

The Relationship Between Social Support, Mental Health  
and Family Functioning in Single Parent Black and White Families

Ariel Kalil and Jacquelynne Eccles  
University of Michigan

Abstract

Previous research has established a link between single-parent status and diminished parent well-being and family functioning, particularly in low-income samples. This study examined the interaction of race and satisfaction with social support in predicting parent-adolescent relationships, parenting behaviors, and maternal mental health in a middle-class sample of 250 Black and 67 White single mothers. All mothers were either unmarried or not currently living with a partner. Significant interactions were obtained between parent race and satisfaction with social support for the dependent measures of communication with child and time spent with child. For Black single mothers, greater satisfaction with extended family social support was related to more communication and time spent with child. For White single mothers, the reverse was true. The discussion highlights the potentially different meanings of extended family social support in the communities of Black and White single mothers.

Presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child  
Development,  
March, 1995, Indianapolis, IN.

This research was funded by a grant from the MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Successful Adolescent Development Among Youth in High-Risk Settings awarded to Jacquelynne S. Eccles. We would like to thank the following people for their assistance in collecting and processing the data for this project: Elaine Belansky, Nick Butler, Diane Early, Kari Fraser, Linda Kuhn, Sarah Lord, Karen McCarthy, Arnold Sameroff, Sherri Steele, and Cindy Winston.

Previous research investigating family functioning in single-parent homes has established a link between single-parent status and diminished parent well-being and family functioning. For instance, research on differences in psychological well-being in single versus married mothers has suggested that single mothers are at greater risk for depression, anxiety, and health problems than other marital status groups (Belle, 1990; McLanahan & Adams, 1987; McLoyd, 1990). Moreover, researchers have observed a variety of problematic parenting practices and parent-child interactions in single-parent homes, including insufficient parent involvement and supervision, inconsistent discipline patterns, and high levels of parent-child conflict (Hall et. al., 1991; McLanahan & Booth, 1989; Montemayor, 1986).

Moreover, a developmental framework for investigating these questions suggests that these negative parent-child relationships are likely to be particularly problematic during the child's transition to adolescence. Steinberg (1987) reported that the parent-adolescent relationship is characterized by higher levels of parent-child distance and increased conflict between parents and their children, especially mothers and their children. Similarly, Montemayor (1983) reported that conflict and arguments were the primary complaints of parents about their relations with their adolescents. Montemayor and Hanson (1985) found that the highest levels of conflict were between mothers and adolescents, and that these conflicts were largely about interpersonal issues.

However, an emerging body of literature has suggested that reactions to single parenthood and family functioning in female-headed families may differ by parent race. Specifically, researchers (Fine and Schwebel, 1988, McKenry and Fine, 1993) have posited that Black families may evidence many strengths during the transition to single parenthood, and thus adjust more successfully than White mothers to single parenthood. This observed resilience to single-parenthood among Black

women may be due in part to the fact that single parent status may be more normative in the Black community than in the White community. Fine and Schwebel (1988) summarize many of the strengths of Black single parents in what they term the “emergent”, or cultural ecological model of Black single parenting. The emergent model of Black single parenting states that the positive and adaptive features of Black families are products of an interaction between Blacks’ unique cultural heritage and their historical and present environmental circumstances in the United States. As examples of the resilience of Black mothers to single parenthood, Fine and Schwebel (1988) report research suggesting that non-married Black mothers suffer no greater amount of family role strain than do their married counterparts. In addition, Fine and Schwebel (1988) report on a study indicating that a majority of mothers among a sample of 200 Black parent-absent families reported that the cohesiveness within their families was either “good” or “very good.” Moreover, other studies indicated that the self-concepts of Black fifth and sixth graders did not differ between those children from single parent homes and those from two parent homes.

In their own research based on the emergent model of Black single parenting, McKenry and Fine (1993) tested relationships between non-marital status and emotional well-being in Black versus White single mothers, hypothesizing that Black single mothers would report greater satisfaction with their role as a single parent than White single mothers. Their low-income sample included 444 White divorced females and 129 Black divorced females. McKenry and Fine (1993) found no race differences on measures of parenting behaviors, parenting involvement, or parental satisfaction. Black and White single mothers did differ on measures of parent expectations of children’s being independent, children’s controlling their tempers, and children’s always doing what parent asks. They found that Black single mothers had higher expectations on these three measures than did White

single mothers. Finally, Black single mothers in their sample reported that the quality of their children's life was more positive than the White single mothers in the sample.

