Influence of Childhood Family Structure Turbulence on Relationship Turbulence in the Transition to Young Adulthood

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Child Trends

Research Questions

This study examines the intergenerational link between childhood family structure history and the turbulence of relationships young people form during the transition to adulthood. The study aims to fill a gap in the existing research base by taking a longitudinal approach to understand how parents' union formation and dissolution behaviors ultimately affect their children's own early union formation behaviors. Our premise is that family turbulence in childhood will be associated with more turbulence in the relationships formed during the transition to adulthood. We define family structure turbulence as any change in the composition of the primary parent figures with whom children live. Our project addresses the following key questions:

1. *Which dimensions of family turbulence (number, type, timing, or duration of transitions) are most predictive of children's own relationship patterns in the transition to young adulthood?* Given the lack of consensus in the literature, we will test whether there are critical dimensions of childhood family turbulence that influence young adult relationship turbulence, and assess whether simpler measures of family turbulence work as well as more complex, multidimensional measures.

2. *How does turbulence in childhood family structure influence turbulence in young adults' own relationships?* Research suggests that family disruption during childhood continues to have negative consequences into adulthood and that there are intergenerational continuities in family turbulence. However, the influence of childhood family structure turbulence on young people's own early union formation and dissolution has not been adequately examined.

3. *Are there gender differences in the association between childhood family structure turbulence and turbulence in the transition to adulthood?* Research has demonstrated gender differences in family structure influences, with stronger effects for females than males.[8,19,36] The stronger negative effects for females may derive from the fact that, compared to males, females are socialized to be more attuned to relationships and they tend to form closer bonds with their mothers, making them more sensitive to the diminished emotional closeness that turbulence often brings and less trusting in future relationships.[3,11,17,21] In turn, we hypothesize that these factors may lead to a stronger association between family and young adult relationship turbulence for females.

Hypotheses

We hypothesize that:

1. Not all dimensions of childhood family turbulence will be equally influential in predicting relationship turbulence in young adulthood. We expect that the number of transitions will be more important than type, timing, or duration because it is the most direct measure of instability and magnitude of disruption.

2. Relationship turbulence in the transition to adulthood (i.e., engaging in a greater number of relationships, both sexual and non-sexual) will be more likely for youth who have experienced more instability in their childhood, specifically for respondents who: 1) experienced a greater number of childhood family transitions, 2) ever lived in a non-intact family, 3) spent a greater duration of their youth in a non-traditional family structure, or 4) faced family change in adolescence, rather than earlier childhood (because it would coincide with a life phase that is already challenging for youth given other simultaneous transitions they are likely to experience, i.e. changing schools, maturation, etc[12,32,38]).

3. Based on research that suggests females are more deeply affected by the emotional distress of family transitions and thus experience more ambivalence and conflict in later relationships, we expect that the effects of childhood turbulence on young adult relationship turbulence will be stronger for females than males.

Background

In recent decades, high rates of divorce and remarriage, and increasing nonmarital childbearing and cohabitation, have generated concern about the implications of family composition and turbulence for the life course of children.[15,20] This concern arises because research has clearly demonstrated that growing up in a stable, low-conflict family with two biological parents is the most advantageous family arrangement for promoting child well-being.[5,24] Although most children from disrupted and single-parent families have positive outcomes, living in single-parent families or in stepfamilies places children at greater risk for a variety of negative outcomes throughout their life course.[1,14,24,26,42] Furthermore, change in family composition over time (or turbulence) can be unhealthy for children.[27,28,41] Adolescents who experience a great number of changes in their home environment face a high risk of psychosocial, emotional, and behavior problems,[7,22,28-30] lower academic achievement,[22] poorer parent-child relationships,[28] and early initiation of sexual intercourse.[27,28]

Research also has shown an intergenerational component of family disruption, with the negative consequences continuing to manifest themselves when the children reach adult ages. The existing literature suggests that adult children of divorce are more likely to have negative attitudes towards marriage,[37] poorer psychological well-being,[18] lower educational and socioeconomic attainment,[9,24] a non-marital birth,[13,40] to cite conflict as the reason for moving out of their parents' home,[13] and to experience marital instability themselves.[4,13,33] Relatively few studies, however, have examined a longitudinal view of children's family structure

experiences that both includes parents' marriage and cohabitation experiences and explores long-term effects on children's own relationships. One notable exception is a study that examined family structure experiences from multiple dimensions and at multiple time points[34] which found that youth raised in alternative living arrangements were more likely to choose cohabitations, rather than marriage, in young adulthood.

