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PARENTAL COHABITATION AND UNION FORMATION AMONG YOUNG ADULTS IN THE UNITED STATES

DESCRIPTIVE FINDING

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Abstract

Background: Demographers have been interested in the intergenerational implications of family structure experiences while growing up. To date, with some exceptions, this literature has focused on married families, divorce, single parenthood, and stepfamilies.

Objective: Our goal was to document childhood family experience for recent cohorts of young adults with a focus on maternal cohabitation and to examine the linkages between childhood experiences to young adults' union formation behavior.

Methods: Using the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth and the National Longitudinal Survey of Young Adults, we presented descriptive results for the proportion of young adults who have ever experienced specific family structures from birth to age 16. We also described the amount of instability they experienced. Multivariate models assessed whether and how different family experiences, in particular maternal cohabitation, were related to young adults' entrance into marriage and cohabitation.

Results: Approximately 30% experienced maternal cohabitation, with the majority having lived with a cohabiting step-parent. Levels of childhood instability are relatively high among young adults who experienced maternal cohabitation. Multivariate results indicate that maternal cohabitation, depending on its type, raises the odds of young adults entering cohabitation versus staying single and reduces the odds of direct marriage net of controls for family instability. Results also show that growing up in a stable rather than unstable two-biological parent cohabiting family is associated with lower odds of entering either a cohabiting or marital union by age 30.

1. Introduction

In the United States cohabitation has become an increasingly common part of family formation. A growing share of young adults has cohabited; by age 30 about three-quarters of women had spent some time in a cohabiting union (Manning and Stykes 2015). Today, the typical pathway into marriage is through cohabitation. Nearly 70% of women cohabited before they married. Further, a growing share of children have been born or raised in cohabiting parent families, with cohabitation the context for the majority (60%) of nonmarital births in the United States (Manlove et al. 2010).

As part of this growth in cohabitation, a substantial share of today's young adult generation have lived in cohabiting parent families. This research note examines how childhood experiences of cohabitation influences their union formation patterns. In particular, we focus on the connection between experiencing maternal cohabitation and young adults' timing of entry into marriage versus cohabitation. To do so, we draw on unique data from a large, nationally representative U.S. survey of mothers, adolescents and young adults.

2. Background

The study of the linkages between family structure and transitions and children's lives began some time ago when nationally representative, longitudinal data sources started to become available. Prior studies have focused largely on the intergenerational consequences of parental divorce, stepparent families or intact marriages rather than the full range of parents' union experiences, specifically cohabitation (e.g., Amato and Cheadle 2005; Kalmijn 2015; Li and Wu 2008; Teachman 2002, 2003; Wolfinger 2011).

More recently, two studies have incorporated parental cohabitation, generally finding that parental union history is correlated with children's later cohabitation. Zito (2015), using the

National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, reports that any experience with parental cohabitation was positively associated with adolescent cohabitation (see also Ryan et al. 2009). Sassler, Cunningham, and Lichter (2009), drawing on the National Survey of Families and Households, find that post-divorce parental cohabitation is linked to cohabitation behavior of the offspring (ages 18 to 34 in 2002) of NSFH respondents. We extend this literature by including the number of parental family structure transitions throughout childhood, drawing on recent, prospective data to distinguish two biological and step-cohabiting parent families, and focusing on union formation throughout young adulthood.

We have three goals. We first describe the family histories of contemporary young adults including parental cohabitation. Second, we assess the connection between childhood family experiences, in particular maternal cohabitation, and later union formation. To do so, we estimate multinomial discrete-time event history models of first union choice: cohabitation versus direct marriage. We take account of family instability as well as sociodemographic variables that influence union formation. Finally, we examine a contrast of interest to researchers and policymakers: the implications of growing up in a stable two-biological parent cohabiting relationship compared to a marital one.

3. Data, Measures, and Methods

***Data and Sample*:** We draw on 24 waves (1979-2010) of nationally representative data from the 1979 National Longitudinal Study of Youth (NLSY79) main youth and young adult (YA) surveys, the household rosters, and the fertility file (see Appendix for details). These longitudinal data allow us to capture both mother's reports of children's living arrangements and young adult's own reports of union formation. To date, no other survey in the United States includes such rich data on mother, adolescent, and adult child family experiences.

Our analytic sample consists of young adults, ages 18 and over in 2010, with complete maternal union histories from birth to age 16 as well as self-reported histories of their own relationship formation from age 16 onwards. We require that the young adults be 16 by 2008 so that they could be exposed to the risk of marriage or cohabitation by 2010, the last survey wave we use. Our final sample consists of 5,820 young adults. In 2010, the mean age of the sample was 25 years old.

Measures: Family experiences growing up: Our key set of independent variables is the child's exposure to particular family types and the total number of transitions from birth to age 16. The first measure taps whether the young adult respondent *ever* experienced a particular family form between birth and age 16; these forms include married two-biological parents, cohabiting two-biological parents, married stepfamily, cohabiting stepfamily, and single-mother family. This measure builds on prior research which considers the independent and long-term impact of specific family experiences (e.g., divorce or single-parenthood) on child outcomes. The second measure conceptualizes family structure instability as the accumulation of family transitions (e.g., counts of maternal union formations and dissolutions combined) which were experienced from birth to age 16. This measure reflects the notion that the accrual of stressful events, rather than exposure to one type in particular, may drive disparities in outcomes. Note that we do not count the movement from cohabitation to marriage as a transition; a child is less likely to experience that transition as instability than one involving, for example, a mother's new partner moving in (see Manning, Smock, and Majumdar 2004; Raley 2004).