In addition to the emergent model of Black single parenthood, another possible explanation for the relatively better family functioning among Black single parent families compared to White single parent families suggests that Black American families are much more reliant upon social support from extended family and friends than are White female heads of families. Indeed, Lindblad-Goldberg (1987) states that "one of the most significant Black cultural patterns for the survival and maintenance of Black single-parent families is the use of extensive social networks (p.40)". Similarly, Melvin Wilson (1989) has suggested that the Black extended family has existed as a dominant cultural norm, particularly among low-income or one-parent families. However, Black two-parent families also participate in extended family networks more than do White dual parent families. The extended family in the Black community serves to buffer against the deleterious effects of nonnormal changes and stressful situations. Wilson posits that, for single mothers, participation in extended families is related to reduced feelings of aloneness, powerlessness, and alienation. Furthermore, single mothers' involvement in extended family networks provides opportunities for mothers to participate in self-improvement activities, provides better quality child care, and buffers against the negative effects of single parenting. For instance, Wilson reports that connection to extended family and kin is related to increased parental control in one-parent families, as well as to decreased levels of deviant activity among adolescents in one-parent families.

Thus, it appears that previous research in this domain has yielded conflicting and inconclusive results. While many investigators have claimed that single parent families, particularly low-income single parent families, are at risk for a

myriad number of negative consequences, including maternal depression, family conflict, and lack of cohesion and communication; other researchers have begun to suggest that such problems do not plague certain groups of single mothers.

Increasingly, researchers have suggested that Black female headed families evidence greater resiliency and more optimal functioning than their White counterparts, due in part to the cultural ecological response to solo parenting in the Black community. However, much of the previous research exploring differences in family relationships and maternal mental health in single-parent families has focused on samples of poor single parent households, especially among minority populations. This body of work may have little generalizability to middle class Black female-headed families. The present investigation will attempt to shed some light on this equivocal body of research

#### Purpose of Present Study

- 1) To examine differences in parent-adolescent relationships, parenting behaviors, and mothers' psychological well-being as a function of parent race in a unique, middle income sample of Black and White single mothers.
- 2) To examine the moderating role of self-reported satisfaction with emotional and financial support from extended family and friends in the two groups of mothers.

### **Methods**

#### Sample

This study is part of a larger investigation being conducted at the University of Michigan (Maryland Adolescent Growth in Contexts Study). The data presented here are from a subset of 317 single (neither married nor living with a partner) mothers. There were 250 Black single mothers and 67 White single mothers. The average age of target adolescents was 12.3 years old. The mean income for the Black

mothers was in the \$25,000-\$29,999 per year range; The mean income for the White mothers was in the \$30,000-\$34,999 per year range. The average number of people living in the home for Black mothers was 3.25; for White mothers the comparable figure was 3.51. Black single mothers did not differ significantly from White single mothers on a dichotomous measure of employment status (employed vs. not employed) or on attainment of a high school diploma or GED.

### Results

All predictions were tested using multiple regression analysis. Mothers' race was contrasted coded such that -1=White and +1=Black. Each regression analysis controlled for mothers' age, employment status, and total annual income. Black and White single mothers did not differ significantly on reports of satisfaction with social support. On a scale of 1 (not at all satisfied) to 7 (very satisfied), White single mothers' average score was 4.82 and Black single mothers' average score was 5.08.

Black single mothers reported *less* inconsistent parenting than did White single mothers ( $B=-.19, p<.00$ ). Black single mothers also reported *more* conflict with their adolescents than did White single mothers ( $B=.20, p<.00$ ). There were main effects of satisfaction with social support in predicting to mothers' level of depression ( $B=-.20, p<.00$ ), resiliency ( $B=.11, p<.00$ ), anger ( $B=-.11, p<.00$ ), and enjoyment of activities with adolescent ( $B=.16, p<.01$ ).

There were two significant interactions between mothers' race and self-reported satisfaction with social support. For Black mothers, greater satisfaction with social support was related to increases in the amount of communication with adolescents. For White mothers, the reverse relationship was true ( $B=.15, p<.02$ ). Similarly, for Black mothers, greater satisfaction with social support was related to increases in the amount of time spent with adolescents. Again, for White mothers, the reverse relationship was true ( $B=.12, p<.03$ ).

