

Singlehood, Marriage, and Remarriage: The Effects of Family Structure and Family Relationships on Mothers' Well-Being

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Abstract:

This article examines three dimensions of mothers' well-being (personal happiness, self-esteem, and depression) across four diverse family structures (first-married, remarried, divorced, and continuously single-parent families). Using a nationally representative sample of 2,781 mothers, the results indicate small but statistically significant differences across family structures. Mothers in their first marriage enjoy the highest well-being, mothers in stepfamilies fare nearly as well, and divorced and continuously single mothers have the lowest well-being. Most of the differences persist when relevant variables are controlled. Multiple regression analyses indicate that the strongest predictors of mothers' well-being are measures of family relations, especially children's well-being, marital happiness, marital stability, and low levels of marital conflict. Implications of the findings are discussed in terms of the relative importance for mothers' well-being of family structure, sociodemographic variables, and family processes.

Article:

Mothering and motherhood are culturally cherished images, standards, and experiences that provide rich sources of personal identity. For most mothers, however, motherhood also is associated with unrelenting and burdensome responsibilities. Mothers typically are the central actors in their families, they are more involved in their families and in their children's lives than fathers are (Larson & Richards, 1994), they perform most of the household labor, and they make more changes and adjustments than fathers do in daily routines, work schedules, and careers to accommodate and fulfill family-related responsibilities (L. Thompson & Walker, 1989). Yet tremendous diversity characterizes the family structures and relationships in which mothers rear their children. National data indicate that two thirds of families in which children live with their biological mothers are first-married family units, nearly 1 in 10 are remarried families, 1 in 7 are families headed by divorced mothers, and 1 in 10 are headed by continuously single mothers (Acock & Demo, 1994). Importantly, the responsibilities and the psychological costs and benefits of being a single mother are likely to be different from those of a married mother. The purpose of this article is to determine whether mothers' well-being varies across diverse family structures and to assess the relative influence of family structure, family relationships, and sociodemographic variables in shaping mothers' psychological well-being.

Mothers' psychological well-being is multidimensional, including personal happiness, self-esteem, and depression. Studies examining marital status yield consistent evidence that, compared with married women, single women generally are not as happy and experience greater stress, anxiety, depression, and physical health problems (Coombs, 1991; Ross, Mirowsky, & Goldstein, 1990). There have been fewer studies on remarriage and well-being, but few differences have been observed between the first-married and remarried (Coleman & Ganong, 1990). There are conflicting findings regarding the effects of parenthood on well-being, but most of

the evidence suggests that having children at home either has no effect or has a weak negative effect on mothers' psychological well-being (Ross et al., 1990).

Although many studies have examined marital status differences in well-being, few studies have examined how aspects of parenthood influence mothers' well-being across diverse family structures. A further problem is that comparative studies typically involve only two groups, with married mothers serving as the "benchmark" comparison group. Most common are comparisons of married mothers and single mothers (e.g., see review by McLanahan & Adams, 1987), blurring important distinctions within groups. Divorced mothers often have very different life trajectories and family circumstances from those of continuously single mothers, a group generally ignored in previous research. Other studies compare married and remarried mothers, who vary along a number of dimensions, including marital history, length of marriage, presence of children from prior marriages, and sociodemographic characteristics. The present study extends prior research by examining the influence of family structure on mothers' well-being using a nationally representative sample of mothers living in four prevalent family structures: first-married, remarried, divorced, and continuously single-parent families.

FAMILY STRUCTURE AND FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

In examining motherhood, we focus attention on three widely valued and frequently studied dimensions of family structure. The first dimension, parental status, is shared by all of the respondents in this study; all are biological mothers living with their children. Two other dimensions the marital status of parents heading the household and residential fathers' biological or non biological relationship to the children-vary across family types. One question guiding this analysis is how important family structure is for mothers' well-being; in our analysis, family structure is defined by (a) mothers' marital status and (b) presence in (or absence from) the household of the children's biological father.

There are theoretical reasons for expecting mothers' well-being to be related to family structure. Many family theories, including family stress and neo-functionalist theories, posit that "nonbenchmark patterns are vulnerable to a great deal of disequilibrium and thus stress" (Kingsbury & Scanzoni, 1993, p. 208). Role strain is also likely to be more common and more intense for single mothers than for their married counterparts, who are assumed to have more manageable workloads (M. S. Thompson & Ensminger, 1989). According to this view, mothers in single-parent families would be expected to experience lower well-being.

