

# Family hardship, family instability and children's development in the first five years of life

Ingrid Schoon

Institute of Education, London

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# Family poverty

- Family poverty constitutes a pervasive developmental hazard, draining family resources
- Child poverty is a persistent problem, even in highly developed countries (UNICEF, 2010)
- Poverty affects families economically, socially and on an emotional level

# Family instability

- Since the 1970s family life and living conditions of parents have become increasingly diversified with fewer children living in traditional two-parent families (Kiernan, 2008; McLanahan 2009; Waldfogel et al., 2010)
- Family instability has been recognised as a salient risk factor affecting parenting effectiveness and children's adjustment especially during early childhood (Amato, 2005; Brown, 2010; Conger & Elder, 1994; McLanahan, 2009)
- Effects of family instability on child adjustment less well researched than poverty effects
- Indeed no consensus about how family instability should be conceptualised and measured (Brown, 2010)

# Previous research

- Associations between poverty, family structure and child adjustment are well established (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; Osborn, 2007; Kiernan & Mensah, 2009)
- Poverty and family break-up often co-occur, making it important to assess their combined as well as separate effect (McLanahan, 2009)



However, relatively little is known about the processes by which poverty or family instability affect child adjustment

# How does poverty affect children?

- Resource deprivation or investment models (Mayer, 1997; Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Linver, Brooks-Gunn & Kohen, 2002)
- Family Stress models (Conger et al., 1992, 2010; Elder & Caspi, 1988; McLoyd, 1989)
- Combination of Investment and Stress Models (Linver, et al., 2002; Yeung et al., 2002; Conger & Donnellan, 2007)
- Instability Hypothesis (Fomby & Cherlin, 2007)
  - Instability Resource hypothesis
  - Instability stress hypothesis (Cavanagh & Huston, 2008)
- Selection theory: role of prior characteristics, in particular education (Rowe & Roger, 1997)

# Aims of research

- Use longitudinal data with sufficient large sample size to:
  - examine how poverty affects family processes and subsequent child adjustment in infants
  - assess the relative role of family poverty and family instability affecting children's adjustment across domains
  - explore whether associations between poverty, family processes and child adjustment are mediated by experience of family instability across different family forms
  - Identify factors enabling positive adjustment in face of adversity

# Developmental-contextual perspective of family processes

- Approach inspired by Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Elder & Caspi, 1988; Sameroff and Rosenblum, 2006:
  - Multiple levels of influence (ranging from proximal to distal influences)
  - Linked lives
  - Development over time and in context
  - Transactions between individual and context

# Why focus on early childhood?

- Early development is crucial indicator of developmental health (Keating & Hertzman, 1999)
- In particular verbal skills and behavioural adjustment are associated with later educational and occupational attainment as well as health and wellbeing
- Early years a crucial window of opportunity for interventions (Heckman, 2006; Hertzman et al., 2010; Marmot, 2010)

# UK Millennium Cohort

- 18819 babies born into 18553 families
- Babies were born between September 2000 and January 2002 in the UK
- At time of survey most babies were 9-month old
- Follow-up study at age 36 months and 5 years

# Child outcomes

- adaptation across domains
  - Cognitive adjustment (naming vocabulary)
  - Behaviour adjustment (SDQ)
- Adjustment in one domain cannot be assumed to generalize to other domains
- Unless multiple domains are assessed, only a partial picture of adaptation can be formulated (Cicchetti & Garmezy, 1993; Masten, 2009).

# Family Poverty

- Equivalised net household income < 60% national median at 9mths, 3 and 5 years :

	N (9,874)	%
Never poor	5,930	60.1
Once	1,491	15.1
Twice	1,106	11.2
Poor at all three time points	1,347	13.6

