

Parent-Adolescent Relationships, Parenting Behaviors, and Maternal Well-Being  
in Single vs. Two-Parent Black Families

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**Abstract**

In a middle to upper-middle income sample of 500 married (or living with a partner) Black mothers and 251 single Black mothers, differences in parent-adolescent conflict, communication, parent monitoring, inconsistent parenting behaviors, time involvement in positive activities, and mothers' psychological well-being were examined based on mothers' marital status. Controlling for self-reported economic well-being and satisfaction with social support, analyses revealed that single mothers report significantly more symptoms of depression and significantly less time involvement in positive activities with their adolescents than do married mothers. Single mothers in this sample did not differ from married mothers in terms of parent-adolescent conflict, communication, parent monitoring, or inconsistent parenting behaviors. Findings were discussed in terms of the mediating roles of economic well-being and satisfaction with social support in these relationships, as well as in terms of the relative affluence of the Black mothers in this study.

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## Introduction

Previous research comparing parent-adolescent relationships and parenting behaviors in mother-only households versus two-parent households has suggested that these relationships may differ in terms of parent-adolescent communication and conflict, parent monitoring and involvement in adolescent activity, and mothers' psychological well-being. Specifically, Montemayor (1986) has reported that more parent-adolescent conflict occurs in divorced, single-parent, and step-parent families than in families with both natural parents present. Other research (e.g. Hall et. al.,1991) has indicated that single mothers were more authoritarian, less affectionate, had more restrictive child-rearing attitudes and behaviors, and reacted inconsistently toward their children. Additionally, McLanahan and Booth (1989) reported research indicating that parental involvement and supervision in mother-only families is lower than in two parent families, that single mothers are less consistent in their discipline patterns than married mothers, and that single mothers are less likely than married mothers to monitor adolescents' social activities.

Finally, research addressing differences in psychological well-being in single versus married mothers (McLoyd, 1990, McLanahan and Adams, 1987), has suggested that single mothers are at greater risk for depression, anxiety, and health problems than other marital status groups. For instance, Compas and Williams (1990), examining stress, coping, and adjustment in single and married mothers and their young adolescent children, found that single mothers reported more daily hassles related to family problems, as well as more symptoms of depression and psychoticism.

Much of the previous research exploring differences in family relationships and maternal psychological well-being in single-parent versus two-parent families has focused on samples of poor single-parent households, especially among minority populations. The purpose of the present investigation was to replicate previous research on differences in parent-adolescent relationships, parenting behaviors, and mothers' psychological well-being as a function of marital status in a unique, middle- and upper-middle income sample of Black single and married mothers. This research also examined the mediating roles of self-reported economic well-being and satisfaction with emotional and financial support.

## Methods

### Sample

This study is part of a larger investigation being conducted at the Universities of Michigan and Colorado (Middle School Family Survey Study). These data represent responses from the first wave of the study, when the target adolescents were in the seventh grade. Data were collected from 500 Black married (or living with a partner) mothers and 251 Black single (divorced, separated, widowed, or never-married) mothers of young adolescents (average age of adolescents=12.3 years old) living in Prince George's County, MD. The average number of people living in the home for the married mothers was 4.09; for the single mothers the comparable figure was 3.25. The mean income for the married mothers was in the \$50,000-\$54,999 per year range, while the mean income for the single mothers was approximately \$30,000 per year. Given that more than 50% of Black female-headed families in the United States are poor (have annual incomes under \$12,000), the present group of female-headed families is clearly middle class. Single mothers in the sample did not differ significantly from married mothers on a dichotomous measure of employment status (employed/not employed).

### Measures

Maternal psychological well-being was operationalized in terms of internalized (e.g. feelings of loneliness and hopelessness) and externalized (e.g. feeling angry, hassled, exhausted) negative psychological symptoms. The mother-adolescent relationship was assessed via measures of mother-adolescent conflict and amount of mother-adolescent communication about adolescents' friends, schoolwork, and life plans. Mothers' parenting behavior was measured in terms of the extent to which they monitored their adolescents' whereabouts during the day and evening, the degree to which parents are inconsistent in their discipline strategies, and the extent to which they pursued positive activities with their adolescents. Economic well-being was assessed via the extent to which mothers reported worries about having enough money to pay for things. Finally, satisfaction with social support included measures of mothers' satisfaction with and confidence in emotional and financial support from friends, parents, and other relatives.