Existing research provides some evidence of intergenerational effects of childhood family turbulence on the type and stability of relationships formed in young adulthood. Experiencing a parent's marital dissolution or ever living in a non-traditional family form have been shown to be associated with a greater likelihood of cohabitation and greater risk of divorce.[4,13,33,34,36] Children of divorce are more likely than children of stably married parents to marry at an early age, and an early age at marriage is associated with increased risk of divorce.[10] Children of divorce also tend to have more interpersonal behavior problems, more negative attitudes towards marriage, and more pessimism about the long-term success of marriages.[4,37] Consequently, it is expected that they will be more likely to choose cohabitation over marriage and, if married, more likely to divorce. Also, experiencing a parent's remarriage is linked to greater odds of early union formation, particularly cohabitations.[36] The effect of remarriage was found to be significantly stronger for daughters than for sons, but it is unclear why. [36]

The number of childhood family structure transitions experienced also is associated with an increased risk of marital disruption in adulthood[39] and with forming cohabiting, but not marital, unions.[34] The observed intergenerational associations are hypothesized to be due, in part, to divorced and remarried parents serving as role models of turbulence and weak commitment to relationships.[6,37] Still, there is debate about whether the type of childhood living arrangement or the number of transitions is a more important predictor of disrupted relationships during adulthood.[34,39]

While extant research provides valuable information about the intergenerational effects of family turbulence, weaknesses include use of non-nationally representative samples and non-contemporary data,[36] oversimplified measurement of family turbulence,[14,35] limited focus on young adult relationships,[34,36] and a lack of gender comparisons.[33,34] Our project builds upon existing work in multiple ways:

1) Uses Add Health data to provide longitudinal, nationally representative data on a recent cohort of youth transitioning to young adulthood, with a strong focus on relationships across the life course.
2) Creates comprehensive measures of family turbulence. Our project tracks all changes in family structure since a child's birth, documenting the number of changes, as well as differentiating changes by type, timing, and duration.
3) Takes a multi-dimensional focus on young adult relationships. Much of the research on the link between family turbulence and relationship outcomes in young adulthood has primarily focused on the types of unions formed (i.e., transition to first marital and/or cohabiting unions).[34,36] We propose a different view, by examining young adult relationship turbulence (i.e., the number of relationships).
4) Examines gender comparisons. Research has demonstrated gender differences in family structure influences, with stronger effects for females than males.[8,19,36]

Overall, to better inform the current policy focus on healthy marriage and the creation of successful marriage promotion programs, we need to understand the factors which influence the

relationships young people choose. Also, understanding links between parents' and children's relationship experiences may help prevent intergenerational cycles of family turbulence and thus improve child outcomes in future generations.

Data and Sample

The project uses data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), a nationally representative, longitudinal study of adolescents in grades 7 through 12 in the United States in the 1994-1995 school year. We use all three waves of in-home interviews and the parent interview to provide a wealth of retrospective information on relationship turbulence, with detailed information on the respondents' parents' relationship histories as well as relationship histories for the respondents themselves in their adolescent and young adult years. For parent histories, we examine four components of relationships, including the number, type, duration, and timing of transitions. For turbulence during the transition to young adulthood, we define turbulence by examining the number of relationships (both sexual and non-sexual) formed.

The detailed retrospective relationship histories gathered from adolescents and parents during the Wave I interview, and from the adolescents/young adults during Waves II and III, form the centerpiece of this paper. For parents, we have start and end dates for marital and cohabiting relationships dating back 18 years. In Wave III, the young adult respondents gave a history of all romantic and sexual relationships experienced since the summer of 1995.

We limit our analyses to teens who were in grades 9 through 11 at Wave I. Ninety-nine percent of teens in this analytic sample are aged 14-18 at Wave I, aged 15-19 at Wave II, and aged 20-24 at Wave III. This age restriction allows us to examine outcomes for young adults in the 20- to 24-year-old age group, and thus ensures that analyses are conducted on an age-homogeneous group of respondents who share a similar developmental life stage.

