Explanations Matter
The Interplay Between Family Instability, Parental Communication Patterns, and Preschool Children’s Family Representations

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Family instability, as a state of chronic chaos and unpredictability, is an accumulation of family events that challenge the continuity and cohesiveness of a child’s daily life and environment. It is one factor that can lead to an increased risk of child maladjustment. Even within the context of other family variables, such as conflict, the way in which caregivers express their emotions and parenting, family instability uniquely contributes to children’s wellness. Thus, it may be a threat not only to children’s perception of security in the family but also to their own sense of control over their environment.

Previous research indicates that the relationship between adversity and child wellness needs more investigation: studies of family instability have typically focused on outcomes such as symptoms (e.g., depression) and behavioral traits (e.g., aggression). Consequently, research psychologists know little about how family instability affects children’s functioning at a process level of interpreting and coping with family adversity. Ackerman and his colleagues defined family instability and isolated some risk factors that challenge a family’s ability to provide a stable environment for its child; residential moves, changing intimate adult relationships that involve a primary caregiver, serious childhood illnesses, changing families with whom the child lives, and other recent negative life events (e.g., death of family member, job change) are all specific indicators of instability that may create adjustment problems for children when they grow older. Furthermore, Ackerman et al. indicated that these risk factors predicted adjustment problems even after controlling for variables such as family conflict and caregiver emotionality.

These results attest to the importance of studying instability, for it is a risk factor that can predict an array of negative outcomes for children. These past studies, however, have focused on outcomes such as symptoms and have not addressed how instability affects children’s coping processes and interpretations. Therefore, this study focused on the influence instability had on the development of children’s internal working models (Fig. 1a).

The typically modest to moderate associations between family characteristics and children’s adjustment suggest that potential moderating factors are important; few studies, however, have considered aspects of family life that may exacerbate or ameliorate the effects of family instability. Hence, the second goal of this study was to examine how parental communication patterns with their children may potentially moderate the relationship between instability and children’s internal representations of their families (Fig. 1b).

Family instability embodies events that are pervasive and/or occur repeatedly over a child’s lifetime. It also depicts a chaotic and unpredictable environment that often results in stress for the child. Disruptive family events and challenges, such as divorce, can increase a child’s vulnerability to a wide range of psychological problems. Links between any single disruptive family event and a child’s adjustment, however, tend to be more suggestive than conclusive. Therefore, psychologists need new conceptualizations of family instability that address children’s cumulative exposure to multiple disruptive family events. These models should more adequately and realistically represent the difficulties families face when creating a cohesive, predictable, and safe environment for their children.

**Internal Working Models and Communication Patterns**

Internal working models (IWMs) can index how children perceive and cope with life events. Early experiences with caregivers contribute to children’s development of sets of social expectations, which then become their IWMs. Children use IWMs as ‘social lenses,’ or mental rules, that provide information and structure to events in their environment. These social expectations guide a their information processing (e.g., their emotions, behaviors, beliefs). IWMs serve as both a framework for future interactions and children’s perception of others and the self. IWMs become more stable with time, and children begin to use them outside of their families, such as in peer groups, school, and the surrounding community.

**The quality of a parent’s explanation strongly influences his or her child’s perception of the family.**

Positive and informed explanations by parents to their children may buffer children from the ill-effects of family instability.
Parents who provide explanations that promote strong family security recognized concern for their child. Such explanations emphasized that parents would ensure their child’s safety, support, and protection.

Since the caregiving environment has been associated with children’s IWMs, and family stability can be conceptualized as part of the caregiving environment,\textsuperscript{11} we predicted that greater stress (as indexed by more frequent unstable life events) would relate to more negative and destructive IWMs.

In addition to considering children’s IWMs as indices for functioning, this study is also unique in that we tried to account for some of the heterogeneity that is usually made evident in children’s outcomes, such as their behavior. Research suggests that even under severely adverse social conditions some children adapt and adjust to meet and overcome their personal challenges.\textsuperscript{12} Sandler and Block\textsuperscript{13} found that social circumstances may affect the relationship between children’s instability and their poor behavior. Many psychologists are now interested in identifying the factors that may promote more positive and effective IWMs.

