAL VALUES FOR WORK AND FAMILY ROLES

The typical American family has undergone dramatic changes. Parental separation, divorce, and remarriage have become common experiences for children in the United States. Half of all marriages begun in the mid-1970's will end in divorce (Cherlin, 1981). Recent statistics indicate that future divorce rates may be even higher. For example, using the 1985 Current Population Survey, Martin and Bumpass (1989) concluded that two-thirds of all first marriages are likely to disrupt. This represents a dramatic increase in divorce rates from just a decade ago when only 20-30% of children experienced parental divorce (Bane, 1976; Furstenberg, Nord, Peterson, & Zill, 1983). The remarriage of a divorced custodial parent results in a third family configuration that is experienced by an increasing number of children. Glick (1984) predicted that 35% of all children born in the early 1980's will live with a stepparent during a part of their childhood. Unlike a decade ago, having children has become less of an obstacle to remarriage for single mothers (Glick & Lin, 1986).

While a great deal of research has been conducted on the outcomes experienced by children in "broken" families, few studies have examined the long-term impact of growing up in a single-mother headed household. Past research and current political rhetoric have been driven by a value orientation that assumes that the two-parent family is the ideal family structure, and that deviations from that form are bad. Much of the research on family structure change takes the crisis perspective, looking for negative outcomes associated with divorce and remarriage. Although many children and families resume normal functioning following the initial crisis period after divorce, the negative stereotypes of divorced families persist. Divorce research has sustained this negative impression of single parenting. Because its emphasis has been on children's adjustment to the stressors accompanying family transitions,

research on divorce focuses primarily on the difficulties encountered during the first few years after marital dissolution. Studies rarely examine whether there are differences in the long-term course of development of children and adolescents in different family types.

In order to more fully understand the effects of divorce on the children and adults involved, research questions need to be developed from a framework other than the common crisis perspective. The main goal of this paper is to test such a framework, examining possible long-term influences of both divorce and living with a single mother on the course of development of typical children and adolescents using a more objective developmental, rather than a crisis, perspective. This study examines how divorce affects adolescents' gender-role related values associated with marriage and family, both directly and indirectly through its effects on maternal values and advice.

These values are an important area of adolescent development. Work and family are domains in which there are distinct gender-role prescriptions for adolescents to follow. And despite the impact of the women's movement, these prescriptions remain fairly gender-role stereotyped. Reviews of sex differences in adolescent goals (Eccles, 1987; Eccles & Hoffman, 1984; Herzog, 1982; Marini, 1978) suggest that occupational choices at this age are still highly gender-role stereotyped. The persistence of this finding is especially interesting in light of the fact that girls are increasingly faced with incentives such as the growing numbers of mother-headed households to develop skills that will lead to secure and well-paid employment.

Do the daughters of divorced mothers place less importance on family roles relative to work roles? What processes are involved in the transmission of family-related values and how are these different in single-mother families? I am proposing that family structure influences the adolescent's values indirectly through its impact on maternal values and advice.

Maternal variables that are likely to influence adolescents' family values are mothers' long-term socialization goals and the values they hope to transmit to their children. These aspirations may change following divorce. Some mothers could adjust their goals for their children's futures, assigning new values to competing goals, as the adjustments of single parenting and supporting a household alone influence their perspective.

A change in relative values for family and career roles could lead to changes in the explicit socialization messages provided by single mothers. For example, single mothers may be less likely than married mothers to have or communicate expectations that their children marry or have families; particularly their daughters. Evidence comparing these maternal values in different family structures is not available, and research is needed to examine how these values might change following divorce.

Since gender-roles are important in the development of career and family plans (Eccles, 1987), differential socialization of gender role values and attitudes in intact and divorced families could have an impact on occupational aspirations. In the occupational domain, a mother's transmission of non-traditional values could prove advantageous, especially for girls aspiring to achieve financial independence. Girls whose mothers do not express expectations that their daughters marry, or who expect their daughters to delay marriage, may be more likely to consider non-traditional careers, since they would not anticipate having to allocate as much time to domestic roles. Since male-dominated occupations frequently demand greater time commitments, girls who do not anticipate integrating family and work roles may be more likely to aspire to non-traditional careers (Eccles, 1987). In this context, the present model examines the long term impact of living with a single mother in a framework that allows for positive interpretations of non-traditional values.

It was predicted that growing up in a single mother-headed household would lead to lower importance of family roles because marital status changes would have

an impact upon maternal values, which would in turn be related to adolescents' values.

For children in remarried homes, it was expected that similar processes would have operated at some point in their lives, since they lived with their single mother prior to her remarriage. While the divorce may have led to less traditional maternal values, the remarriage may reverse these changes. In addition, it may be that the mothers who remarried were those who placed relatively more value on family than those who stayed single. Thus, whether children in remarried families would look more like those in divorced or married families, or like a combination of the two, was an open question.

## Method

### Design Overview

In 1984 and 1985, the Transitions at Early Adolescence Project gathered four waves of data from students making the transition from sixth to seventh grade and some of their parents. In 1988, when the participants were in tenth grade, a fifth wave of data was collected on a subset of these adolescents and on the parents of approximately 40% of this reduced sample.

### Sample

The sample for this study was drawn from the existing longitudinal sample of students in the Transitions at Early Adolescence Study. The students were from 6 middle and lower-middle class communities in southeastern Michigan and represented a range of socio-economic and educational characteristics. Families were recruited with a permission letter distributed in the students' sixth grade math classes. It is important to note that this sample is representative of families with children enrolled in the grades selected for study, and allows for the assessment of family structure effects in a non-clinical sample.