## Discussion

Contrary to previous investigations of parent mental health and parent-child relationships in female-headed families (e.g. Fine and Schwebel, 1988), in this sample of middle-class single mothers, Black mothers did not differ from White mothers in their reports of satisfaction with social support from extended family and friends. Furthermore, mothers' race was not a predictor of the majority of dependent variables. There was some evidence that the Black mothers in the sample were faring better than the White mothers, in that they reported less inconsistent parenting. However, Black single mothers also reported more conflict with their adolescents than did the White single mothers. Before any firm conclusions can be made about differential reactions to single parenthood in the two populations of single mothers, it would be important to determine the nature of the parent-adolescent conflict, and also to assess the effects of inconsistent parenting and parent-adolescent conflict on family functioning and adolescent well-being.

Satisfaction with social support was related to all three indices of mental health and to mothers' reports of enjoyment of activities with their adolescents. These relationships were in the expected direction, and were true of both groups of single mothers. Thus it seems that increased satisfaction with social support affects family functioning by directly influencing mothers' psychological well-being. Presumably, this relationship affects adolescents indirectly by improving the quality of parenting and parent-adolescent interactions.

Two interesting interactions emerged, suggesting that the *meaning* of social support may be different in the two groups of single mothers. When Black mothers have greater satisfaction with social support, they indicate spending more "social time" with their adolescents; time spent enjoying activities together or talking about life. These results are consistent with the hypotheses put forth by Wilson (1989), and suggest that networks of family and friends function to allow Black single

mothers more time to relax and "hang out" with their children. Conversely, White single mothers reported spending more of this "social time" with their adolescents when they were *less* satisfied with the social support available to them. This relationship suggests that the White single mothers may be relying on their children to provide companionship in the absence of extended networks of family and friends.

In future analyses we will investigate the role of other characteristics of single-mother families; for instance, mothers' satisfaction with employment, and adolescents' gender as potential moderators in these relationships. We will also expand our investigation of the effects of parent-adolescent conflict and inconsistent parenting (since this is where we observed differences in single parenting in Black versus White mothers) to determine the effects of these behaviors are on the well-being of the adolescent children. With these analyses, we will begin to assess reactions to single parenthood at the family level.



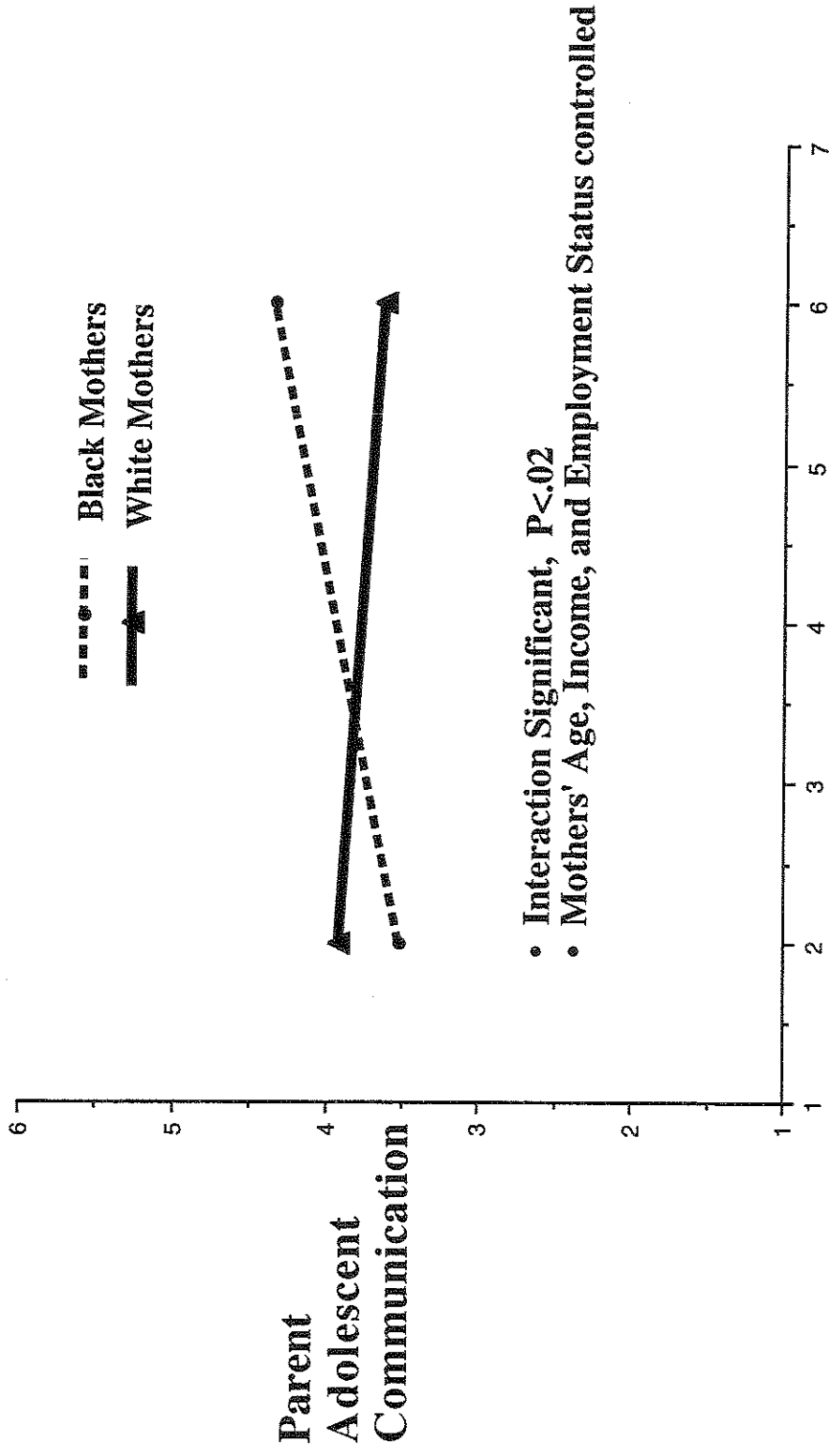
<u>Scale</u>	<u>Reliability</u>
<i>Parent Depression</i> (4 items) "During the past couple of months, including today, how often have you felt depressed?"	.82
<i>Parent Anger</i> (4 items) "During the past couple of months, including today, how often have you felt really mad at other people?"	.74
<i>Parent Resiliency</i> (4 items) "I am very good at figuring out problems and then making a plan to solve the problem."	.83
<i>Parent-Child Conflict</i> (4 items) "How often do you and your 7th grader disagree about his or her clothes, hair, and makeup?"	.72
<i>Parent-Child Communication</i> (6 items) "How often does your 7th grader talk to you about problems he or she is having at school?"	.84
<i>Positive Time Use with Child</i> (5 items) "How often have you done something just for fun with your 7th grader, like go to the movies or go for walks?"	.78
<i>Enjoy Activities with Child</i> (7 items) "How much do you enjoy working with your 7th grader on schoolwork?"	.70
<i>Parent Monitoring</i> (4 items) "How often do you know where child is in the course of the day?"	.62
<i>Inconsistent Parenting</i> (5 items) "If you ask your child to do something and she does not do it, how often do you give up trying to get her to do it?"	.64
<i>Satisfaction with Extended Family Social Support</i> (6 items) "How satisfied are you with the emotional support you receive from your friends?" "How confident are you that you could turn to other relatives for financial support in an emergency?"	.82