Protective factors, embodying environmental characteristics and events in addition to individual attributes, are not as strongly associated with negative outcomes in children as some psychologists predicted.\textsuperscript{14} Therefore, protective factors like family warmth and emotional support,\textsuperscript{14} children’s temperament,\textsuperscript{15} parental involvement,\textsuperscript{16} and children’s competence level,\textsuperscript{17} may weaken the effects of risk factors on children’s symptoms. Wyman et al.\textsuperscript{13} propose that research psychologists must look beyond children’s characteristics and extend their inquiry to family contexts and relationships; they argue that parent-child interactions give children the ability to learn and internalize attributes associated with positive adaptation and coping. In this study, we wanted to examine how explicit parental communication patterns related to family instability and children’s internal working models.

Researchers have postulated that communication patterns may moderate children’s reactions to dimensions of the caregiving environment. For example, Cummings, Simpson, and Wilson\textsuperscript{18} found that children showed less negative reactions to conflict among adults when these arguments were followed by explanations and rationalizations. Children’s reactions to discipline also tend to vary as a function of the quality of explanations that parents offer during disciplinary interactions.\textsuperscript{19}

Furthermore, researchers concerned with emotion expression have found that parents’ discussion of emotion-related behaviors can predict children’s social competence,\textsuperscript{20} altruism, peer functioning, understanding of emotion,\textsuperscript{21} and social-emotional development.\textsuperscript{22} These findings indicate that parental communication is important to not only children’s reactions and symptoms but also their emotional responses to conflict and discipline. Moreover, these results indicate that specific parent-child communication patterns directly related to the discussed issues might be important factors in children’s development.

Although most developmental psychology research has overlooked how parental communication patterns affect children’s reactions to family instability, Bretherton\textsuperscript{6} found that children’s ability to form coherent representations of family relationships is supported by emotionally open and sensitive parent-child communication. Nancy Eisenberg\textsuperscript{23} found that when parents talk to their children about emotions and why specific emotions are expressed at certain times, children are generally well behaved and more socially adapted. Although Eisenberg et al.\textsuperscript{24} demonstrated that communication patterns are significant to children’s social adjustment, developmental psychologists still know little about how they function as a protective factors against family instability. Parents may protect their children from the effects of family instability by providing explanations, but no previous research has addressed this issue. We predicted that good communication between parents and their children would ease the ill effects of family instability on children.

**The FEQ and Story Stems**

This study is part of a larger one at the University of Rochester that is investigating characteristics that may affect children’s internal working models. Thirty-eight preschool age children (16 girls and 22 boys, with a mean age of 4.5 years) and their primary caregiver or parent, who was often female, were interviewed as part of this study. Seventy-nine percent of the families were Caucasian, 18% were African-American, and the remaining 3% were of other ethnicity. We recruited families from 3 separate pre-school agencies in urban Rochester, NY. Preschool children, unlike older primary school children, interact mostly with their primary caregivers.

We interviewed parents by telephone at a time of their choosing and asked them to describe their demographic backgrounds and family communication patterns and to fill out a questionnaire. The questionnaire, the Family Event Questionnaire (FEQ), was a self-report questionnaire adapted from two previous forms developed by University of Rochester researchers, one by Evan Forman and Patrick Davies\textsuperscript{25} and the other by William Work and his colleagues.\textsuperscript{26} Interviewers asked parents to describe the preceding three years of her or his child’s life in an attempt to measure cumulative life events. Studies show that maladaptive events in a child’s life can accumulate and have more significant effects on the child’s adjustment than recent and singular life-stressors.\textsuperscript{27} The questionnaire included questions about 19 specific events that we consider unstable, threatening, or disruptive. Fourteen of the questionnaire’s 19 items addressed the number of instances the parent and child had experienced each unstable event. For example, how many times had a close family member lost a job or been unemployed; or, had an adult in the home and a romantic partner separated? The remaining 5 items assessed problems that tended to be more pervasive, like drug or alcohol abuse. For these questions, the parent indicated if each situation occurred within the past three years. These data became a measure of overall family instability.