This study includes a subsample of the past participants. Of the 12 original districts, 6 were chosen for the follow-up study based on past participation histories of families in the districts. According to 1980 Census information, these six districts range in median family income from \$23,200 to \$27,500. In 1988, a fifth wave of data was gathered from 1,304 students (75% of the students we were able to recontact) and from the parents of 528 of these. (The fourth wave included parent data from 538 families, so the fifth wave retained 98% of that number of participants.) This reduced sample is the sample for this study.

Of the students responding at the fifth wave, 27%, or 346, indicated that their parents did not live together. There were 200 students whose custodial parent had not remarried, and 132 with a remarried custodial parent. Of the children who had experienced parental divorce, 269 lived with their mothers and 41 lived with their fathers. Only those residing with their mothers were included in the present analyses, because there was such a limited number of custodial fathers. The analyses reported in this paper include only White students, since the sample included few Black or Hispanic students, and only two in remarried families. The final sample includes 797 children whose parents are married, 95 living with remarried mothers, and 108 with divorced mothers, to total 1,000 participants. Approximately two-thirds of these participants whose parents were eligible to participate had mothers who provided data (N=406).

### Procedure

The sample was recontacted in the spring of 1988. Feedback letters containing initial descriptive statistics of the past study (Waves 1-4) were mailed to all participating families in the reduced sample. The mailing also described the proposed study and solicited their continued participation. In the case of intact families, participation was solicited from both parents and the target adolescent. In single-parent families, participation from the custodial parent and the target adolescent was

sought. In blended families, the custodial parent, the step-parent, and the target adolescent were asked to participate.

The student questionnaire was administered in a group setting in each of the eight high schools in April, 1988. Those tenth grade students in each school who had participated in the sixth and seventh grades were excused from their regular classes and gathered in a cafeteria or auditorium. Based on pilot testing, the students were given up to 90 minutes to complete the questionnaire, and most finished early. Research staff members were available to answer any questions the participants had.

A concerted effort was made to maintain as large a sample of families as possible by sending questionnaires and post-paid return envelopes to students who were absent on the day of administration if their parents had participated at Waves 1-4. The parent questionnaires were mailed to parents who had participated in at least one earlier wave, along with feedback about the findings from the study, and a post-paid return envelope. Three weeks after the initial mailing, reminder postcards were sent to all families who had not returned questionnaires. Follow-up phone calls were used to encourage participation and to determine whether parents had misplaced the original questionnaires and were in need of second copies. Telephone interviews were used to gather demographic and future expectancy data from parents who had not returned questionnaires within three months. Using these techniques, some information was gathered from 66% of parents in the study.

### Measures

Student and parent attitudes were assessed using questionnaires consisting of seven-point Likert items and open-ended questions to assess attitudes and expectations. The parents' questionnaires were constructed to parallel the children's wherever possible. For value questions, it is not clear which is the most relevant to consider as a mediator: the child's perception, or the actual value reported by the parent. It is important to examine whether the parental influence is mediated through

the child's perception, and which of these two variables, in turn, mediates the relationship between family structure and the child outcomes. This study includes both mother and child reports in the analyses.

Scales were constructed based on theoretically driven factor analysis. For each scale, a mean was computed when a student had non-missing data on half or more of the individual items in the scale. Unless otherwise noted, all scales have a minimum value of one and a maximum value of seven. The specific items in each scale, as well as alphas, are reported in Appendix A.

Adolescent family-role values. The Family Value scale consisted of four items about the anticipated importance in the adolescents' adult lives of marriage, parenting, and successful participation in the roles of spouse and parent. Higher scores indicate greater importance. The alpha for Family Value is .87.

Maternal family-role values. Maternal rating of Family Value is a composite score of four items on the importance of different family roles as goals for the child (alpha = .73). These items are the same as those asked of the students in the Family Value scale.

Perceived Parental Family Value was gathered from the adolescents with one question about the importance placed by parents on the adolescent's eventual participation in spouse and parent roles. High scores on these scales denote greater importance of family roles.

Maternal advice about family and work roles. Maternal reports of advice about work, family, and the conflicts involved between the two domains were collected, using Likert items to measure the frequency of advice on each topic (high scores indicate greater frequency) from both mothers and adolescents. As with the value items discussed above, perceived frequency of parental advice was asked of each child.



## Results

The conceptual model presented in Figure 1 guided the analyses. Bivariate and multivariate analyses were used, when appropriate, to test a number of hypotheses inherent in the model for the direct and indirect impact of family structure on adolescent values associated with marriage and family.

Because mother data were available for only about half of the sample, the children with mother data were compared to those without mother data on a number of variables to determine whether or not the sample was representative of the entire population. On all measures of achievement, the children with mothers who provided data scored higher. However, for the values and beliefs examined in this study, the two groups did not differ significantly. In addition, multiple groups LISREL comparing the two samples indicated that there were no significant differences in the relationships between these variables for the two groups. Thus, the results reported here combine the two samples when maternal variables are not included in the analysis, providing a larger sample size.

### Relation of Family Structure to Child Values

Initially, 3 X 2 (marital status X child gender) analyses of variance were run to check for interactions between marital status effects and gender. As there was only one area in which interactions occurred (parental advice about the conflicts between work and family responsibilities), boys and girls were pooled for all analyses. One-way analysis of variance was performed to compare the importance placed on family roles by children in intact, divorced, and remarried homes. The results are illustrated in Table 1. Three possible pairs of comparisons are tested: married/remarried, married/divorced, and remarried/divorced. Those shown by F-tests to be significant at the .05 level or lower are reported.