## References

- Belle, Deborah. (1990). "Poverty and Women's Mental Health." *American Psychologist*, 45, 385-389.
- Fine, Mark A. and Schwebel, Andrew I. (1988). "An Emergent Explanation of Differing Racial Reactions to Single Parenthood." *Journal of Divorce*, 11, 1-15.
- Hall, Lynne A., Gurley, Diana N., Sachs, Barbara, and Kryscio, Richard J. (1991). "Psychosocial Predictors of Maternal Depressive Symptoms, Parenting Attitudes, and Child Behavior in Single-Parent Families." *Nursing Research*, 40, 214-220.
- Lindblad-Goldberg, Marion. (1987). "The Assessment of Social Networks in Black, Low Income Single-Parent Families." *The Family Therapy Collections*, 23, 39-46.
- McKenry, Patrick, and Fine, Mark A. (1993). "Parenting Following Divorce: A Comparison of Black and White Single Mothers." *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 24, 99-111.
- McLanahan, Sara S. and Booth, Karen. (1989). "Mother-Only Families: Problems, Prospects, and Politics." *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 51, 557-580.
- McLanahan, Sara S. and Adams, Julia. (1987). "Parenthood and Psychological Well-Being." *Annual Review of Sociology* (13) Palo Alto, CA: Annual Reviews. 237-257.
- McLoyd, Vonnie C. (1990). "The Impact of Economic Hardship on Black Families and Children: Psychological Distress, Parenting, and Socioemotional Development." *Child Development*, 61, 311-346.
- Montemayor, R. (1983). "Parents and Adolescents in Conflict: All Families Some of the Time and Some Families Most of the Time." *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 3, 83-103.
- Montemayor, R. (1986). "Family Variation in Parent-Adolescent Storm and Stress." *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 1, 15-31.
- Montemayor, R., & Hanson, E. (1985). "A Naturalistic View of Conflict Between Adolescents and Their Parents and Siblings." *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 5, 23-30.
- Steinberg, L. (1987). "Impact of Puberty on Family Relations: Effects of Pubertal Status and Pubertal Timing." *Developmental Psychology*, 23, 451-460.