## Sample Items from and Reliabilities of Scales

<u>Scale</u>	<u>Reliability</u>
<p><i>Parent Depression: Internalizing</i> (4 items)</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">“During the past couple of months, including today, how often have you felt depressed?”</p>	.82
<p><i>Parent Depression: Hassled/Angry</i> (6 items)</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">“During the past couple of months, including today, how often have you felt really mad at other people?”</p>	.76
<p><i>Parent-Child Conflict</i> (4 items)</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">“How often do you and your 7th grader disagree about his or her clothes, hair, and makeup?”</p>	.72
<p><i>Parent-Child Communication</i> (6 items)</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">“How often does your 7th grader talk to you about problems he or she is having at school?”</p>	.84
<p><i>Parent Monitoring</i> (4 items)</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">“How often do you know where child is in the course of the day?”</p>	.62
<p><i>Inconsistent Parenting</i> (6 items)</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">“Does the kind of punishment you give child depend on whether or not you are in a good or bad mood?”</p>	.59
<p><i>Positive Time Use with Child</i> (5 items)</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">“How often have you done something just for fun with your 7th grader, like go to the movies or go for walks?”</p>	.78
<p><i>Economic Well-Being</i> (2 items)</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">“How worried or upset are you because you don’t have enough money to pay for things (reverse coded)?”</p>	.62
<p><i>Satisfaction with Social Support</i> (6 items)</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">“How satisfied are you with the emotional support you receive from your friends?”</p>	.82

## Results

All predictions were tested using regression analyses. Measures of maternal depression, parent-child conflict, parent-child communication, parent monitoring, inconsistent parenting, and positive activity involvement with child were regressed on marital status of the mother (contrast coded such that +1=married and -1=single parent status). All regressions were run separately and controlled for mothers' reports of satisfaction with their social support. Regressions also tested for the mediating effect of economic well-being in the relationships between marital status and the dependent measures.

Over and above the effects of maternal satisfaction with social support and self-reported economic well-being, marital status directly predicted to maternal depression: internalizing symptoms ( $B=-.09$ ,  $p<.01$ ) such that single mothers reported more negative psychological symptoms than married mothers. Marital status was also a direct predictor of positive time use with child ( $B=.10$ ,  $p<.05$ ) such that single mothers spent less time than married mothers involved in positive activities with their adolescents. Married mothers scored higher on measures of economic well-being than single mothers ( $B=.23$ ,  $p<.01$ ). Although perceived economic well-being predicted directly to maternal depression ( $B=-.34$ ,  $p<.01$ ), maternal reports of feeling hassled and angry ( $B=-.15$ ,  $p<.01$ ), and inconsistent parenting ( $B=-.06$ ,  $p<.05$ ), such that greater economic well-being was related to lower scores for all mothers on these dependent measures, there was no support for the hypothesis that economic well-being mediated the relationship between marital status and any of the dependent measures.

## Discussion

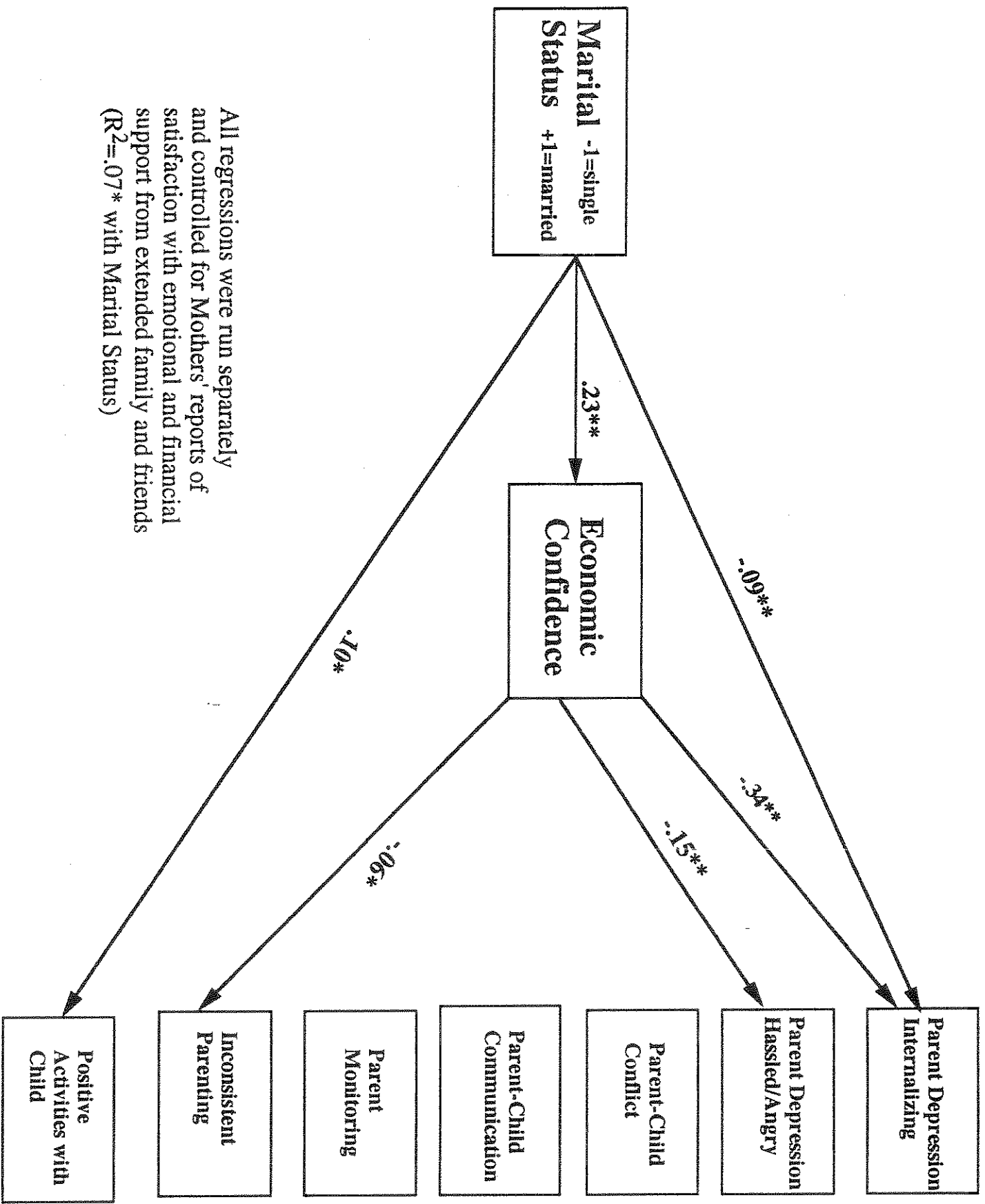
The most interesting results from the present investigation were the non-significant relationships between marital status and the majority of the dependent measures. Contrary to previous investigations of parent-child relationships, in this sample comparing middle-class single Black mothers to upper-middle class married Black mothers, single parent status was *not* a significant predictor of parent-child conflict, parent-child communication, parent monitoring, or inconsistent parenting. Not surprisingly, however, even though the single mothers in this sample were relatively economically secure, they were still significantly less secure in their ability to make ends meet than were married mothers.

The fact that single mothers reported spending less time than married mothers doing positive activities with their children was also not surprising. Presumably, single mothers, since they have more roles to fill than do married mothers, simply have less time for leisurely activities like going to movies or going for walks. However, it should be noted that in the interview, these particular questions asked "How often did you *or your spouse/partner* do.....with your 7th grader?" Therefore, married mothers had more opportunities to report time spent in positive activities with their adolescents. In future, a better assessment of the relationship between marital status and positive activity involvement with children might be a child report of time spent with his or her mother.

The analyses also revealed that a significant relationship remained between single parent status and depressive symptomatology, even after controlling for perceived economic well-being and satisfaction with social support. In future analyses we will investigate the role of other characteristics of single mothers; for instance their employment status (full vs. part-time), or their child's sex as potential mediators in this relationship. We will also investigate the interaction between marital status and satisfaction with social support in order to determine if single mothers with greater satisfaction with social support differ from those single mothers who are less satisfied with their social support. Finally, we will examine marital status in interaction with race in order to see if White single and married mothers differ from each other in similar ways, and to test differences between White and Black mothers in general.

## References

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All regressions were run separately and controlled for Mothers' reports of satisfaction with emotional and financial support from extended family and friends ( $R^2=.07^*$  with Marital Status)