As predicted, children in intact families placed significantly more importance on their participation in future spousal and parental roles than those in either remarried ( $p = .02$ ) or divorced families ( $p < .001$ ). (See Figure 1)

#### Relation of Family Structure to Maternal Variables

The next bivariate analysis examines whether there are differences in maternal values that might account for differences between family types. Maternal reports of the importance placed on family roles were significantly different, with divorced mothers having lower value of family roles than married or remarried mothers,  $p < .005$ . (See Figure 2)

There was also a trend in the same direction for children's perception of parental value placed on family roles, with those in intact families perceiving higher parental value than those in remarried families,  $p < .07$ . (See Figure 3)

Divorced mothers reported giving significantly more advice about the conflicts between family and work responsibilities than married mothers,  $p < .002$ . Remarried mothers fall in between. For advice about the importance of being able to support oneself and a family there is a similar, but nonsignificant, trend,  $F(2,326) = 2.28$ ,  $p = .10$ . The child's perception of talking with the mother about future plans reflects this difference, with children of divorced mothers reporting talking more,  $p < .001$ . In addition, although there are not significant differences between family types, child reports of parental advice about specific work and family-related issues parallel this finding. Children in intact families report less parental advice about the conflicts between work and family responsibilities than those in divorced families,  $p = .07$ .

Mother and child reports of advice about this issue are the only variables which showed an interaction of marital status and child gender in a 2 X 3 ANOVA. According to maternal reports, remarried mothers are giving daughters more advice than sons,  $F(2,316) = 4.28$ ,  $p < .02$ . There is a trend in the child reports for an interaction in which

sons of remarried mothers report receiving more advice than daughters of remarried mothers,  $F(2,820) = 2.26, p < .12$ . See Table 2 for these results.

### Multivariate Relationships

To test the viability of the hypothesis that maternal values help explain the effects of divorce or remarriage on adolescents' values, multivariate analyses were performed. Recursive path analysis was used to test for whether the effects of family structure on adolescent family-related values and beliefs are mediated by maternal family-related values, maternal gender-role typed beliefs, and maternal employment history. A variable functions as a mediator when it accounts for the relation between the predictor and the outcome. Thus, to test for mediation, the following three steps suggested by Baron and Kenny (1986) were followed: first, regressing the mediator on the independent variable; second regressing the dependent variable on the independent variable; and third, regressing the dependent variable on both the independent variable and the mediator.<sup>1</sup> All coefficients that were significant ( $p < .05$ ) are included in the following figures.

Figure 4 illustrates the unmediated effect of family structure on child family values. As discussed in the section on univariate relationships, children in remarried and divorced families placed lower value on family roles. Figures 5 and 6 show the mediating role of mother's family value and of perceived parental family value separately. In both cases, family structure continues to have a significant direct effect. Figure 7 combines the two intervening variables, and illustrates that the direct marital status effect does not remain significant. These computations showed both maternal family value and adolescent perception of parental family value were significant

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<sup>1</sup>All of these regressions were also run with income as an exogenous predictor, and in no case was it a significant predictor of these outcomes. Furthermore, it did not eliminate the direct effects of marital status.

mediators for the relationship between family structure and adolescent family value. In other words, divorced mothers placed lower value on family roles, remarried mothers' children perceived them to have lower family values, and these two variables together accounted for the relationship between family structure and the adolescents' lower family value.

### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of family structure on adolescent values, and to examine the extent to which any effects are attributable to maternal values. As predicted, differences in family structure were related to adolescent attitudes. The analyses reported here document that marital status was linked to values for participation in family roles, with divorce and remarriage predicting lower family value. After assessing these main effects, maternal values combined with adolescent perceptions of those values were found to be significant mediators of divorce and remarriage effects.

Maternal family values were shown by path analyses to account for the lower importance placed on family roles by children in divorced and remarried families. Following divorce, a mother may decrease her value of family roles as she is confronted by the difficulty of parenting alone. Negative feelings about the challenges she must meet in financially and emotionally providing for her children (Arendell, 1986), accompanied by the negative experiences in her role as spouse that led to the divorce, may markedly diminish earlier positive feelings about family roles. In addition, she may feel betrayed by the failure of the societally prescribed roles she had accepted. Alternately, positive experiences of life as a single person may lead mothers to de-emphasize the marital role for their children, as they realize that not marrying can be a viable option. Either of these pathways, in turn, could lead to the child's lower family value.

It is worth noting in this discussion of parental value that the divorce variable affects the child's perception of parental values almost as strongly as maternal report of family value. A reason for the direct marital status effect may be that actions are more salient than maternal values. The parents elected to get divorced, thus dissolving their marriage. This action may communicate an even lower value of marriage than that reported by divorced mothers to the child. In support of this idea, the remarriage dummy variable did not have a similar direct effect. Remarried parents may communicate continued value for the spousal role by re-entering a marriage. Thus, while the child perception is important for prediction of child family value, it is not just in the role as an indicator of maternal values.

In sum, as predicted, the importance placed on spouse and parent roles for the adolescent by the parent was found to be an important mediator between family structure and child family value. Higher perceived parental family values (reported by the child), in combination with higher maternal report of family value, accounted for the higher child family value found in intact families.