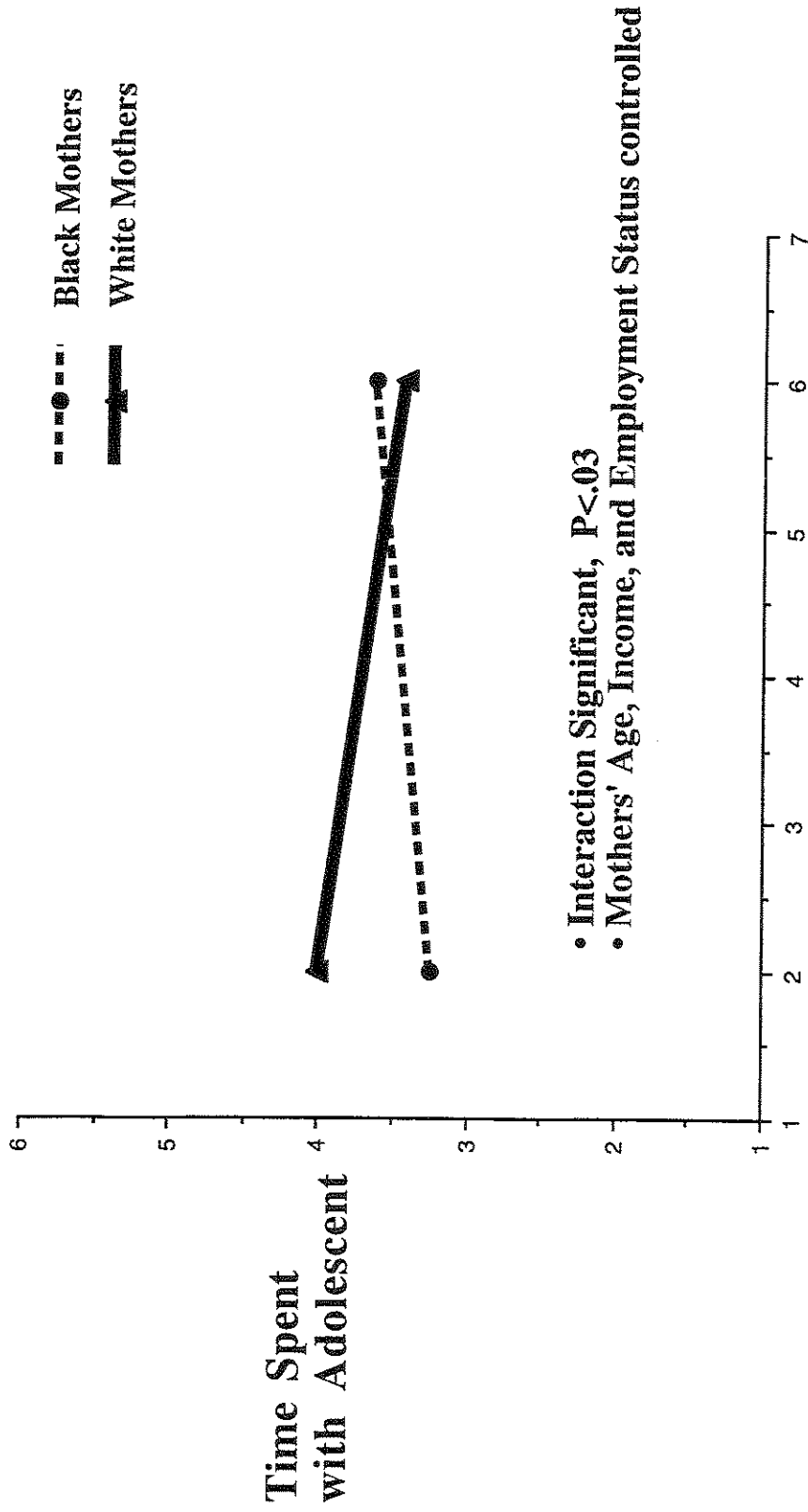
Wilson, Melvin N. (1989). "Child Development in the Context of the Black Extended Family." *American Psychologist*, 44, 380-385.

# Race X Satisfaction with Support=Communication with Child



# Satisfaction with Social Support from Extended Family and Friends

# Race X Satisfaction with Support=Time Spent with Child



# Satisfaction with Social Support from Extended Family and Friends