Family systems theories describe family structure using such concepts as boundary (Minuchin, 1974) and boundary ambiguity (Boss & Greenberg, 1984) to define who is in the family and their respective tasks and functions. From this perspective, stepfamilies are predicted to have problems establishing and maintaining boundaries between marital and parental subsystems due to ongoing relationships with former spouses, stepkin, and quasi-kin, and a number of studies have examined the consequences for remarital quality (Ganong & Coleman, 1994). This explanation emphasizes that stresses associated with stepfamily complexity and role ambiguity lead to greater stress and lower well-being for remarried mothers than for first-married mothers.

Of course, family types vary widely in many ways that make it difficult to isolate the effects of family structure on well-being. For example, many studies document the economic hardship experienced by mother-only families relative to two-parent families (McLanahan & Booth, 1989). But it is also important to recognize socioeconomic differences across different types of single-parent and two-parent households. Data collected in the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) indicate that families headed by continuously single mothers live on roughly half the income of divorced families and barely more than one fifth the income of first-married families (Acock & Demo, 1994). Further, compared with divorced mothers, continuously single mothers tend to be younger and less educated and are more likely to be African American. Thus a second question guiding our analysis is whether differences in mothers' well-being across family types are attributable to other factors that are associated with family structure. In other words, do any observed differences across family types disappear when we control for sociodemographic variables, such as household income, household size, age of youngest child, marriage length, or years since divorce? Or is there a systematic effect of family type that goes beyond these background variables?

A third question regards how important family process variables are to mothers' well-being. Family theory and research consistently demonstrate the influence of family dynamics on individual adjustment. For example, feminists emphasize the highly variable, gendered, and contentious nature of marital and family relationships (Baber & Allen, 1992; Ferree, 1990; L. Thompson & Walker, 1989). Traditional marriages and parenting arrangements, as opposed to egalitarian or feminist marriages, have fewer benefits for women than for men. Some women, however, may fare better than others. Women living in more equitable arrangements and in families where male partners are more involved, supportive, nurturant, and affectionate, should exhibit higher well-being. A feminist perspective also suggests there may be psychological benefits for women who remain single or who divorce, at least in comparison with the unhappily married. Women in inequitable marriages suffer higher rates of depression than their counterparts in more equitable relationships (Mirowsky, 1985), and the psychological well-being and happiness of formerly married women improves significantly in the first few years postdivorce (Booth & Amato, 1991).

Although many studies suggest that mothers are profoundly influenced by relationships with their children and spouses, relatively few studies have examined how mothers are influenced by continuing relationships with former spouses. For divorced or remarried mothers, an important aspect of relationships with former spouses is the coparental relationship. Many nonresidential fathers have limited involvement with their children from previous marriages, and some former spouses have very conflicted relationships with each other, whereas others have very little contact and few disagreements (Acock & Demo, 1994; Kitson, 1992). In this study, we examine how mothers' well-being is influenced by relationships with members of their immediate and divorce-extended families.

METHODS

Sample and Measures of Mothers' Well-Being

We analyzed data collected in the NSFH, designed by the Center for Demography and Ecology, University of Wisconsin (Sweet, Bumpass, & Call, 1988). The data for this study rely on the reports of 2,781 mothers living in one of four types of families:

1. First marriages ($n = 1,338$). These are families in which both the mother and the father are in their first marriage and they have one or more biological children under 19 living at home. Steps were taken to maximize sample size while minimizing misclassifications. Using data provided by mothers, we excluded families in which the mother reported being married more than once. The number of times her husband was married was obtained from a self-administered questionnaire the husband completed. We included only those families in which the husband reported this was his first marriage or if his data were missing. Some families with missing reports from the father may have involved his second or subsequent marriage. We were able to eliminate some of this potential bias by excluding families in which the mother had a biological child that was not her husband's child or she had a stepchild. Finally, we excluded families in which the mother was not living with her husband at the time of the interview.
2. Divorced ($n = 704$). A second family type consists of a mother who has divorced and has at least one biological child under 19 from a previous marriage living at home. In defining children as being from a previous marriage, we included children born within 10 months after the marriage ended.
3. Stepfamilies ($n = 278$). The third group includes families in which the mother is remarried (that is, married for at least the second time) and has at least one biological child under 19 living with her and her current husband. We excluded families in which the mother was not living with her husband at the time of the interview.
4. Continuously single ($n = 461$). The fourth family type consists of a mother who has never married and has one or more biological children under 19 living at home.

Measuring Mothers' Psychological Well-Being

The NSFH offers several indicators of mothers' well-being. Psychological well-being is measured in three ways. First, global well-being is assessed by a single question. Mothers were asked to give an overall evaluation of themselves and their lives on a 7-point scale ranging from very unhappy to very happy ($M = 5.34$, $SD = 1.36$).

Second, a 12-item scale was used to measure depression. It asked how many days in the last week the mother felt or behaved in ways reflecting depression ($M = 1.44$, $SD = 1.44$). The items included feeling bothered by things that usually don't bother you, not feeling like eating, feeling that you could not shake off the blues, having trouble keeping your mind on what you were doing, feeling depressed, feeling that everything you did was an effort, feeling fearful, sleeping restlessly, talking less than usual, feeling lonely, feeling sad, and feeling you could not get going. This scale was highly reliable, $\alpha = .929$.

A mother's self-esteem is also an important component of her well-being. We measured self-esteem using three standard items from widely used self-esteem scales (e.g., Rosenberg, 1979). The questions asked if she felt satisfied with herself, if she could do things as well as other people, and if she felt she was a person of worth. The responses were coded from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) ($M = 4.10$, $SD = .60$). The higher the average on this scale the higher the mother's self-esteem. The reliability of this scale was marginal, $\alpha = .635$.

Measuring Predictor Variables

The predictor variables include characteristics of the household, the relationship between parents, the relationship between parents and children, characteristics of the mother, and a control variable.

We measured several characteristics of households. For single parents, we included a variable measuring whether they were currently cohabiting, coded 1 (cohabiting) and 0 (not cohabiting); 9.1 % of divorced mothers and 14.3% of continuously single parents were cohabiting. For divorced mothers, we included a variable, divorce length, measuring the interval between their divorce and the time of the interview ($M = 6.54$ years, $SD = 4.97$ years). For married mothers, we measured marriage length, the interval between when they were married and the time of the interview ($M = 11.04$ years, $SD = 7.60$ years). For all family types, we measured the number of people living in the household ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 1.36$), the age of the youngest child ($M = 6.40$ years, $SD = 5.21$ years), and the total household income ($M = \$31,567$, $SD = \$39,685$). Because income was missing for between 10% and 20% of the first-married, divorced, and stepfamily members and it was missing for 28% of the continuously single-parent families, we substituted the mean income by family type for missing data. We included a dummy variable for missing income coded 1 (mean was substituted) and 0 (actual income known).

Characteristics of mothers included mother's education, which was measured in years ($M = 12.59$ years, $SD = 2.53$ years) and race, coded 1 (White) and 0 (otherwise) (67.0% White). We also examined her age ($M = 33.08$ years, $SD = 7.60$ years) and the number of hours per week she is employed for pay ($M = 22.16$ hrs, $SD = 19.82$ hrs). The hours employed were the reported hours the mother worked the previous week as long as she was not temporarily away from work or the week was atypical. For the latter cases, we substituted the number of hours the mother said she normally works. Mothers in the armed forces were assigned a 40-hr work week. Because a substantial number of mothers did not work for pay (39.3%), we created a dummy variable, employed for pay, coded 1 (worked/or pay) and 0 (did not work/or pay).

Relationships between parents and quality of present marital relations were measured by different variables depending on the family type. Married mothers were asked a single question on marital happiness of wife that was scored from 1 (very unhappy) to 7 (very happy) ($M = 5.87$, $SD = 1.32$). To evaluate possible confounding of the mothers' reports of their marital happiness with the outcome variables, we used a corresponding question asked of husbands, marital happiness of husband ($M = 6.13$, $SD = 1.10$). The correlation between the husbands' reports of marital happiness and the wives' reports was $r = .471$. A seven-item scale was used to measure marital conflict reported by wife that asked the wife/mother how often she and her husband argued about different issues. The answers ranged from 1 (never) to 6 (almost every day) ($M = 1.87$, $SD = .69$). This scale had adequate reliability, $\alpha = .757$. Because of possible confounding, we also used a corresponding scale, marital conflict reported by husband, ($M = 1.97$, $SD = .73$). It had an $\alpha = .786$, and the correlation between the husbands' and the wives' reports was $r = .467$. Marital stability reported by wife was measured using a single item scored from 1 (very high chance of divorce) to 5 (very low chance of divorce) ($M = 4.59$, $SD = .73$). Because of possible confounding, we also measured marital stability reported by husband ($M = 4.54$, $SD = .78$). The correlation between the husbands' and wives' reports was $r = .471$. The analysis of the correlations (not shown

here) showed that the husbands' reports, when compared with wives' reports, were correlated with the outcome variables in very similar ways—same direction and significance but somewhat weaker correlations. In nearly every case, the husbands' and wives' reports were both statistically significant. This gives us more confidence that the mothers' reports are providing useful information.