In addition to those on the FEQ, parents provided answers to questions that would illuminate communication patterns among adults and between adults and children. Interviewers presented hypothetical vignettes...
that described events indicative of instability within the family. These events included: (1) a parent or caregiver losing a job that is important to the family’s financial security; (2) adult relationship troubles; (3) the death of a close family member; (4) a residential change; (5) and a serious drug or alcohol problem within the family. Interviewers read each vignette to the caregiver and then asked whether or not she would say anything to her child, and if so, what she would say. Their responses were written down verbatim. Since the purpose of these interviews was to examine the explicit messages children receive, interviewers prompted parents for direct quotes if necessary (“What would you actually say to your child? For example, if I was your child, what would you say to me?”).

This study relied on a common technique called coding to quantify the data collected and make them accessible. With coding, data reviewers assign a numerical value to different types of responses to a given question or prompt. Coding allows researchers to look for trends in and correlations between data and variables. In this study, multiple researchers coded each interview and statistical tests for variance between reviewers indicated that coding scores were consistent and reliable.

Parents’ narratives were coded separately along five-point continuous scales for each hypothetical vignette and then summed across all vignettes to illuminate trends in relational harmony and overall security. Relational harmony ranged from very discordant (low scores) to very harmonious (high scores) and was designed to highlight the ways in which parents’ explanations represented the social world and interpersonal relationships.28 Higher ratings reflected more harmonious and positive interpersonal relationships that portrayed positive, caring, and loving relationships (e.g., concern for others). Conversely, lower ratings portrayed relationships as threatening, dangerous, chaotic, or all three, in which parents placed little value on the well-being of others.

Coding for overall security ranged from strong insecurity (low scores) to strong security (high scores).29 Explanations were coded based on the degree to which they reduced the proposed threat while promoting a sense of security from the child’s perspective. Parents who provided explanations that promoted strong security recognized concern for their child. Such explanations emphasized that the parent would ensure her child’s safety, support, and protection within the family. Explanations with low scores, however, indicated that family members could not provide physical and psychological safety, support, and protection for their children. Conversational attributes that could influence children’s understanding, such as brevity and complexity, were also considered in coding the explanation.

Children were interviewed in their preschools in an area separate from other children to minimize their distractions and so that we could videotape the interview. Interviewers used story stems to elicit children’s narratives about unstable family events from which we could measure children’s IWMS. Story stems elicit children’s attitudes, feelings,29 and developmental understanding of family representations by creating a contextualized narrative that he or she must complete.30 Some studies have found linkages between the way pre-school children play and how parents and teachers report problem behaviors.30 These studies suggest that researchers can garner additional information about children from less structured assessments like story stems.

We used two story stems that were based on the MacArthur Story Stem Battery paradigm (MSSB).31 The first story stem was adapted from Breherton et al., while the second was created for this study. Breherton’s story stem involved an adult argument about lost car keys. Our story stem concerned a lost job resulting in financial trouble. Each story stem depicted two adult dolls (one male and the other female, both of an ethnicity similar to the child’s) engaged in a discussion that indicated family instability, while a child doll (of the same gender and ethnicity as the participating child) looked on. The interviewer presented each story stem to the child and then asked him or her to complete the story using the dolls. The interviewer also asked the child to demonstrate what would happen the next time the characters (dolls) interacted. We added this additional prompt because we wanted to examine how children’s expectations corresponded to the amount of instability in their home lives. Children’s verbal narratives, along with their physical manipulation of the dolls, are meant to represent their IWMS.29,30,32

Children’s interpersonal discord and overall felt security were assessed using five-point continuous coding scales similar to those used for the adult interviews. For interpersonal discord, higher scores indicated intense strife characterized by multiple threats to a person’s well-being or survival (e.g., physical aggression, death, profound physical or emotional injury). Lower scores reflected benign interactions free from any discord. Overall felt security captured the holistic quality and patterns of security within relationships as described by the children:33 it considered how children viewed themselves in the context of family relationships in regard to both short- and long-term feelings of safety and security. We also accounted for the cohesiveness of each child’s story: higher scores (strong security) depicted predictable, cohesive, and

![Figure 1a](image-url) Family Instability Children’s Representations

![Figure 1b](image-url) One purpose of this study was to examine how parental communication patterns with their children moderated the relationship between family instability and how children mentally represented their families.
understandable relationships. In these situations, children represented adults as able and willing to effectively manage stressful events while simultaneously supporting and comforting them. Lower scores (strong insecurity) indicated that children considered adults to be unpredictable, dangerous, or ineffective at solving problems. Children whose responses were coded low presented few, if any, positive descriptions of adults.