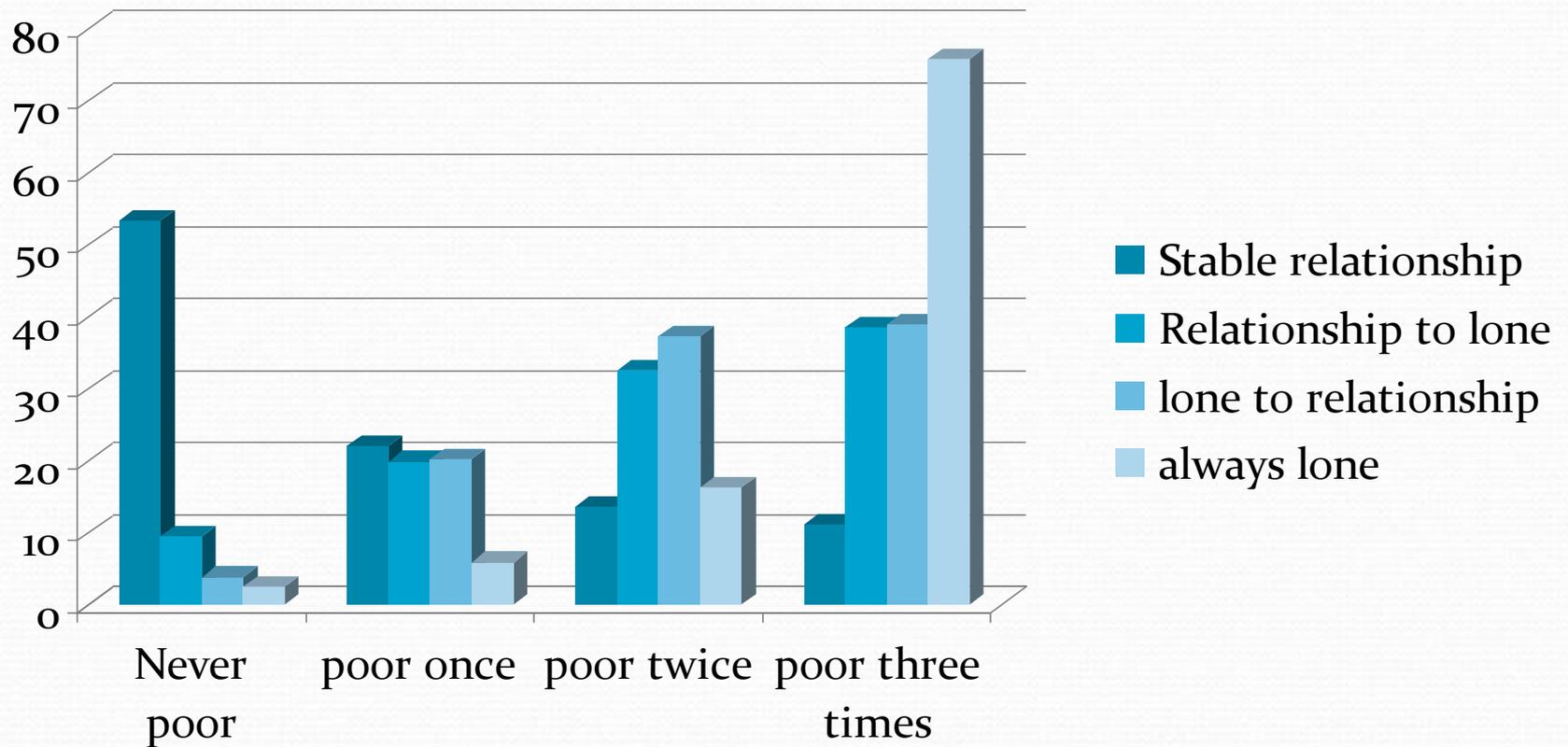
# Family Status at each sweep

	2000/2 MCS <sub>1</sub> (W <sub>1</sub> ) %	2003/4 MCS <sub>2</sub> (W <sub>2</sub> ) %	2005/6 MCS <sub>3</sub> (W <sub>3</sub> ) %
Married	60.5	65.1	60.9
Cohabiting	24.6	17.9	19.0
Lone	14.5	16.6	19.8

# Family transitions between MCS1 and MCS3 (2000-2005/6)

	N	%
Stayed in relationship	10,930	75.8
Relationship to lone	1,355	9.7
Lone to relationship	792	4.9
Stay lone parent	1,477	9.6

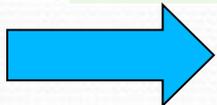
# Poverty and Family transitions



# Decomposition Analysis: Cognitive Adjustmt

What is a greater risk: poverty or family transitions?

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
1. Poverty	sign.				
2. FamTrans		sign			
3. Pov + Fam			Only pov sig		
4. + Demographics				Age,sex,bw qual,work, poverty	
5. + Own characteristics					Age, bw, qual, cogn, poverty
R <sup>2</sup>	.079	.030	.080	.157	.298

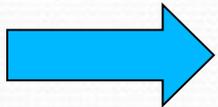


Poverty greater risk factor for cognitive development than family trans

# Decomposition Analysis: Behaviour

What is a greater risk: poverty or family transitions?

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
1. Poverty	sign.				
2. FamTrans		sign			
3. Pov + Fam			Pov + fam sign.		
4. + Demographics				Age,sex,bw, qual,work pov, fam	
5. + Own characteristics					Age, sex,bw, qual, cogn, pov, fam
R <sup>2</sup>	.076	.058	.0807	.132	.152

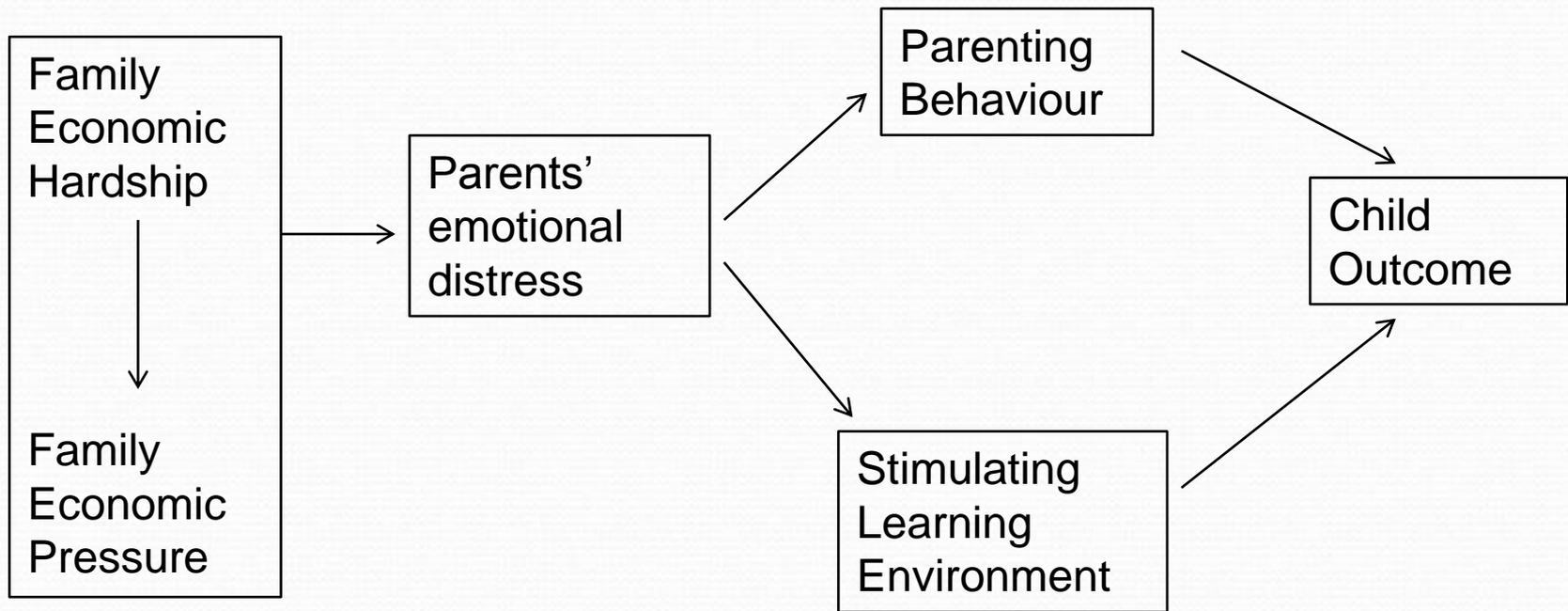


- Poverty and family transitions impact on behaviour adjustment
- Domain specific pathways



# Risk processes

# Combining Family Stress and Investment models



# Findings

- The experience of material hardship:
  - effects both cognitive and behavioural adjustment
  - can exacerbate maternal distress
  - is associated with less effective parenting
- Experiences in the family environment can mediate the influence of material hardship on child outcomes (after controlling for socio-economic background and biological risk factors)
- Different mediating processes for cognitive and behaviour adjustment

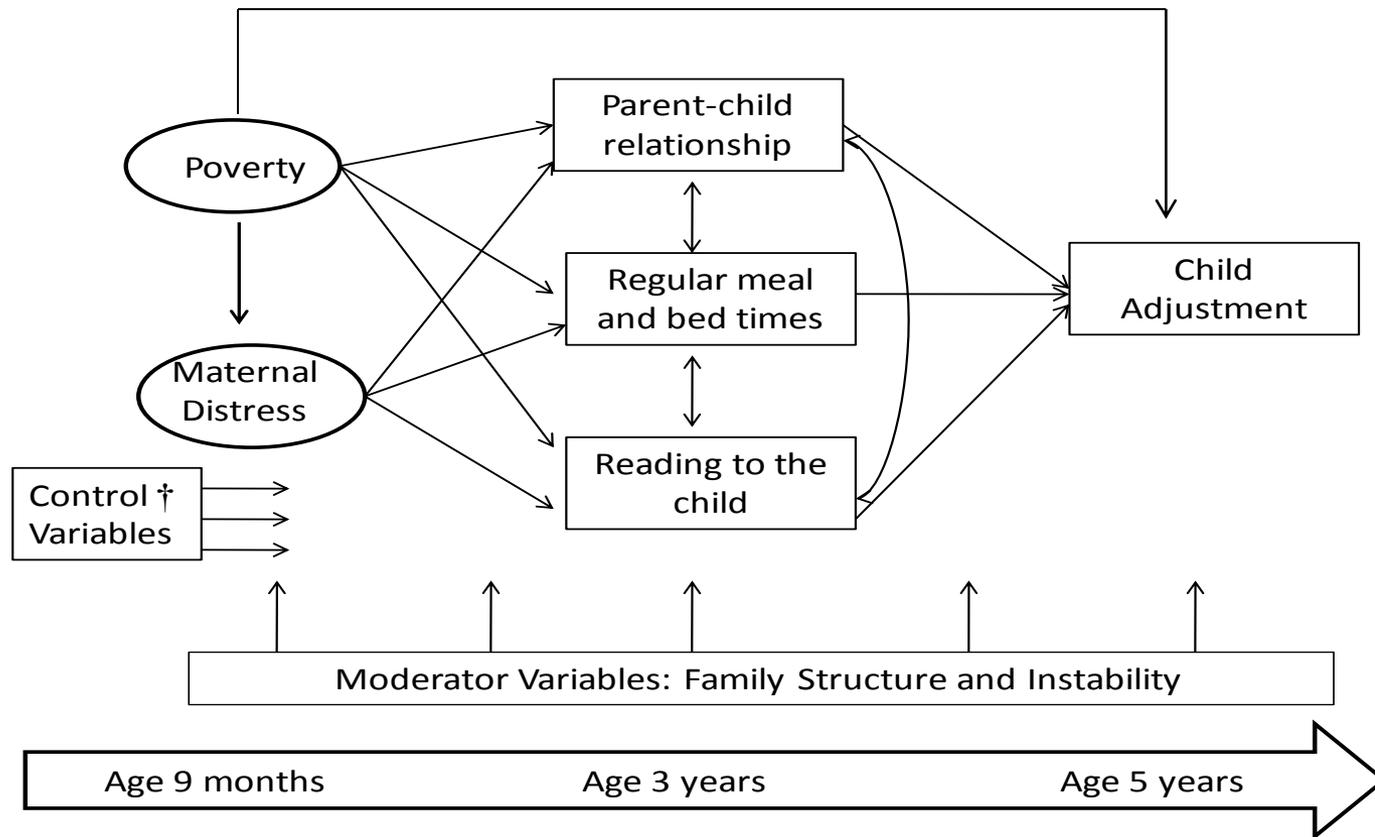
# The role of family instability

- Does the model apply in complex and changing family systems?
- Family stability in MCS by age 5 of child:

Relationship status (W1-3)	%
Stably married	59
Married to lone	4
Stably cohabiting	13
Cohabit to married	6
Cohabit to lone	4
Stably lone	9
Lone to married	1.4
Lone to cohabiting	3.5

Majority of children grew up in stable 2-parent families (78%), although nearly 40% were born to unmarried parents.  
About 1 in 10 children grew up with lone mother.

# A developmental-contextual model of family processes



† Control variables include: Child's birth weight, gestational age, ethnicity, child age and temperament at assessment, maternal age and education.

# Findings

- Maternal distress is crucial risk factor undermining parent-child relationship, which in turn influences child adjustment across all family types
- Levels of distress especially high among initially cohabiting or married mothers who later separated, as well as among stable single mothers
- Losing a partner is associated with loss of income
- Parental investments in children lowest among initially lone mothers, who also are poorest
- Greater adjustment problems among children experiencing change in family structure

# Conclusion

- To gain a better understanding of the impact of family instability on child adjustment, one has to take into account initial relationship status and circumstances of change (gaining or losing a partner)
  - Example: gaining a partner can improve family income, but might generate stress in mother-child relationship
  - Family context and family dynamics play crucial role in shaping family processes in addition to poverty:
- ➔ Family structure and instability moderate associations between poverty and family processes

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Ingrid Schoon@ioe.ac.uk

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