The quality of the marriage was also gauged by asking mothers to compare their marriage with what life would be like if they separated. A six-item scale measured the comparison level of marriage. For each question, a score of 1 indicated that separation would be much better and a score of 5 indicated that this option would be much worse ($M = 3.70$, $SD = .69$). Thus a higher score indicates marriage compares favorably with separation. This scale was reliable, $\alpha = .824$.

Mothers who had experienced divorce were scaled on the comparison level of divorce. They were asked to compare their current life situation with their previous marriage using a seven-item scale. Questions asked about different aspects of their life and were scored from 1 (divorce much worse) to 5 (divorce much better) ($M = 3.85$, $SD = .86$). Thus a higher score means divorce compares favorably with marriage. This scale was reliable, $\alpha = .815$. Single parents also were asked to describe the frequency of interaction with their child's nonresidential father, with answers ranging from 1 (not at all) to 6 (several times a week) ($M = 2.96$, $SD = 1.76$). Finally, mothers were asked if they were dissatisfied with the child support they received from the child's father. This item was scored from 1 (very satisfied) to 4 (very dissatisfied) ($M = 2.56$, $SD = 1.26$).

We have two variables assessing mother-child relations. Mothers were asked how often they had an enjoyable time with a focal child, and this was scored from 1 (never) to 6 (almost every day) ($M = 5.19$, $SD = 1.14$). Complementing this, mothers were asked how often they had a difficult time with the child, using the same response options ($M = 3.19$, $SD = 1.68$).

A scale was used to measure how much time the nonresidential father spent with the child. This four-item scale asked about different activities and was scored from 1 (none) to 6 (several times a week) ($M = 2.13$, $SD = 1.04$). It had adequate reliability, $\alpha = .717$. The mother was also asked how much influence the nonresidential father had on a focal child, with responses ranging from 1 (none) to 3 (a great deal) ($M = 1.66$, $SD = .75$). Finally, a scale was used to measure the conflict between the mother and nonresidential father about a focal child. This six-item scale focused on various parenting issues (e.g., raising the child, spending money on the child) and was scored from 1 (none) to 3 (a great deal) ($M = 1.27$, $SD = .38$). Its reliability was $\alpha = .766$.

The well-being of the child was measured with a single item that asked how well the focal child's life was going. Answers ranged from 1 (not well at all) to 4 (very well) ($M = 3.62$, $SD = .57$).

A dummy variable indicating whether the respondent was in the primary sample or in an oversampled group (including single parents and stepfamilies) was included to control for global differences between these two groups (34.1 % of families were in an oversampled group).

RESULTS

The Results section has three parts. The first part compares the psychological well-being of mothers in the four types of families. The purpose of this subsection is to examine whether mothers in different types of families vary in their psychological well-being. The second part presents a multiple regression analysis using all the predictor variables that are shared across family types along with a series of dummy variables representing the effect of family structure. This subsection enables us to assess whether mothers' well-being varies by family type when common sociodemographic and relationship variables are controlled. Finally, we examine predictors of mothers' well-being within each type of family. Here, the variables that are unique to each family type are combined with those that are shared across family types. This final section allows us to assess the relative influences of family structure, sociodemographic variables, and relevant relationships on mothers' psychological well-being.

Mothers' well-being by family type. Table 1 presents the mean score for each measure of mothers' psychological well-being by type of family. There are clear differences in the level of depression. Single parents, both divorced and continuously single, report being depressed more often than married parents. First married mothers report being depressed significantly less often than mothers in other family types. A similar pattern emerges for global well-being. Again, mothers in their first marriage have the highest level of global well-being, followed by mothers in stepfamilies, with single mothers reporting significantly lower global well-being than either group of married mothers.

A different pattern emerges for self-esteem. First-married, divorced, and stepfamily mothers are closely matched on level of self-esteem, but continuously single mothers have significantly lower self-esteem than mothers in the other three family types.

The variation across families in mothers' well-being shown in Table 1 does not control for other predictor variables, notably socioeconomic resources and the quality of family relationships. There are enormous differences between these family types on the sociodemographic variables, as we have described in more detail elsewhere (Acock & Demo, 1994). For present purposes, we want to note some important differences on these variables. Continuously single mothers tend to have younger children, with their youngest child averaging 4 years of age compared with 6-8 years in the other family types. Although the mean level of education is virtually the same for three of the family types, continuously single

TABLE 1
Mothers' Well-Being by Family Type

<i>Item Being Compared</i>	<i>First Marriage</i>	<i>Divorced</i>	<i>Stepfamily</i>	<i>Continuously Single</i>	<i>Significance^a</i>
Outcome variables					
Self-esteem—average of three items, 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree	4.13 (1,283)	4.09 (680)	4.11 (274)	3.99 (428)	c,e,f
Depression—average days per week for 12 items	1.15 (1,326)	1.71 (698)	1.38 (278)	1.89 (456)	a,b,c,d,f
Global well-being, 1 = very unhappy, 7 = very happy	5.60 (1,154)	4.98 (625)	5.40 (246)	5.07 (391)	a,b,c,d,f

a. Scheffe's Multiple Comparison procedure was used to determine significance levels. The letters indicate which means are significantly different at the $p < .05$ level: An "a" means the first-married are significantly different from the divorced, "b" means the first-married are different from stepfamilies, "c" means the first-married are significantly different from continuously single, "d" means the divorced are significantly different from stepfamilies, "e" means the divorced are significantly different from the continuously single, and "f" means the stepfamilies are significantly different from the continuously single. The numbers in parentheses show the number of respondents upon which each mean is based.

mothers on average have 1 less year of education. Continuously single mothers also are younger (mean age of 28) than mothers in the other family types, who average 33-35 years of age. There is considerable variation on race. Stepfamilies are disproportionately White, whereas continuously single-parent families are disproportionately non-White. The size of families does not vary dramatically (3.87 for first-married, 3.22 for divorced, 4.34 for stepfamilies, and 3.61 for continuously single-parent families). Finally, there are dramatic differences in household income, with married mothers (whether first-married or remarried) significantly advantaged over single mothers. But it is also important to distinguish among groups of single mothers because continuously single mothers, for example, have less than half the household income of divorced mothers—an average of just under \$9,000.

Regressions predicting mothers' psychological well-being. In addition to controlling for family resources, it is also important to control for family relationships before attributing mothers' well-being to the type of family

in which she lives. This is problematic because important dimensions of family relations vary by family type. For example, wives/mothers in first

TABLE 2
Predicting Mothers' Psychological Well-Being

Predictors	Outcome					
	Global Well-Being		Self-Esteem		Depression	
	B	β	B	β	B	β
Intercept	3.52***	na	3.16***	na	2.90***	na
Divorce effect	-.46***	-.15	-.01	-.01	.42***	.13
Stepfamily effect	-.00	.00	.01	.00	.10	.02
Continuously single effect	-.46***	-.12	-.08*	-.05	.48***	.12
Household size	-.03*	-.03	-.01	-.03	-.00	-.00
Age of youngest child	.02	.06	.00	.02	-.01	-.02
Household income (1,000s)	.00	.03	.001*	.05	-.00	-.03
Mother's age	-.01	-.05	.00	.02	.01	-.03
Mother's education	.02	.03	.03***	.11	-.05***	-.09
Mother's race	.02	.01	.03	.02	-.06	-.02
Mother's hours employed	-.00	-.05	.003*	.11	.01**	.11
Mother works for pay	.13	.05	-.09†	-.07	-.43***	-.15
Mother enjoys times with child	.11***	.10	.02†	.04	-.00	-.00
Mother's difficulty with child	-.03†	-.03	-.03***	-.09	.11***	.12
Child's well-being	.42***	.17	.13***	.12	-.30***	-.12
Oversample	.00	.00	.06*	.05	.09	.03
N	2,356		2,600		2,691	
R	.312***		.249***		.318***	

† $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

marriages do not have relations with former spouses, and length of marriage is not relevant for continuously single mothers. Table 2 presents regression analysis results wherein each outcome variable was regressed on family type and all the predictor variables that apply across family types.

The combination of family type along with the family resource and family relationship variables that are common across family types have significant multiple correlations that range from .249 to .318. For global well-being and depression, being a single parent (whether divorced or continuously single) reduces global well-being. The self-esteem of divorced and remarried mothers is not different from that of first-married mothers, but continuously single mothers have lower self-esteem. These results parallel those we reported in Table I, in which there were no controls. This is evidence that there may be a persistent effect of family type on well-being.

Although the sociodemographic variables vary dramatically across family types, they do not appear crucial to mothers' well-being. A larger household size reduces global well-being, but the effect is small ($\beta = -.03$). Income is positively associated with self-esteem, but this effect is also small ($\beta = .05$). Mothers' education is more important than household income in that mothers' education is associated with higher self-esteem and a lower incidence of depression ($\beta = .11$ and $\beta = -.09$, respectively).

We included two variables related to employment: whether the mother is employed for pay and hours she is employed per week. When both employment variables are included in the equations predicting self-esteem and depression, they have opposite effects on well-being. Mothers who are employed report lower self-esteem ($\beta = .07$), although this is only marginally significant, but they report significantly lower depression ($\beta = -.15$). Yet being employed a higher number of hours per week is associated with both higher self-esteem ($\beta = .11$) and a lower incidence of depression ($\beta = .11$). These are somewhat difficult to interpret because of the colinearity between the two employment variables.

As shown in Table 2, however, the overall pattern of sociodemographic variables is that they have little effect on the psychological well-being of mothers. Although selected relationships are statistically significant, the

magnitude of these effects tends to be weak. Further, none of these variables—age of youngest child, household income, mother's age, mother's education, mother's race, mother's employment, or number of hours per week the mother is employed—are significantly related to mothers' global well-being.

Table 2 includes family relationship variables for which we have data on all four family types. These are limited to mother-child relations and children's well-being. Mothers who frequently have enjoyable times with their children report higher global well-being ($\beta = .10$) and greater self-esteem ($\beta = .02$, marginally significant). Mothers who experience frequent difficulties interacting with their children report lower global well-being ($\beta = -.03$, marginally significant), lower self-esteem ($\beta = -.09$), and higher incidence of depression ($\beta = .12$). The well-being of focal children is important to all three maternal outcomes. The child's well-being is associated with greater global well-being ($\beta = .17$), higher self-esteem ($\beta = .12$), and lower depression ($\beta = -.12$).

Regressions by family type. In an effort to represent more aspects of family relations, and with the intention of comparing the strength of various predictors of well-being across the four family types, we conducted separate regressions for each family type. The selection of variables for inclusion in the multiple regression predicting well-being in each type of family structure is complicated by several considerations. Including all of the variables is not acceptable because of missing data, low predictive value, and multicollinearity problems. To select predictor variables, we rely on the bivariate correlation of each variable with each outcome variable, as well as information regarding missing data. Relying on statistical significance of these correlations is problematic because it is influenced by sample size, and the sample sizes vary dramatically across family types. For example, a correlation of $-.060$ between household size and mother's self-esteem is significant at the $.05$ level for first-married mothers whereas a correlation of $-.093$ is not significant for remarried mothers.

Because of the exploratory nature of these regression equations, we included predictors that met the following conditions: (a) 70% of the respondents answered the relevant items on the questionnaire and (b) the correlation between the predictor and the outcome is greater than or equal to $.10$ or (c) the correlation is statistically significant at the $.05$ level. Mother's employment and the hours the mother is employed per week are highly collinear. In most, but not all, cases they have comparable bivariate effects on the outcome variables. When both variables met the conditions listed above, we included the hours the mother was employed per week only if it added significant variance after the dummy variable for her employment status was included. Because of the large amount of missing data for husbands' reports of marital happiness, conflict, and stability we did not include these variables in the multiple regressions.

Table 3 presents the results of four regressions, one for each family type, for each of our three outcome measures of mothers' well-being. It is important to note that some aspects of well-being are predicted better than others and that the prediction is much stronger in some types of families than in others. For example, the r for mothers' global well-being varies from $.438$ to $.572$, except for continuously single mothers when it is only $.208$. A similar pattern applies to predicting mothers' self-esteem and depression. In short, the specific variables examined in this study are not influential in explaining the well-being of continuously single mothers.

Global well-being. Married mothers' global well-being, both for those in their first marriages and stepfamilies, is highly dependent on marital happiness. For first-married mothers, other significant variables include the child's well-being, the frequency of enjoyable times spent with the child, marital stability, and marital conflict. With all these relationship variables included, only one of the sociodemographic variables has an independent effect—education—and that is only marginally significant. For mothers in stepfamilies, none of the sociodemographic variables has

TABLE 3
Predicting Mothers' Psychological Well-Being by Family Type

Predictors	Mothers' Global Well-Being						Mothers' Self-Esteem						Mothers' Depression											
	First Marriage Mothers		Divorced Mothers		Stepfamily Mothers		Continuously Single Mothers		First Marriage Mothers		Divorced Mothers		Stepfamily Mothers		Continuously Single Mothers		First Marriage Mothers		Divorced Mothers		Stepfamily Mothers		Continuously Single Mothers	
	B	β	B	β	B	β	B	β	B	β	B	β	B	β	B	β	B	β	B	β	B	β	B	β
Intercept	1.70***	na	1.16*	na	2.73***	na	2.96***	na	2.75***	na	3.63***	na	3.09***	na	2.44***	na	4.44***	na	4.32***	na	1.09***	na		
Income (\$10,000 units)			.05	.06			.01†	.05	.02†	.06			.05	.06										
Marriage length (months)																								
Household size																								
Age of youngest child																								
Mothers' education																								
Mothers' race (1 = White, 0 = otherwise)																								
Mothers' age																								
Hours employed																								
Work for pay (1 = yes, 0 = no)																								
Marital happiness																								
Marital conflict																								
Marital stability																								
Comparison level marriage																								
Comparison level divorce																								
Conflict with nonresident father																								
Dissatisfaction with child support																								
Enjoyable times with child																								
Difficult times with child																								
Child's well-being																								
Sample																								
n	1,014		437		218		387		669		247		422		1,141		454		247		364			
R	.506***		.438***		.572***		.316***		.363***		.293**		.187**		.409***		.373***		.484***		.200***			

†p < .10; *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001

an independent effect, but marital happiness, marital stability, and the child's well-being are significant predictors.

For divorced mothers, a different pattern emerges. The strongest predictors are a mother's employment and the hours per week she is employed. Being employed has a strong positive effect on her global wellbeing, whereas the greater number of hours she is employed has a negative effect. Employment is beneficial to well-being, but given that, the more hours she works the lower her sense of global well-being. Two other significant predictors of global well-being for divorced mothers are relational: the comparison level of divorce and the child's well-being. For continuously single mothers, none of the sociodemographic variables has an effect. The only significant influences are the frequency of enjoyable interaction the mother has with the child and the child's well-being.

Self-esteem. There are many similarities in the results for mothers' self-esteem. Of the sociodemographic variables, only education has a significant effect among mothers in their first marriage. However, several

relational variables including marital happiness, marital stability, and difficulties interacting with the child have significant effects. For mothers in stepfamilies, the only variable approaching significance is the frequency of difficult interaction between mother and child. As important as relational variables are, however, it is noteworthy that across three family types involving relations with nonresidential fathers, there were no statistically significant associations between aspects of the coparenting relationship and mothers' global well-being or self-esteem.

The self-esteem of divorced mothers is associated with education and employment. The higher the education the greater the self-esteem, and being employed is related to higher self-esteem. The relational variables that are significant are difficulties interacting with the child and the child's well-being. For continuously single mothers, the only significant influences are education and the child's well-being.

Depression. Mothers' depression is the final outcome variable. For first-married mothers, education is associated with lower depression. Older mothers are less depressed (marginally) and mothers who are employed are less depressed. None of the other sociodemographic variables are significant. By contrast, marital happiness and marital conflict are significantly related to depression, with conflict being the strongest predictor. Marital stability, a judgment that the marital relationship compares favorably with separation, and difficulties with children are marginally significant.

For divorced mothers, the only sociodemographic variable that has a significant effect on depression is employment status: employed mothers report being less depressed. Divorced mothers who evaluate their current life situation as superior to their marital relationship, who experience low levels of conflict with nonresidential fathers, and whose children are well adjusted report lower levels of depression.

The only sociodemographic variable that has a significant effect on remarried mothers' depression is the mother's education. Family processes that are associated with a lower incidence of depression among mothers in stepfamilies are marital happiness, low levels of marital conflict, infrequent difficulties with children, and higher child well-being. For continuously single mothers, the only variables that have a significant effect on depression are dissatisfaction with child support and difficult interaction with children.

DISCUSSION

In this article, we observed differences in several dimensions of mothers' well-being across family types. Simple comparisons across family types without controls for relevant variables indicated that single mothers have lower well-being and tend to be more depressed than married mothers. Compared with mothers in other family types, continuously single mothers have significantly lower self-esteem. Still, divorced and continuously single mothers are generally happy and satisfied with their lives. We then controlled for a series of social background and resource variables and found that significant differences in aspects of well-being persist across family types.

These findings refute the idea that differences in mothers' well-being across family types are entirely due to socioeconomic, racial, age, or employment differences associated with family structure. Although we have stressed that differences in well-being across family types are small, married mothers tend to be advantaged. Because our sample is restricted to mothers, we cannot assess whether being a mother enhances or detracts from women's well-being. But our data are consistent with the view that single mothers and married mothers experience parenthood differently. Long-term single parenting, usually performed by employed women, is a chronic stressor (M. S. Thompson & Ensminger, 1989). Compared with their married counterparts, most single mothers have little relief from the responsibilities and burdens of parenting. Marriage typically provides social integration, social support, and emotional support, so that spouses have someone to talk to, someone to listen, someone who cares about them as individuals, and who cares about their problems (Coombs, 1991; Ross et al., 1990). Married mothers also receive instrumental support from their husbands. If they have conflicting or competing demands, they can often rely on their husbands to help out (Szinovacz, 1984). By contrast, single mothers often are on their own. Research shows that emotional support reduces depression, anxiety, and other psychological problems (Ross et al., 1990).

Although the effects of marriage on mothers' well-being are generally positive, they are not particularly strong. This occurs because, as feminist family researchers emphasize, marriage, parenthood, and family life are characterized by substantial diversity and variability. Each of these experiences has the potential to enhance or diminish mothers' well-being, with women in more nurturing and equitable family environments benefiting more than other women. Especially in traditional marriages, women often relinquish control, independence, and autonomy (Ross, 1991). Our findings show that mothers' well-being is higher where they rate their current life circumstances (whether married or divorced) as better than their alternatives and where they describe their family relationships favorably. For both groups of married mothers, aspects of marital process are tied to personal well-being. Among first-married mothers, higher self-esteem and global well-being are related to marital happiness and marital stability. Similarly, there is a powerful relationship between marital conflict and depression. Although the effects are not as strong in stepfamilies, remarried mothers also appear to benefit psychologically from marital happiness and stability. Thus our findings corroborate previous studies suggesting that although marital status or family structure tells us relatively little about mothers' well-being, the quality of marital relationships is critical (Coontz, 1992; Gove, Hughes, & Style, 1983). We should recognize, however, that our data are cross-sectional and many of the relationships we have observed are bidirectional. Specifically, higher maternal well-being is likely to facilitate happy and stable marriages.

Parent-child relations also are central to mothers' self-esteem and overall well-being (Acock & Demo, 1994). Of the many dimensions of marital and family relationships we examined, the child's well-being is clearly the strongest and most consistent predictor of mothers' well-being. Substantiating previous studies (Greenberger & O'Neil, 1990), we also found that difficulties in relationships with their children adversely affect mothers' well-being. For divorced mothers, an important source of distress and depression is the coparenting relationship with their children's nonresidential father.

Interestingly, we have been able to identify many more aspects of family relationships that are important for married mothers than for single mothers. Our selection of variables was guided by previous research and by dominant theories in family studies and resulted in many significant findings. Yet many variables deemed important in previous research reflect marital processes, and these variables are not relevant for understanding the well-being of single mothers. In particular, we could identify very few family relationships that influence the well-being of continuously single mothers. In part, this occurred because previous research has neglected these families or failed to distinguish between different types of single-parent families. As a result, we know less about these families and their well-being than we do about other family types. But another reason is that we had a relatively small subsample of continuously single mothers, and our analysis was further restricted when pertinent information was not available for some of these families. Still, we found that, like married mothers, the well-being of single mothers depends on their children's well-being and on their relationships with their children. It is provocative, especially in the contemporary cultural and political climate, that parenting concerns and children's well-being are as salient to the well-being of continuously single and divorced mothers as they are to that of married mothers. But we suggest that an important direction for further research is to focus on various types of single-parent (including male-headed) families. Considerable theoretical and methodological work is needed to correct for this imbalance in family research. Specifically, we need to develop a fuller understanding of the diversity and complexity of cohabiting relationships, coparenting arrangements, relations with noncohabiting partners, relations with extended and chosen kin (Weston, 1991), and the influences of these relationships on single parents' well-being.

We also examined how dimensions of mothers' well-being are influenced by aspects of their social background. Across all family types, and for all three dimensions of psychological well-being we examined, sociodemographic variables were less important than family relationships in explaining mothers' well-being. Still, certain aspects of mothers' social structural location and resources are associated with their well-being. Controlling for other variables, there is a weak relationship between household income and mothers' self-esteem, and mothers' education is associated with both higher self-esteem and reduced feelings of depression. Our findings also indicate that employment is a valuable resource, particularly for divorced mothers and in

situations when employment does not require excessive time commitments. One reason employment is especially important for divorced women and their families is that their income generally plunges in the years following divorce (Holden & Smock, 1991; Weitzman, 1985). For most divorced mothers, however, employment represents more than necessary financial resources; it provides meaning, satisfaction, a sense of personal control, and well-being (Spitze, 1988).

Our intent has been to isolate the effects on mothers' well-being attributable to marital status and the presence or absence of the children's biological father. In doing so, we separated out the effects of other variables that are sometimes examined as dimensions of family structure, such as mothers' education, mothers' employment, and household income. Still, we found that marriage is generally associated with higher maternal well-being. Adopting a broader conceptualization of family structure that incorporates related sociodemographic influences would strengthen the conclusion that family structure indeed matters for mothers' well-being. However, even the combined influence of family structure and sociodemographic variables is quite modest relative to the effect of family process variables. In the end, there is much greater variation in mothers' well-being within family types than across family types.

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