



Residential mobility and the family context: A developmental approach



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 22 May 2012

Received in revised form 12 November 2013

Accepted 27 November 2013

Available online 31 December 2013

Keywords:

Residential mobility

Family

Achievement

Behavior

ABSTRACT

The goal of this study was to examine the links between residential mobility and the family context, whether these links varied across developmental periods (early childhood, middle childhood, or adolescence), and how they were associated with children's achievement and behavioral outcomes. Longitudinal data from a diverse sample of over 1000 U.S. children were used to explore family structure (marital and employment change), process (quality of the home and maternal sensitivity and depression), and residential mobility. Results of structural equation models indicated that associations between residential mobility and family structure and process varied across developmental periods, with significant links found for family process in early childhood and structure in middle childhood and adolescence. We found evidence of indirect associations between residential mobility and children's outcomes through family process in early childhood and of a direct association with internalizing behaviors in adolescence. We provide implications for programs and policies for residentially mobile children.

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Historically, the United States has been a country with high rates of residential mobility (e.g., Long, 1992), a trend pronounced among children (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Reviews largely conclude that residential mobility is associated with children's achievement and socioemotional functioning; however, mechanisms underlying these associations remain debated (e.g., Jelleyman & Spencer, 2008; National Research Council & Institutes of Medicine, 2010). Moving itself is unlikely directly associated with children's outcomes. Instead, alterations in relevant developmental contexts that accompany mobility are likely pathways of influence. Specifically, moving may come with changes in family interactions because it competes for parental resources and availability. In turn, residential mobility may lead to unfavorable child outcomes through disruptions in the family. Accordingly, we examine the family context as one that changes concurrent to a move and that may link residential mobility with children's outcomes.

Although the family is an important context across development (Grusec & Davidov, 2007), the extent of changes in the family context concurrent to a move may depend on the developmental demands and challenges that evolve over time. Thus, moving could be differentially associated with both family characteristics and children's outcomes across developmental periods—early childhood, middle childhood, and adolescence. As such, the goal of this study is to use longitudinal data from a diverse sample of youth followed from birth through adolescence to investigate how a key social context of

childhood and adolescence—the family—is associated with residential mobility and children's achievement, internalizing, and externalizing behaviors, and if these associations vary over the course of development. Structural aspects of the family include its composition and features, such as parents' marital and employment status. Process aspects are indicated by interpersonal interactions within the family, for example, maternal sensitivity, mother's depressive symptoms, and provision of a stimulating learning environment. We examine these aspects of the family separately, because they are conceptually distinct, only modestly related (Cook, Herman, Phillips, & Settersten, 2002), and structure is often thought to provide the conditions under which process is facilitated. In addition, each feature may be amenable to different types of policy interventions.

Theoretical perspectives

We use bioecological theory and a developmental systems approach as a lens to consider children's residential mobility (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Lerner, 2006). According to these perspectives, children are nested in multiple contexts and these contexts, in conjunction with the child, are systematically integrated. Children are not sole receivers of inputs with predictable outputs and instead simultaneously create and respond to their environment, forming dynamic bidirectional relationships (Overton, 2010). When a child moves, the structure and process of each context, such as with whom the child interacts and how these interactions unfold, likely change because the system reorganizes, either before or after the move, or both.

Moving may have different implications for development depending on when it occurs (Elder, 1995). Because each developmental period

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has its own challenges, moving may confer different contextual shifts based on when it transpires, necessitating distinct modes of adaptation (Graber & Brooks-Gunn, 1996). For instance, moving that occurs in early childhood may have different implications for the family context than if it occurs in middle childhood or adolescence because young children often rely on parents more and are not exposed to as many extrafamilial contexts as in later periods.

Associations between residential mobility and family context

A reasonable body of literature has examined family context changes in childhood that parallel residential mobility. We start with the literature focusing on the links between residential mobility and family structure, followed by family processes. Because previous studies have not adopted a developmental perspective and have instead focused on a single developmental period (usually adolescence), the following review does not distinguish between developmental periods.

Research demonstrates that family structural changes are associated with moving (Hoffmann, 2006a; Norford & Medway, 2002; Tucker, Marx, & Long, 1998). Not surprisingly, moving often co-occurs with divorce, is highest among young, single parent and divorced families, and can correspond with parental job changes (Kan, 2002; Schachter, 2001; South, Crowder, & Trent, 1998). Change in socioeconomic circumstances, particularly chronic economic instability, also is associated with a change in residence (Kan, 1999; Schafft, 2006). Finally, people who are older, own a home, and have tenure and social connections in the neighborhood are less likely to move than those without these assets (Kan, 2007; Lee, Oropesa, & Kanan, 1994). We anticipate that associations between family structure and childhood residential mobility will be present in the current study as well.

Little research has investigated how moving is associated with family processes, but literature on family poverty and stress may be informative. Family stress models (Conger & Donnellan, 2007) posit that under conditions of family economic pressure, parents evince emotional and behavioral problems and inter-parental conflict that are associated with inconsistent, harsh, and unsupportive parenting. In turn, low quality interactions between the child and parent are associated with children's academic and behavioral problems. Like family economic pressure, moving may be stressful for parents because it entails physically relocating to a new home, perhaps accompanied by financial pressures and adjusting to a new neighborhood or workplace, diminishing parents' well-being (Warren-Sohlberg & Jason, 1992). Although maternal depression is construed as a characteristic of the mother alone, depressive symptomatology is associated with relationship problems, co-rumination, and poor problem solving among the mother-child dyad (Grimbos, Granic, & Pepler, 2013; Katz, Hammen, & Brennan, 2013) and with deficits in maternal sensitivity (Musser, Ablow, & Measelle, 2012). No research that we are aware has examined maternal depression among children who move although there are links between moving and adult wellbeing (Oishi & Schimmack, 2010).

Financial changes that can accompany residential mobility also may have consequences for the provision of a stimulating learning environment, which is critical for children's school readiness and achievement (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). Families may move because they cannot afford their current housing situation (Holupka & Newman, 2011), or may face immediate financial strains after a move because of the sheer cost of changing households. The economic toll of moving may impede a family's ability to provide a stimulating learning environment, such as books or extracurricular activities (Neuman & Celano, 2001). On the other hand, growth in income from a job promotion or inheritance may prompt families to move to homes or neighborhoods more conducive to providing a stimulating learning environment (Dupéré, Leventhal, Crosnoe, & Dion, 2010). Taken together, we tentatively anticipate that moving (compared with stability) will be associated with a lower quality family process context.

Associations between residential mobility and children's achievement and behavior via family context

Some research supports the premise that changes in the family context represent a possible mechanism explaining the association between residential mobility and a range of children's outcomes. Multiple studies have demonstrated that residential mobility moderates the association between family instability and children's achievement (Astone & McLanahan, 1994; Tucker, Long, & Marx, 1995). Furthermore, residential mobility has been shown to mediate the association between childhood living arrangements, such as single parenthood, and schooling outcomes (Crowder & Teachman, 2004). However, other work points to a minimal to moderate association between family structure and adolescents' problem behaviors through residential mobility (Fomby & Sennott, 2013; Hoffmann, 2006b). This body of research suggests that family structure may play a role in associations between residential mobility and children's achievement and to a lesser extent their internalizing and externalizing behaviors. However, the heterogeneity of findings across studies tempers firm hypotheses.

Several studies have addressed the role of family process among residentially mobile children. In early and middle childhood, family stress may partially explain associations between residential mobility and subsequent high school completion (Haveman, Wolfe, & Spaulding, 1991). Mobile families report considerable stress (Bradshaw, Sudhinaraset, Mmari, & Blum, 2010), and children in such households have lower academic achievement than their stable peers (Warren-Sohlberg & Jason, 1992); however, if parents do not report experiencing stress from a move, then such associations are attenuated (Mantzicopoulos & Knutson, 2000). Maternal support and paternal involvement also may buffer the potential adverse consequences of residential mobility on children's achievement outcomes (Hagan, MacMillian, & Wheaton, 1996). With low-income samples, moving in adolescence was associated with internalizing problems at least partially through the quality of the maternal relationship among females (Adam & Chase-Lansdale, 2002), and with heightened caregiver conflict among males and females (Stoneman, Brody, Churchill, & Winn, 1999). Finally, Adam's (2004) review concluded that mobile parents' compromised well-being may explain the association between residential mobility and children's outcomes. These studies suggest that residentially mobile children may demonstrate lower achievement, and to a lesser extent behavioral problems, than their stable peers because of less supportive and stimulating parenting among residentially mobile parents.

Developmental differences

Varying developmental demands across childhood and adolescence suggest that residential mobility may be differentially associated with children's outcomes by developmental periods. During early childhood, children experience rapid physical, cognitive, and socioemotional development and rely on parents to a great extent (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Alterations to children's developmental contexts, notably the family, during this period could have lasting repercussions in a number of domains (e.g., Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997). If the family is disrupted, parents may not be as responsive to their children's needs, potentially resulting in internalizing and externalizing behavior problems (Smetana, 2011). Similarly, changes in the nature of the home environment may impede the provision of a developmentally stimulating environment, potentially disrupting children's achievement (Bradley, 1987). Thus, in early childhood, moving may be associated with deficits in children's functioning, primarily via the family process context. Yet, because moving is more normative among families with young children than those with older children (Schachter, 2004), we may not expect associations between residential mobility and children's outcomes to be mediated by family structure.

During middle childhood, children transition to elementary school and then middle school, continue to develop cognitively, physically,

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