**Interpreting the Data**

Family instability appears to be associated with children’s internal representations of their families. Children feel less secure about their families when their parents do not effectively explain both the causes of an argument and that they are not responsible for the argument. While negative representations of family life may be detrimental to children’s long-term psychological adjustment, these representations may have some short-term adaptive value. They may function as a cognitive warning signal for children and prepare children to adapt and protect themselves when faced with a potentially threatening event. Our findings demonstrate the value of addressing children’s functioning at a process level (i.e., how children process information that contributes to their IWMs) and not at an outcome level.

Negative representations of family life may function as a cognitive warning signal for children and prepare them to adapt and protect themselves.

Since some children who are exposed to family instability still develop adaptively, we examined whether associations between family instability and children’s internal representations may depend, in part, on the quality of explanations parents provide to their children about the meaning of unstable family events. The data from this study partially supports this proposed moderator model. Our hypothesis predicted and our results suggest that family instability led to greater discord and less security in family representations only when parental explanations depicted family life as disruptive. In other words, when parents in unstable families portrayed relationships as threatening, dangerous, or chaotic in their explanations of family events, children represented simulated family events (i.e., story stems) as hostile and insecure. This suggests that the quality of a parent’s explanation strongly influences his or her child’s perception of the family.

When characteristics of family cohesiveness and harmony were emphasized in parent’s explanations, greater family instability was a predictor for less discord and more security in children’s internal representations of the family. This finding is consistent with Garmezy, Masten, and Tellegen’s17 “challenge model,” in which stressful events are conceptualized as fostering children’s understanding, appraisal, and coping with subsequent stressors if they occur in manageable and mild doses. If we extend this model to incorporate our results, we can infer that explanations that emphasize positive attributes of interpersonal context may help reduce children’s stress associated with unstable family events to manageable doses.

There are several limitations to these conclusions that warrant discussion. First, the small sample size limited the statistical power of our findings and our ability to generalize them beyond our sample population of children. Even with a small sample size, however, the magnitude of the moderating effects was relatively large. Second, the measure used to index family instability contained diverse dimensions of instability (e.g., change of primary caregiver, placement in foster care, move to a new residence). Different aspects of family instability may have varying effects on children, some of which may be especially potent while others may be benign. Our conceptualization of family instability is nonetheless consistent with earlier research that focused on this issue. Ackerman et al.3 argued that an accumulation of experiences, and not simply a specific event within the family, indicates if a family is able to provide a predictable and cohesive environment for its child. This accumulation of events is a more robust predictor for a child’s psychological wellness than any single experience. Third, parents’ explanations were not measured directly within a natural context, their homes; we created hypothetical situations to create a similar environment. Thus, some researchers may question the ecological validity of this measure. The hypothetical situations, however, were designed to activate similar psychological processes (i.e., explanations) that probably occur in common family contexts while also controlling for variation in explanations that may emerge from experiences with different types of family instability.

Despite these limitations, this study extends earlier research by addressing the influence of family instability at children’s processing level while simultaneously accounting for some of the heterogeneity in children’s outcomes. Family instability is a significant proxy for children’s internal representations of their families. The findings discussed in this paper emphasize that researchers should consider children’s mental processing of family events and life experiences, for it appears to have a noticeable effect on how children process family events and life experiences. Future studies should examine how children may mediate between their personal adjustment and family’s instability as portrayed in their family representations. Moreover, future research should look for specific aspects of instability that are most influential to children’s processing and adjustment. Parental communication patterns partially moderate the relationship between family instability and children’s internal representations of family, indicating that future efforts should consider aspects of the family that may exacerbate or ameliorate the effects of family instability.

This is a summary of Sara Meyer’s senior thesis, for which she received the 2002 Zimmer Award for Research in Psychology from the Department of Clinical and Social Psychology at the University of Rochester. Sara graduated from the University in 2002 with a B.A. Honors Degree in Psychology; she is currently working toward her Ph.D. in Developmental Psychology at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln.