



The Impact of Stepfamily Adjustment on Adult Attachment: A Comparison of American Indians and Whites

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Abstract

One-third of American children will spend time in a stepfamily. Stepfamily formation is often accompanied by heightened amounts of stress. This study examined the effects of stress on attachment for American Indian and White emerging adults who spent time in stepfamilies. Participants of the STEP study were between the ages of 18 and 30 and spent at least one year in a stepfamily before the age of 18. Ordinary Least Square regressions were run to identify correlations and relationships. Interactions were examined between race and stress to identify the moderating effects that race had on attachment outcomes. Results indicated that an individual's level of education, gender and race all impacted their emerging adult attachment outcomes. American Indians had higher overall attachment outcomes than Whites. However, the impacts of stress on attachment did not differ by race. Implications of these findings are also discussed.

It is estimated that up to one-third of American children will reside in a stepfamily home before the age of 18 (Papernow, 2013). Stepfamily formations are common when single adults with children remarry or go on to cohabit with a new partner (Jensen, Shafer, & Holmes, 2015; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Stepfamily formation is accompanied by an adjustment for all members of the family and often results in children experiencing emotional, academic, and behavioral challenges (Amato, 2010; Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Family structure changes as new partners, stepparents and stepsiblings

come together. Those changes require the formation of new interactions between caregivers and children.

The interactions individuals have with their caregivers influence how they interact in future relationships (Bowlby, 1969; Malekpour, 2007). The remarriage of a parent influences the dynamics of biological parent and child relationships. Boundaries between parents and children have to adjust, and family traditions and rituals change when a new stepparent is introduced, changing preexisting family dynamics (Papernow, 2013). It is therefore important to explore the implications of stepfamily adjustment on adult relationships and attachment in emerging adults.

While a few studies have looked at these connections generally (Ganong, Coleman & Jamison, 2011), few, if any studies, have examined groups of color and specifically American Indians. This study looked at how stepfamily stress and adjustment impacted attachment styles in American Indian and White emerging adults. The following section reviews the literature and uses attachment theory as the theoretical framework.

ATTACHMENT THEORY

Attachment theory focuses on infant attachments to their parent. As children grow and develop, the relationships and interactions they have with their caregivers influence how they respond to others (Bowlby, 1969). According to attachment theory, those early parent relationships impact how individuals act and feel in their romantic relationships (Collins et al., 1997). Individuals can develop different attachment styles that can be separated into four categories—secure, anxious, avoidant and disorganized. For the purpose of this study we looked at attachment in two categories: secure and insecure (i.e., anxious, avoidant and disorganized). Bowlby explained that secure attachments include trust and emotional connections in relationships and create a framework for positive interactions with significant others; thus allowing for the development of effective self-regulation skills and the exploration and development of the self. Those with insecure or avoidant attachments worry that their partner will be unsupportive in times of need and they distance themselves from their partners (Bowlby, 1969; Mikulincer, Victor, Cowan & Cowan, 2002; Planitz, Feeney, & Peterson, 2009). The terms “negative adult

attachment outcomes” and “attachment difficulties” will be used interchangeably when referring to insecure or avoidant attachment styles.

The original foundation of attachment theory, according to Bowlby (1969), required looking at attachments occurring in infancy as well as early caregiver interactions. Bowlby later expanded this theory and found that meaningful interactions with others affect beliefs about availability (Bowlby, 1969; Mikulincer et al., 2002). As with attachment theory, the organizational-developmental perspective considers attachments formed early in life and how those impact relationship patterns later in life (Sroufe & Fleeson 1986). The organizational-development perspective emphasizes that stressful and challenging situations earlier in life are associated with adult emotional relationships, and attachment (Simpson, Collins, Farrell & Raby, 2015; Thompson, 2008). Research demonstrates that stepfamily formation is a time of stress and adjustment, which according to both attachment theory and the organizational-developmental perspective, could have an impact on attachment outcomes (Jensen et al., 2015). The next section discusses stepfamily formation and adjustment from an attachment theory perspective.

STEPFAMILY ADJUSTMENT

In the literature, the results of stepfamily formation and its associated stress are often referred to as stepfamily adjustment. The adjustment of becoming a stepfamily can be influenced by many factors including family conflict, biological and stepparent closeness, societal stigma, social stress, a reorganization of family boundaries, loss of attention, financial changes and role conflict. These factors can result in short or long term behavioral, emotional, interpersonal and academic difficulties (Amato, 2010; Dunn, 2002; Jensen et al., 2015). However, the long-term implications of stepfamily adjustment within an attachment theory context are unknown.

Important differences in adjustment and coping behaviors exist when children experienced a parental separation when compared to those that did not (Dunn & Deater-Deckard, 2001). Children in stepfamilies frequently start the new relationships with bonds of attachment to one parent in the relationship, but not the new partner. However, a potential buffer against the adverse effects of divorce and remarriage is parent and

stepparent support (Papernow, 2013). Parent and stepparent support has the potential to lower stress in stepfamily experiences (Shafer et al., 2015). This wide range of potential challenges and protective factors may impact an individual's overall adjustment to stepfamily formation. Since individual experiences vary, our study had participants examine, retrospectively, the overall stress they experienced as a result of their stepfamily formation.

Differences in adjustment between racial groups have been identified. Researchers have found that children who come from African American stepfamilies adjust better than White children (Adler-Baeder, Robertson, & Schramm, 2010; Papernow, 2013). We looked specifically at American Indian racial differences between stepfamily experiences and found very few studies. Given the lack of research that examined American Indians, the current study focused on race as a moderating variable when comparing American Indians to Whites.

AMERICAN INDIAN FAMILIES AND STEPFAMILIES

Stemming from the majority population's oppressive means of interaction, American Indians have experienced cultural and ethnic difficulties. These difficulties have often been exacerbated by policies and practices that devalued American Indian culture and traditions. Some of these have included the forced relocation of tribes to reservations and programs that removed Native children from their homes, families, and communities (Whitbeck, Adams, Hoyt & Chen, 2004). American Indian children were removed from their homes and placed in boarding schools, or with non-Native families, to help them become "assimilated" and learn the American way. The devastating result was a loss of identity, and American Indian role models, which led to generational attachment issues and parenting difficulties (Weaver, 1998). This lack of generational attachment has had long-term, profound effects on American Indian families and children.

Today, American Indians experience heightened stress in many areas, including economic hardships, higher unemployment rates, larger families and fewer resources, parental loss, as well as higher rates of alcoholism and violence (Brave Heart, 1999; Christensen & Manson, 2001; Lonczak, Fernandez, Austin, Marlatt, & Donovan, 2007).

In a study addressing adult attachment with American Indians, Christensen and Manson (2001) found that poor adult attachment can also be generational in nature. American Indian families continue to suffer the effects of generations of loss and subsequently may have difficulties forming healthy attachments with their parents, which are then perpetuated into intergenerational conflict and onto future generations who may also struggle to form healthy attachments (Brown-Rice, 2013).

A potential buffer against familial difficulties is addressed by Limb, Shafer and Sandoval's (2014) study that looked at the importance of kin support on American Indian families. They found that kinship support and interactions impacted how a family or individual adjusts to change within the family structure (Limb et al., 2014). Within a kinship network traditional American Indian communities have been seen as inclusive and are often defined so that everyone in the tribe is considered a relative to whom one was owed obligations and everyone was owed obligations by everyone else (Sachs, 2011). As an example, one study found that American Indian youth were twice as likely as Whites to live in a residence with a grandparent; thus demonstrating a multigenerational aspect of kin care within a family (Green, Eitle, & Eitle, 2014). Kin support has been essential to the survival of American Indian families from the effects of culturally traumatic events (Limb et al., 2014). Other factors were also found when looking at stepfamily adjustment and attachment when reviewing the literature.

OTHER FACTORS THAT IMPACT STEPFAMILY ADJUSTMENT AND ATTACHMENT

While not specific to American Indians, a number of other factors were found to impact stepfamily adjustment and attachment. These factors include gender, current age, and age at the time of the stepfamily formation. Research suggests that gender differences in attachment styles exist as overall women have more secure relationships than men (Matsuoka et al., 2006; Mikulincer et al., 2002). However, research also indicates that girls have a harder time with stepfamily formation than do boys (Ham, 2004; Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998; Papernow, 2013). Stepfamily research also suggests that the age of an individual at the time of the stepfamily formation can impact how well they transition (Van Eeden-Moorefield & Pasley, 2007). The earlier the

transition takes place, the fewer difficulties that may arise, and “early adolescence appears to be a particularly challenging time for remarriage” (Papernow, 2013, p. 50).

A number of studies have looked at attachment with children, but there is a gap in research that examines attachment in emerging adults, and a substantial gap when examining it in American Indians. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the moderating effects of race, specifically American Indian, on stepfamily adjustment and adult attachment outcomes among emerging adults. It was hypothesized that American Indians who experienced stressful stepfamily formations would have less secure attachment styles in emerging adulthood than Whites who experienced similar stresses. Understanding this important topic can help fill a research gap that exists in American Indian stepfamily research.

METHODS

PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURES

This study used data from the Stepfamily Experiences Project (STEP). The data were collected by a research team at Brigham Young University and Qualtrics, a research firm specializing in data collection. After receiving Brigham Young University IRB approval, data were collected by Qualtrics in 2013. Participants were recruited and surveyed to create a nationally-based quota sample of emerging adults ages 18 to 30 that lived in a stepfamily for at least one year between the time they were 8 and 18. The original survey consisted of 78 total questions and study participants were asked to look retrospectively at their stepfamily experiences, and then asked about their current life experiences. The total sample size was 1,593 and included an oversample of 340 (21%) American Indians.

Sample demographics. Our study only included participants who identified as American Indian or White from the STEP data (see Table 1). These categories were not mutually exclusive since participants could self-identify as more than one race. Therefore, for purposes of this study, individuals who indicated their race as White only were included in the White category. This resulted in a sample size of 855. Of the White only participants, 56.6% were female and the mean age was 24.5 years old. Participants

identifying either American Indian only, or American Indian in combination with another race, were included in the oversample of American Indians. This resulted in a sample size of 340 American Indians. Of those, 72.3% were female and the mean age was 27.5 years old. Other demographic information is included in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Characteristics of the Sample (n= 1,191)

Variable	American Indian (n=340)	Caucasian (n=851)
	% or Mean (SD)	% or Mean (SD)
Overall Attachment	68.41(17.11)	65.74 (16.27)
Anxious Attachment	38.78 (11.47)	38.38 (10.66)
Avoidant Attachment	29.64 (8.28)	27.37 (7.96)
Stepfamily Stress	2.53 (.89)	2.31 (.87)
Age	27.5 (3.92)	24.5 (3.63)
Gender		
<i>Male</i>	27.71%	43.39%
<i>Female</i>	72.29%	56.61%
Age at Stepfamily Formation	8.35 (4.73)	8.55 (4.44)
Education	3.14 (1.04)	2.9 (0.97)

MEASURES

Dependent variable. The dependent variable was adult attachment. This was measured using Simpson, Rholes and Nelligan's (1992) Adult Attachment Questionnaire, a commonly used and standardized measure for adult attachment. The Adult Attachment Questionnaire contains two subscales: one measuring avoidant attachment and one

measuring anxious attachment. Participants were asked how they “typically feel toward romantic (dating) partners *in general*.” They responded on a scale of 1 to 7 with 1 being “Strongly Disagree” and 7 being “Strongly Agree.”

The avoidant attachment subscale included the following statements. “I find it relatively easy to get close to others” (reverse coded), “I’m not very comfortable having to depend on other people,” “I’m comfortable having others depend on me” (reverse coded), “I don’t like people getting too close to me,” “I find it difficult to trust others completely,” “I’m nervous whenever anyone gets too close to me,” and “Others often want me to be more intimate than I feel comfortable being.” Participants rated each statement from 1 to 7 with 1 being “Strongly Disagree” and 7 being “Strongly Agree”. The Cronbach’s alpha for the items included on the avoidant subscale was ($\alpha=0.77$). Participants then received a composite score for avoidant attachment on a scale from 7 to 49 based on their responses.

The anxious attachment subscale consisted of the following statements, “I rarely worry about being abandoned by others” (reverse coded), “I often worry that my partner(s) don’t really love me,” “I rarely worry about my partner(s) leaving me” (reverse coded), “I often want to merge completely with others, and this desire sometimes scares them away,” “I’m confident others would never hurt me by suddenly ending our relationship” (reverse coded), “I usually want more closeness and intimacy than others do,” “The thought of being left by others rarely enters my mind” (reverse coded), “I’m confident that my partner(s) love me just as much as I love them” (reverse coded), “Others often are reluctant to get as close as I would like” and “I’m somewhat uncomfortable being too close to others.” Participants responded on the same 1 to 7 scale as with the avoidant attachment scale. The Cronbach’s alpha was $\alpha = 0.79$ for the anxious subscale. Scores on the anxious attachment subscale were then analyzed on a scale from 10 to 70. According to the literature, the higher the score an individual receives on these scales, the more anxious or avoidant they generally are in their romantic relationships (Simpson et al., 1992). Low composite scores indicate more secure attachments.

Independent variable. Our independent variable, stepfamily stress and adjustment, was measured using the following question, “How much *stress* did you experience as a result of your stepfamily forming?” This was measured as a continuous

variable. Participants responded on a scale of 1 to 10 about the amount of stress they felt with 1 being “none” and 10 being an “extreme amount.” Respondents were asked to look retrospectively at their stepfamily experiences in response to this question.

Moderating variable. The purpose of this study was to examine if there are racial differences between the stress experienced at stepfamily formation and adult attachment styles. Therefore, race was our moderating variable. The impacts of stress and adjustment on adult attachment were examined with both American Indians and Whites. Participants who claimed American Indian only as their race, as well as those who claimed American Indian multi-racial, were included in the sample size. To justify combining both of these groups, sample t-tests were run to identify differences between multi-racial American Indians, and American Indians only, and no significant differences were found.

Control variables. Control variables included the following: the participant’s current age (range 18-30); the participant’s age at the time their stepfamily was formed (range 0-18); gender (female coded 0, male coded 1); and level of education with five categories ranging from 1 to 5: 1 = GED or less than high school, 2 = high school diploma, 3 = some college, 4 = bachelor’s degree, and 5 = more than a bachelor’s degree.

DATA ANALYSIS

The first set of analysis involved descriptive statistics of the American Indian and White samples. The second set of analysis involved a series of three regression models. Model 1, the first analysis, was conducted by running an Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression. This was conducted to examine the relationship between stepfamily stress and attachment for the sample of American Indians and Whites, excluding control variables.

Model 2, the second OLS regression analysis, examined stepfamily stress and attachment while controlling for current age, gender, age at stepfamily formation. The model was checked for collinearity, heteroscedasticity, outliers and leverage points. It passed the required tests and met the assumptions for OLS regression analysis.

Model 3 examined stepfamily stress and attachment, included all the control variables and also included race as a moderating variable. We examined the interaction between the race and attachment variables to determine if stepfamily stress and its impacts on attachment outcomes differed between American Indians and Whites.

RESULTS

INDEPENDENT EFFECTS

Model 1 (see Table 2) shows results of an OLS regression that included stepfamily stress as the independent variable and adult attachment as the dependent variable. It was found that children that experienced more stressful stepfamily formations experience more difficult attachment outcomes in emerging adulthood. Every one-point increase in adult attachment outcomes was associated with a 1.85-point increase in stepfamily stress. ($p < .001$). As the level of stress increased in childhood, the level of attachment difficulties in emerging adulthood also significantly increased. Here, attachment difficulties refers to an increase in anxious and avoidant attachment as an emerging adult.

Model 2 (see Table 2) used an OLS regression and examined the same outcomes as Model 1 with the inclusion of the control variables. With the control variables, the relationship between stepfamily stress and adult attachment difficulties decreased slightly. However, outcomes remained significant ($p < .001$), meaning that for every one-point increase in stepfamily stress, there was a 1.78-point increase in attachment difficulty outcomes. Here, the more stressful the transition to stepfamily life, the higher the anxious and avoidant outcomes in emerging adulthood. Overall, American Indians experienced significantly higher negative attachment outcomes than Whites ($p < .05$).

RACIAL DIFFERENCES ON ATTACHMENT OUTCOMES

Model 3 (see Table 2) used an OLS regression that included the same outcome variables and control variables that were used in model 2. However, to identify the moderating effects of race, stepfamily stress levels were interacted with race. We found that being American Indian or White had no significant moderating effects when looking at differences of stress on negative adult attachment outcomes. In other words, when race was included as the moderating variable, there was a slight decrease on the attachment outcome but this decrease was not significant when comparing American Indians to Whites. The R-squared for our final working model was .155 indicating that our model accounted for 15.5% of the variability. A participant's gender was significant when

looking at attachment outcomes. Being male was associated with a 2.26-point decrease in negative anxious and avoidant attachment outcomes as compared to females ($p < .01$). This meant that in comparison to boys, girls experienced higher negative attachment outcomes.

Education was also found to have a significant impact. The reference group for educational attainment was individuals with less than a high school education. As education increased, negative attachment outcomes decreased. This means that individuals who had a higher level of education also had lower/less negative attachment outcomes. When looking at individuals with a high school education, for every one-point increase in education, there was a 5.82-point decrease in negative avoidant and anxious attachment outcomes ($p < .01$). For individuals with some college, every one-point increase in education was associated with a 5.04-point decrease in negative attachment outcomes ($p < .01$). For those with bachelor's degrees, every one-point increase in education was associated with a 6.30-point decrease in negative attachment outcomes ($p < .001$). Finally, for those with more than a bachelor's degree, every one-point increase in education was associated with a 9.83-point decrease in negative attachment outcomes ($p < .001$). Together, all these indicated that as an individual's education increases their negative attachment outcome scores decreased.



DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine if the level of stress a child or adolescent felt at the time their stepfamily formed impacted adult attachment outcomes. Specifically, we wanted to see if the impacts of stress on attachment outcomes were different between American Indians and Whites. After a review of the literature revealed that American Indians often experience a heightened number of challenges, we hypothesized that they would have poorer adult attachment outcomes (Brave Heart, 1999; Christensen & Manson, 2001; Lonczak et al., 2007) if they experienced more stressful stepfamily formations.

Overall, results suggested that the more stressful the stepfamily formation was for an individual the higher their negative attachment score, meaning they had more negative avoidant and anxious attachment patterns than individuals with lower scores. However, when comparing the impacts of stress on attachment between the two groups, it was found that there were no statistically significant differences between the outcomes of American Indians and Whites. Stepfamily stress and attachment outcomes were not found to be dependent upon race as defined in this study. These findings did not support our initial hypothesis that there would be significant differences between the two groups in relation to the impacts of stress on attachment. However, in Model 2, attachment outcomes between American Indians and Whites, when not related to stress, were significantly different. American Indians experienced higher negative attachment scores than did Whites. This finding was consistent with our hypothesis that American Indians would experience more attachment difficulties in emerging adulthood.

Previous literature has found that women had more secure relationships than did men (Matsuoka et al., 2006; Mikulincer et al., 2002) as well as more challenges with stepfamily formation than did men (Ham, 2004; Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998; Papernow, 2013). Our study found that women had higher negative attachment outcomes than did their male counterparts. With regard to educational outcomes, generally speaking, it has been identified that individuals with lower educational attainment often have lower socio-economic status. American Indians are at a heightened risk to be in lower socio-economic situations (Brave Heart, 1999; Christensen & Manson, 2001; Lonczak et al., 2007). Therefore, they may be at a higher risk of attachment

difficulties than those with more education. Our study found that as education increased, negative attachment outcomes decreased.

LIMITATIONS/AREAS FOR FURTHER STUDY

This study had a number of limitations. First, much of the attachment literature reviewed suggested that attachment was developed in the early months and years of life (Bowlby, 1969). Our study focused on a broader age of individuals that experienced a stepfamily formation. Although there are many reasons that a couple may have separated and a subsequent stepfamily formed, the STEP data did not account for individual circumstances surrounding each stepfamily formation which could have influenced either the stress they felt or their attachment outcome. Second, we used secondary data to conduct this study which limited the types of outcomes we could examine. Third, while no differences were found, combining the American Indian only and American Indian multiracial groups together could be considered a limitation. Finally, other important potential factors were not considered in this study. For example, attachment theory tends to focus just on the parents. As such, we cannot be certain that the theory is adequately addressing attachment within an American Indian context since there is often reliance on more family members than just the biological parents and stepfamily unit. Hence, there is a possibility that the results could have been impacted by factors not addressed within the current study.

Future research could examine if there are racial differences between American Indians and Whites when looking at participants' view on family, divorce and relationships. The STEP data consisted of relationship questions regarding long-term relationships, marriage and divorce. Further study in this area would allow researchers to explore if the amount of stress an individual felt when their stepfamily formed or their adult attachment styles, were related to the number of successful relationships and or marriages an individual had. Further research could also address if attachment outcomes would differ if an intervention were conducted to lower the level of stress an individual experienced when their stepfamily formed.

IMPLICATIONS

Helping professions, such as social work, emphasize the importance of cultural competence. In order to best help clients, one must have knowledge of cultural differences and cultural implications of research (National Association of Social Workers, 2008). Interventions are not often evidence-based when it comes to working with American Indians, especially those who grew up in stepfamilies. Our findings did not support our initial hypothesis that the effects of stress on attachment would differ by race. We now have an initial understanding that stress had similar effects on American Indians and Whites who came from stepfamilies. This understanding can guide interventions, treatment modalities and case conceptualizations when working with American Indians.

However, our findings did indicate that American Indians experience higher overall negative attachment scores as a result of the stress of stepfamily formation. Therefore, helping professionals who work with American Indian emerging adults need to take this into consideration and make sure they include culturally appropriate interventions into their treatment models. As noted in the literature review, kinship networks are critical to the health of American Indian communities. Here, promoting positive attachment of these children, spread across extended family members may buffer its negative effects. As clinicians tap into these resources, kin networks can potentially add a strength and resilience component to any intervention.

Our research also suggested that girls may have more challenging experiences with stepfamily formations than do boys. When it comes to working with stepfamilies, this information can help clinicians make appropriate assessments and intervene with girls more effectively. Likewise, individuals with lower levels of education experienced higher attachment difficulties. If clinicians remain aware of these risk and protective factors, they can have a better understanding of where to intervene and be more culturally sensitive when working with American Indians.

CONCLUSION

This study found that American Indians had higher negative attachment scores in general and that the amount of stress an individual experienced at the time of their

stepfamily formation impacted their adult attachment outcomes. As more research emerges regarding stepfamilies and clinical interventions, we will have a greater understanding of the commonalities and differences that exist between American Indian and White stepfamilies. There are still gaps that exist in the literature but understanding the similarities and differences between American Indians and Whites, when looking at stepfamily stress and attachment, can help guide future research and interventions for this important but often overlooked population.

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