In view of the pervasiveness of divorce and remarriage in our culture, it is surprising how little is known about the long term impact of these life transitions on parents and their children. This study has proposed an area of adolescent development (family-related values) that may be influenced by process differences between family types. The results suggest that increased attention should be focused on normal development in different family types, and the processes that influence adolescents who have experienced these family transitions.

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Table 1

**Child Means by Marital Status**

	<u>Married</u>	<u>Remarried</u>	<u>Divorced</u>	<u>F</u>	<u>p</u>
FAMILY VALUE	5.70 (1.34)	5.12 (1.79)	5.37 (1.55)	8.93	0.0001
PARENT FAMILY VALUE	4.56 (1.75)	4.15 (1.79)	4.25 (1.89)	2.69	0.0683
TALK W/MOM ABOUT FUTURE	4.55(1.68)	4.90(1.74)	5.17(1.89)	6.38	0.0018
DUAL ROLE CONFLICT ADVICE	3.71 (1.73)	4.04 (1.78)	4.05 (1.88)	2.52	0.0809

**Mother Means by Marital Status**

	<u>Married</u>	<u>Remarried</u>	<u>Divorced</u>	<u>F</u>	<u>p</u>
FAMILY VALUE	5.04 (1.00)	4.86 (1.05)	4.69 (1.12)	1.97	0.1411
DUAL ROLE CONFLICT ADVICE	3.72 (1.48)	4.26 (1.59)	4.75 (1.87)	5.85	0.0032

TABLE 2. MEANS FOR PARENTAL ADVICE

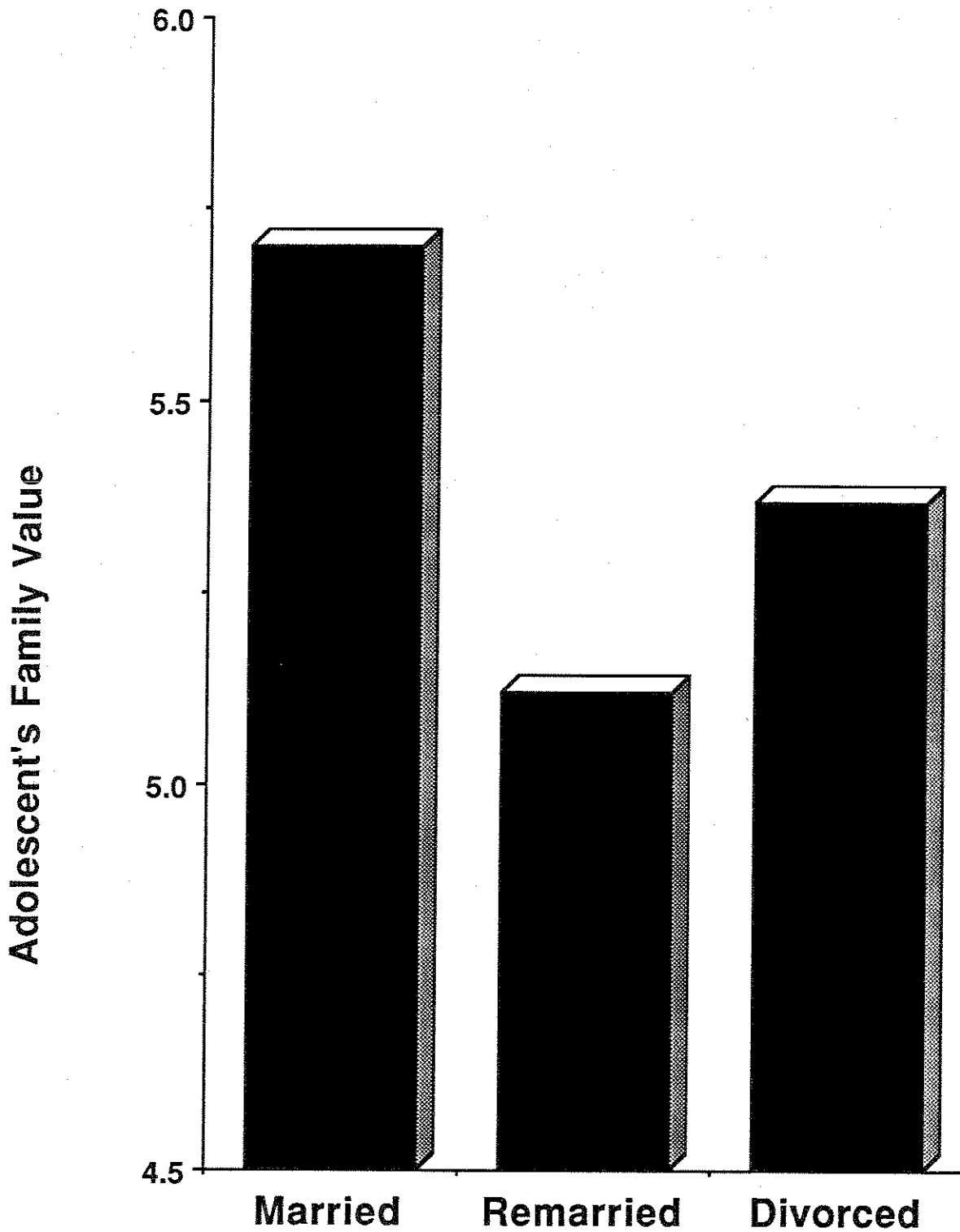
Child Report of Parent Dual Role Conflict Advice

	<u>Married</u>	<u>Remarried</u>	<u>Divorced</u>
Girls	3.66 n=341	3.75 n=52	4.07 n=56
Boys	3.75 n=321	4.84 n=19	4.03 n=37

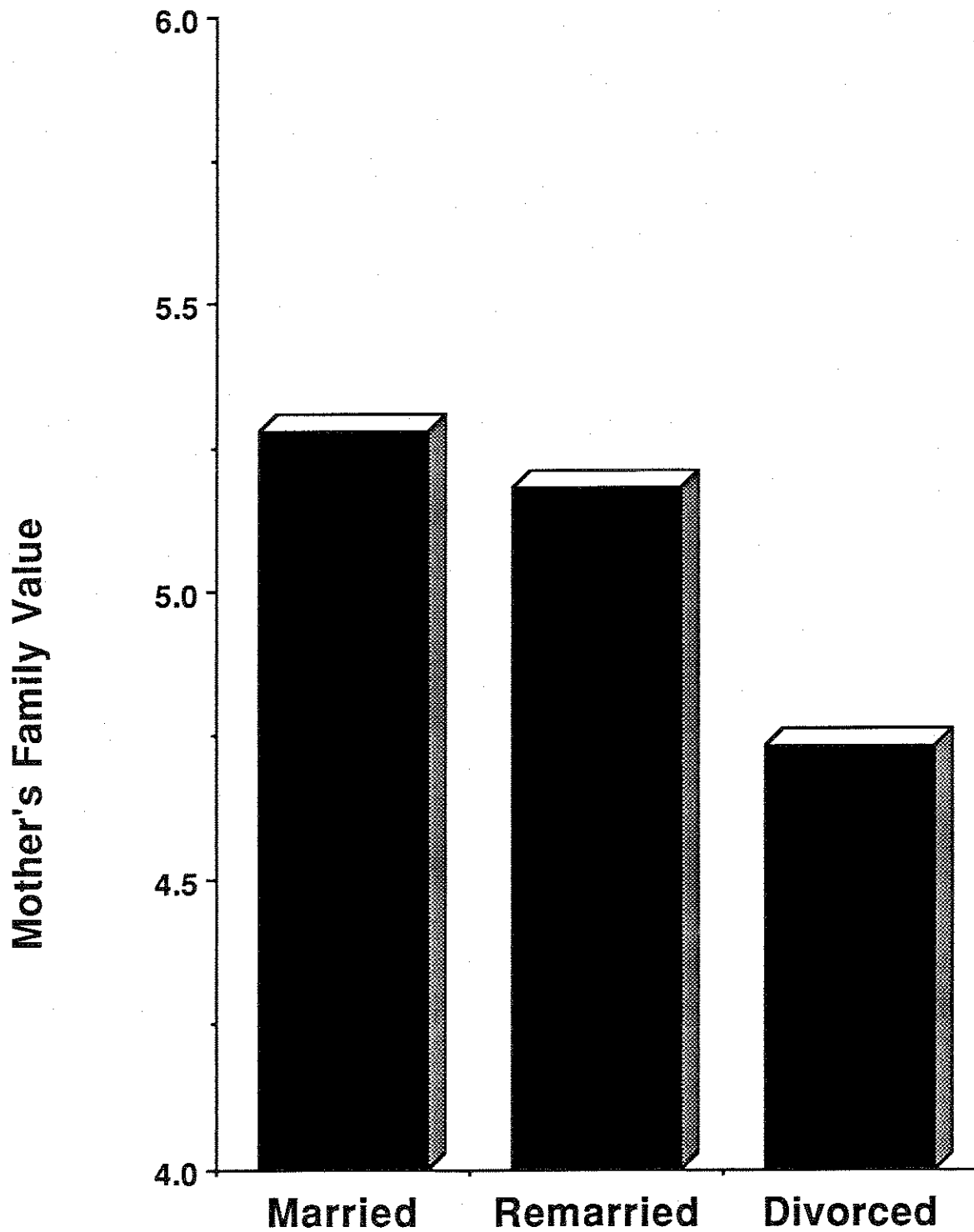
Parent Report of Parent Dual Role Conflict Advice

	<u>Married</u>	<u>Remarried</u>	<u>Divorced</u>
Girls	3.72 n=144	5.33 n=9	4.62 n=13
Boys	3.73 n=135	3.30 n=10	4.91 n=11