Measures

Our dependent variable measures relationship turbulence in the transition to young adulthood. Using data from Wave III, we investigate young adult relationship turbulence via a measure of the number of relationships formed since Wave II. The total number of relationships (sexual and non-sexual) a respondent engaged in between Waves II and III assesses relationship instability. We include non-sexual relationships in this measure because, while such relationships are developmentally appropriate for young adults, the breakup of close relationships, sexual or otherwise, are often emotionally distressing for young adults,[16,25,31] but are underexplored in the literature. We also examine the number of sexual relationships, to highlight these more risky unions ("risky" referring to the possibility of unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections that is present in sexual relationships).

Our key independent variable of interest is childhood family turbulence/family structure history. Given the complexity of measuring childhood family turbulence, we examine multiple

dimensions, focusing on the four components most often identified in the literature as being salient for later outcomes.[2,12,23,24,32,34,38,40] Using retrospective relationship data in which mothers reported the start and end dates for all marital and cohabiting relationships, we construct a detailed history of all family structure transitions respondents experienced from birth through age at Wave II, to produce the constructs described below.

- *Number of transitions.* We calculate the total number of transitions experienced, capturing both formation and disruption of mothers' unions.
- *Type of family structure.* We examine if youth ever lived in a cohabiting family, single-parent family, and/or stepfamily. This construct is distinct from number of transitions because children could have arrived in one of these family types either through a transition (i.e. divorce or remarriage), or they could have been born into these family structures and, thus, never experienced any transitions.
- *Duration in various family structures.* We measure the proportion of years spent living outside a two-biological, married parent family (i.e., with a single mother or cohabiting or remarried parent).
- *Timing of transitions.* We also examine adolescents' age at last transition.

Methods

The first stage of the analyses will explore whether certain components (number, type, timing, or duration of transitions) of family turbulence are more salient in influencing relationship turbulence later in life, as well as whether a unidimensional measure of turbulence is preferable to a multidimensional approach. This methodological work will be carried out in conjunction with the multivariate analyses described below, so that we can test the importance of the various family turbulence measures in relation to each of our outcome measures. Our general approach will be to assess model fit between nested models to determine if using less complex measures of family turbulence produce model fit that is as good as models with more complex measures (tested using chi-square difference tests). Because we consider number of transitions to be the most salient and most conceptually important measure of turbulence,[34,40,41] and to maintain consistency with how young adult relationship turbulence is measured (via number of relationships), we will specify our base models to include number of transitions as the only family turbulence measure. In subsequent analyses, we will add the type, timing, and duration dimensions of family turbulence one at a time to produce nested models. If model fit does not improve with any additional dimensions of turbulence, we will use a unidimensional measure of turbulence (number of transitions) in our final analyses. If, however, the tests reveal that multiple dimensions of turbulence are salient, we may explore using a single combination measure to facilitate parsimony and data reduction.

In the second stage of analysis, we will examine univariate and bivariate statistics to provide descriptive information about the number of relationships young people experience during the transition to adulthood, and to assess the intergenerational association between childhood family turbulence and young adult relationship turbulence. We will use bivariate Generalized Linear Models (GLM) to compare, across categories of childhood turbulence, the mean number of all

relationships and of sexual relationships. We will also examine bivariate associations between family and individual characteristics and young adult relationship turbulence. These analyses will be done in Stata, with adjustments for the complex sampling design of Add Health.

Finally, for multivariate models, we will use structural equation models (SEM) to examine the association between childhood family structure turbulence and young adult relationship turbulence, after controlling for other family and individual background characteristics. We also will test the moderating effect of gender by using cross group comparison models in SEM. We will investigate whether constraining the pathway between childhood turbulence and young adult relationship outcomes to be equal for the two groups results in a significantly worse-fitting model. If there is no indication that this constraint worsens the model fit, then we can conclude that there is no difference in that path across the subgroups.

Preliminary Findings

To date, we have run preliminary bivariate analyses. The results indicate that there is an intergenerational association between childhood family turbulence and relationships in young adulthood that warrants study. For both males and females, childhood turbulence (measured as the number of family transitions experienced during childhood) is associated with more sexual partners during the transition young adulthood. For example, males who experienced no family structure transitions while growing up had an average of 2.7 relationships during the transition to adulthood, compared with 4.5 relationships for males who experienced four transitions in their family structure while growing up. These findings provide preliminary support for our hypothesis that relationship turbulence in the transition to adulthood (i.e., engaging in a greater number of relationships, both sexual and non-sexual) is more likely for youth who have experienced more instability in their childhood, specifically for respondents who experienced a greater number of childhood family transitions.

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