

Family of Origin Structure and Instability and the Formation of First Unions

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Abstract

This project will examine the role of childhood family structure in union formation using the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. This study extends previous research by more fully measuring childhood family structure. Family structure experiences included stable married parent families, stable cohabiting families, and stable single-parent families. Thirty-seven percent of offspring experienced between 1 and 10 transitions in childhood family structure including transitions in and out of married families as well as cohabiting families. Using event history techniques, the childhood family structure variables, including family type, number of transitions, and type of transition, will be considered in relation to the offspring's age at and type of first union. It is expected that offspring from unstable families, offspring who experience more transitions, and offspring who experience the dissolution of their mothers' marital and cohabiting relationships will enter unions at younger ages and be more likely to enter into informal unions.

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First unions in the United States have changed substantially in the past 30 years in at least two important ways. First, with the rapid rise of cohabitation, many young adults are entering informal cohabiting relationships prior to marriage. Second, those young adults who do choose marriage are delaying marriage, waiting on average until their mid to late twenties to enter into marital unions. Researchers have examined a multitude of factors in trying to predict these changes in union formation, including education (Thornton, Axinn, & Teachman, 1995), economic circumstances (Clarkberg, 1999), marriage market characteristics (Raley, 1996), and gender role attitudes (Sassler & Goldscheider, 2004).

One of the more important predictors of the age and type of first union is childhood family structure. Though several studies have attempted to examine its role in union formation with mixed findings (e.g. Teachman, 2003; Wolfinger, 2003), prior research has failed to fully account for the dynamic nature of the modern family. Previous research has largely focused on comparing married and unmarried families (South, 2001; Wolfinger), with the exception of Jay Teachman's work using the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) in which he examined the relationship between types of families experienced across childhood, including married, remarried, cohabiting, and unmarried families and union formation (Teachman). However, this study failed to fully measure the transitions in the family of origin across childhood. While childhood family structure transitions in and out of marriages were measured for the adult women, transitions in and out of informal cohabiting relationships were not. Raley and Wildsmith

(2004) examined the NSFG to see how much of children's family instability was missed when only transitions into and out of marriage are counted. They found that adding transitions into and out of cohabiting relationships to those into and out of marriage increased the measure of family instability by 30% for White children and by over 100% for Black children.

This study furthers previous work examining the association between childhood family structure and union formation through examining the complete childhood family structure histories of youth in a nationally representative sample – the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health). Using this dataset, I am able to measure different types of stable families of origin, including stable married, cohabiting, and single families, as well as mothers' transitions in and out of both marriages and cohabitations across the first 16 years of the young adults' lives. I use these data to predict age at first union as well as type of first union when the offspring are young adults.

Proposed Study

This study seeks to further the literature on family structure and union formation through examining the association between family structure experiences of children over the first 16 years of life in a nationally representative longitudinal sample of adolescents and the age at and type of first union. Family types examined will include stable married, cohabiting, and single-parent families as well as unstable families. Family structure transitions will include transitions in and out of formal and informal family types. The various measures of family structure will be examined for their effects on union

formation, specifically, the timing of the first cohabiting union and first marital union and the choice of type of first union, informal or formal.

Method

Sample

The first and third waves of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) were used for these analyses. The Add Health data is based on interviews with students in grades 7 through 12 and their parents in 1995. These data were collected from students in a sample of 145 middle, junior high, and high schools in the United States. The original sample consisted of all the students allowed to complete the questionnaire who were in attendance on the day that in-school questionnaire was administered ($N = 90,118$). The data used for this project will be the contractual data that includes in-home interviews administered in 1995 to 20,745 of the students (Udry, 2003). The first-wave of data also includes data from the female-head of the household. A follow-up of the original sample was conducted in 2001 and 2002. Any adolescent who had reached the age of 18 was eligible to be included in Wave 3. Approximately 15,197 were interviewed at Wave 3.

Construction of the Sample

The sample for this project began with 20,745 adolescents from Wave 1 (see Table 1). First, all adolescents not born between 1977 and 1980 were filtered from the sample ($n = 5644$). The second filter eliminated adolescents whose biological or adoptive mother did not complete the female-head of household interview ($n = 3888$). Third, adolescents who spent more than 6 months away from their mothers during the childhood were filtered from the sample ($n = 821$). Fourth, any adolescent with missing values on

the weight variable were filtered from the sample ($n = 706$) due to the fact that the final data will be weighted to provide for national estimates. Finally, any adolescent who was missing data on key variables (the relationship variables reported by the mother and used to construct the transition variables) were filtered from the dataset ($n = 617$). The final N was therefore 9069. At Wave 3, 7050 of this subsample were re-interviewed; hence the attrition rate was 22.26%. Men, older participants, respondents whose mothers were less educated, and respondents whose mothers experienced greater numbers of family structure transitions were more likely to drop out of the sample.

Variables

Note that all descriptive statistics on the independent and control variables have been weighted to be nationally representative.

Relationship history. Relationship history was assessed at Wave 1 for the past 18 years through a series of questions of the mothers. First, mothers were asked: “In the past 18 years, how many marriage and marriage-like relationships have you had?” Mothers were told that a “marriage-like relationship” meant “living with someone as if you are married to him when you are not”. Answers ranged from 0 to 6 or more.

Mothers were then asked to think about their present or more recent such relationship, and were instructed to mark the years in which they were in the relationship between 1977 and 1995. Mothers were also asked whether the relationship was a marriage or marriage-like relationship, followed by whether the relationship was still going on. If the relationship had dissolved, mothers were asked how the relationship ended. Responses included separation, divorce, annulment, death, and other. Next, if mothers answered that they had had more than one marriage or marriage like relationship,

they were asked the same series of questions about their second most recent relationship and their third most recent relationship. Therefore, the relationship history of the adolescents' mothers includes complete information including duration on 3 previous marriage and marriage-like relationships.

Constructed Independent Variables

My first step in constructing the independent variables for this study was to recode the relationship history data into a series of 16 variables, each variable representing a year of the child's life, with the first variable representing the child's birth year, and the last variable representing the child's 16th year. Note that not all children in the sample were age 16 because some children may be living in their 16th calendar year but have not yet reached their 16th birthday. After recoding the data, I created several variables representing three different ways of conceptualizing family structure.

Independent Variables

Each of the independent variables was created from data from Wave 1. All of the reported data has been weighted in order to provide national estimates of family structure experiences.

Family type. Family type was coded as 0, stable single-parent family, 1, stable married family, 2, stable cohabiting family, and 3, unstable family. An unstable family was defined as any family that changed its family structure at some point in the adolescent's childhood, whether through marriage, entrance in a cohabiting relationship, divorce, cohabitation dissolution, or death. Table 1 describes the families in this sample. It is interesting to note here that a substantial proportion of the sample, approximately 7%, spent their entire childhoods in a stable single-parent family, while less than half a

percent of the adolescents spent their entire childhoods in stable cohabiting families.

These results indicate that long-term cohabiting couples, even when children are involved, are rare.

Number of transitions. The number of transitions was coded as the number of times a child moved from one family form to another. For example, if a child went from a married parent family to a single-parent family, that was coded as one transition. If a mother entered into a cohabiting relationship that also was coded as one transition. Table 2 describes the range, the mean, and the mode of the number of transitions by all families and unstable families only. Note that it is possible to have 10 transitions because each transition in and out of a relationship, whether it was with the same partner or not, was coded as a transition.

Type of transition. The type of transition the child experienced was also coded. Children could have experienced 6 different transitions: mother marries, mother enters cohabiting relationship, mother divorces, mother dissolves cohabiting relationship, death of the mother's spouse, and death of the mother's cohabiting partner. Table 3 details the descriptive results for the type of transition.

Dependent Variable

The data for the dependent variables will come from Wave III of Add Health. At Wave III, the offspring's relationship history for the past six years was measured through a series of questions. Each relationship the respondent experienced was coded as a dating relationship, cohabitation, or marriage. The duration of each relationship and cause of dissolution was also measured, including separation, death, and divorce. The date each relationship began was measured as well. For marriages, participants were asked whether

or not they cohabited prior to marriage, and if they had cohabited, they were asked the duration of the cohabitation. From this data, the *Age at First Marriage* and *Age at First Cohabitation* will be coded.

Control Variables

The following variables will be controlled for and considered.

Age at Wave 3. The age of the adolescent at the time of the Wave 3 interview was coded in years. Age ranged from 20.33 to 25.25 with a mean of 22.79 and a standard deviation of 1.19.

Adolescent gender. Gender was measured at Wave 1 and was coded as 1 = male and 2 = female. The sample consisted of 50.00% males.

Adolescent race. The adolescent's race was measured at Wave 1 and was coded as 1 = Latino, 2 = White, 3 = Black, and 4 = Other. See Table 4 for the racial breakdown of the adolescents in the sample.

Mother education. Mother education was measured at Wave 1 and was coded as 1 = 8th grade or less, 2 = some high school, 3 = high school graduate, 4 = some college, 5 = college graduate, and 6 = post-graduate work. The mean level of education for the mothers was 3.68 with a median of 4, a mode of 4, and a standard deviation of 1.29.

Data Analysis Plan

All analyses will be run in Stata (StataCorp, 2005) using event history techniques. Stata will be used to statistically control for the clustered, stratified, and weighted nature of the Add Health sample, hence giving the correct national weighted estimates.

Hypotheses/Expected Results

Hypothesis 1. I hypothesize that offspring who grew up in an unstable family, as opposed to a stable married family or a stable single parent family, will transition into cohabiting and marital unions at an earlier age. Further, I hypothesize that offspring who grew up in an unstable family, as compared to those who grew up in stable families, will also be more likely to choose a cohabiting union over a marital union as a first union.

Hypothesis 2. I hypothesize that offspring who experienced more transitions in family structure across their first sixteen years of life will enter cohabiting and marital unions at an earlier age than those offspring who experienced fewer transitions in family structure. Further, I hypothesize that offspring who experience more transitions in family structure will also be more likely to choose an informal cohabiting union as their first union.

Hypothesis 3. I hypothesize that offspring who experience their mom entering into or dissolving cohabiting unions will enter into cohabiting and marital unions at an earlier age than those offspring who did not experience their mother enter or exit a cohabiting relationship. Similarly, I hypothesize that offspring who experience their mom in a cohabiting relationship will be more likely to choose a cohabiting union as their first union. I also hypothesize that offspring who experience their mom marrying or divorcing will enter into cohabiting and marital unions at an earlier age than those offspring who did not experience their mother enter or exit a marriage. Likewise, I hypothesize that offspring who experience their mom marrying or divorcing will also be more likely to choose a cohabiting union as their first union.

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Table 1. *Family type.*

Family Type	N	% of total
Stable family	5731	63.33%
Stable single parent family	690	6.91%
Stable married family	5001	55.98%
Stable cohabiting family	40	0.44%
Unstable family	3338	36.67%

Table 2. *Descriptive statistics on the number of transitions.*

	Range	Mean	S.D.	Mode
All families	0 - 10	0.78	1.28	0
Unstable families	1 - 10	2.12	1.28	1

Table 3. *Type of transition.*

Type of transition	N	% of sample experiencing	Range for subsample	Mean	S.D.	Mode
Mother marries	1843	20.89%	1 – 5	1.20	0.48	1
Mother enters cohabiting relationship	784	9.04%	1 – 4	1.27	0.56	1
Mother divorces	2286	25.91%	1 – 5	1.19	0.45	1
Mother dissolves cohabiting relationship	581	6.37%	1 – 4	1.26	0.55	1
Death of mother's spouse	217	2.10%	1 – 2	1.07	0.26	1
Death of mother's cohabiting partner	27	0.27%	1 – 2	1.04	0.20	1

Table 4. *Wave 3 sample child racial breakdown.*

Race	Adolescent	
	N	Percent
Latino	386	7.89%
White	4979	58.11%
Black	1033	20.07%
Other	645	13.72%