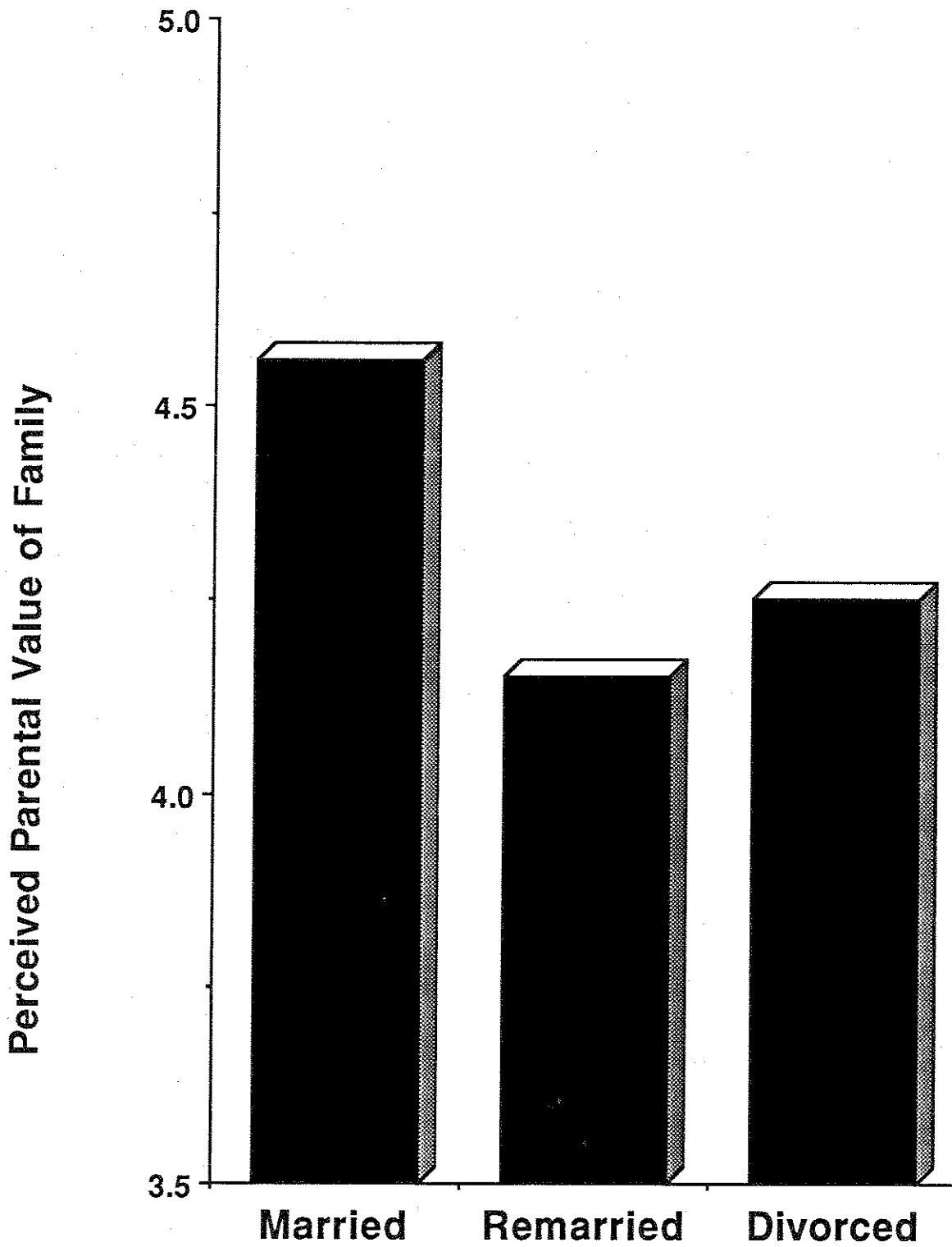




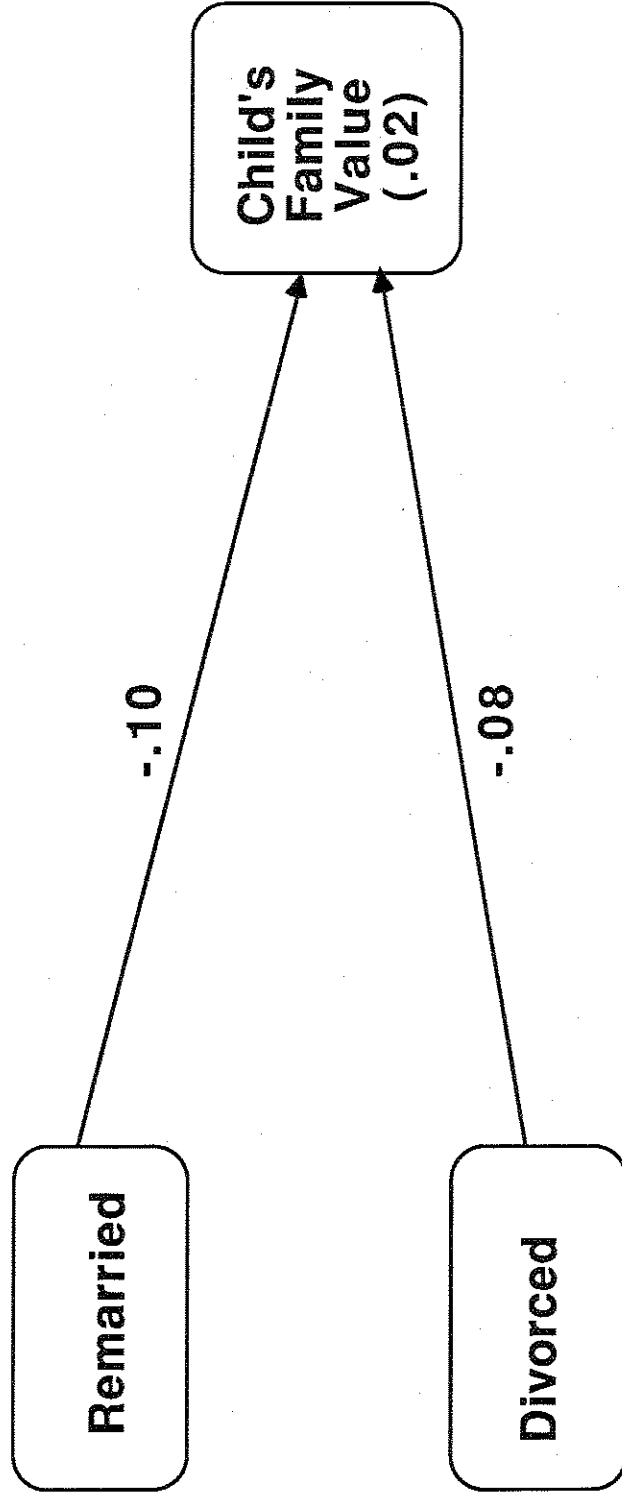
**Figure 1. Importance Placed on Family Roles by Adolescents**



**Figure 2. Importance Placed on Family Roles by Mothers**



**Figure 3. Adolescent Report of Importance Placed on Family Roles by Parents**



**Figure 4. Direct effects of marital status on child's family value.**

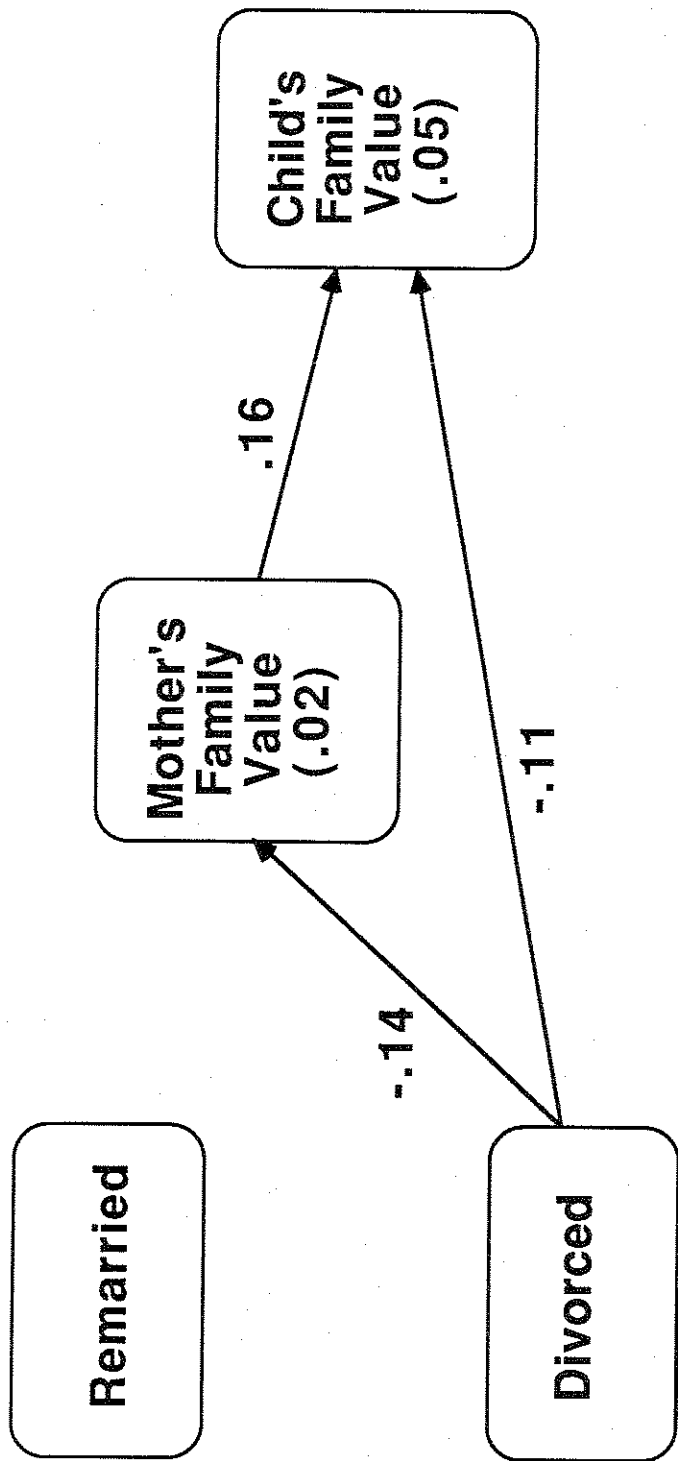


Figure 5. Mother's family value as a mediator of marital status effects on child's family value.

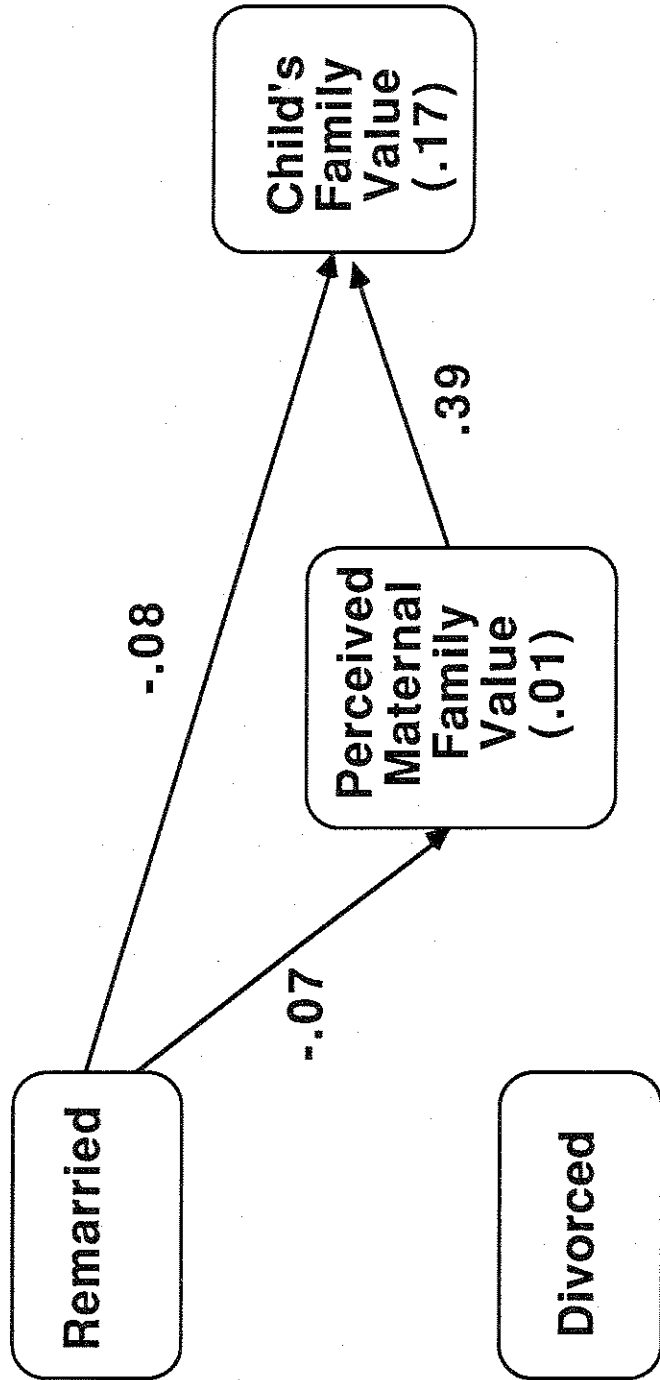


Figure 6. Perceived maternal family value as a mediator of marital status effects on child's family value

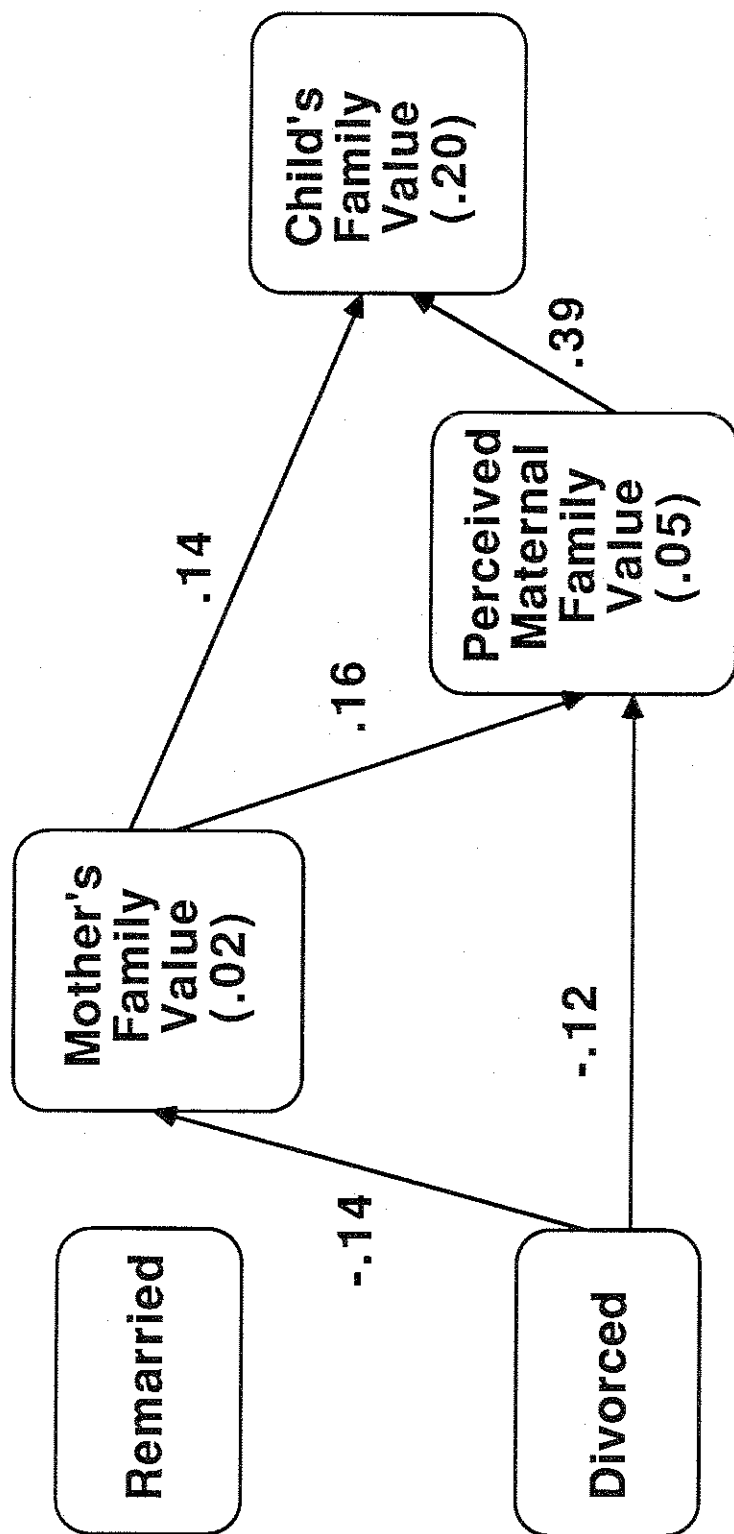


Figure 7. Mother's family value and perceived maternal family value as mediators of marital status effects on child's family value.