Measures: Multivariate analyses: The dependent variable is entrance into first cohabitation or direct marriage. This is based on young adult's reports of relationships that occurred since the last interview as well as information on current cohabitations and marriages. Follow-up

questions include information on the type of relationship and the date of its start.

In addition to controlling for family instability, our multivariate analyses include several variables relevant to union formation. Time-varying covariates include young adult's activity status (e.g., employment, in school, or neither), educational attainment (less than high school, high school graduate, more than high school), fertility (child vs. none), and religiosity as measured by religious attendance (coded 1-4 from "never" to "weekly or more"). In addition, we use mother's education at birth as a rough proxy for social class, mother's age at first birth, child's race/ethnicity (non-Hispanic White, non-Hispanic Black, Hispanic), and child's sex. Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for our control variables.

Methods: We first provide descriptive results illustrating the family experiences of respondents in the sample. Our multivariate models are discrete-time event history models to examine the determinants into cohabitation or marriage as first union. Analyses are based on person-months, with exposure to risk of entering a first cohabitation or marriage beginning at age 16. Respondents are censored at time of last interview or when they reach age 30. We have 400,734 person-months of exposure. Predictions of the odds of first union entry are based on multinomial logistic regression models because we expect that effects of covariates differ depending on whether the alternative choice is cohabitation or marriage. By altering the reference categories, we estimate the odds of (1) marrying versus not entering a union; (2) marrying versus cohabiting; and (3) cohabiting versus not entering a union. Using discrete-time event history is also appropriate because we have a length-biased sample (e.g., Guo 1993). The analysis is child-based and accounts for correlated observations (more than one child per family) by estimating robust standard errors using bootstrap methods.

4. Results

Table 2 shows descriptive statistics for our family background variables. Perusal of the table shows considerable family diversity and flux growing up for our respondents. Panel A shows that 82% experienced living with their two married biological parents at some point; these are mostly cases in which the child was born into this family type but also cases in which parents married after childbirth. At the same time, large fractions of our respondents experienced other family forms. Approximately 50% lived at some point in a single-mother household and 24% in a married stepfamily. While only a small proportion ever experienced living with their biological cohabiting parents (7.2%), 23% experienced a cohabiting stepfamily. Just under half spent their entire childhood with married biological parents.

Table 2 also indicates that, overall, about 44% of young adults experienced some family structure instability, with 15% experiencing one transition and nearly 30% experiencing two or more instances of instability. The mean is slightly over 1 transition (1.14); for those with any transition, the mean is 2.24 (not in table). Panels B and C focus on two groups of particular interest: Young adults who experienced maternal cohabitation with either biological fathers or stepfathers, respectively. Note these categories are not mutually exclusive: A child may be born to cohabiting parents, experience the dissolution of that relationship, and at some later point, live with the mother and her cohabiting partner.

Panel B shows that most young adults whose mother cohabited with their biological fathers were born to cohabiting couples, a minority are cases in which the parents cohabited after childbirth. Only 31% experienced no further transitions while 42% experienced one or two, and 36.5% experienced three or more family transitions. Panel C that young adults who ever lived with a mother's cohabiting partner (stepfather) experienced substantially higher levels of

instability than those born to biological cohabiting parents: 42% experience two transitions and 47% percent experience at least three transitions from birth to age 16.

Table 3 shows results from multinomial logistic event history models predicting entrance into cohabitation or marriage versus staying single using our "ever" indicators; each line represents a separate model and we show both zero order and full models that contain all covariates in Table 1. Altogether, 41% of our sample had entered a cohabiting union, with the mean age at the start being 20.2, and 23% had entered a marriage at some point during the observed time span. The mean age at marriage is approximately 22.3 years old (not in table). To simplify presentation of findings, we do not present coefficients for control variables. For the same reason, we do not show the odds ratios of the likelihood of marriage versus cohabitation. We denote significant differences in the odds of cohabiting versus marrying by underlining odds ratios.

There are clear patterns of association between having ever experienced a particular family form and union entry. Focusing first on maternal cohabitation, in both the zero-order and full model, having lived with two-biological cohabiting parents is associated with lower odds of direct marriage compared to staying single. Having lived with in a cohabiting stepfamily does not lower the odds of entering a marriage compared to remaining single, but more than doubles the odds of cohabitation. In the full model, having lived in a cohabiting stepfamily raises the odds of cohabitation by roughly 25%. The underscored coefficients indicate that both groups of young adults are more likely to cohabit than marry as a first union. The results are similar with and without family instability in the model (results not shown).

Table 3 also shows that having lived with two biological married parents lowers the odds of entering a cohabiting union and increases the odds of marrying directly compared to staying

single. Although the coefficient for cohabitation becomes insignificant in the full model, this family experience raises the odds of marrying by 85% compared to staying single. Experiencing a married stepfamily increases the odds of entering a cohabiting union (by 79%) compared to staying single, although the coefficient becomes statistically insignificant in the full model. Finally, experiencing a single parent family raises the odds of cohabitation while lowering the odds of marriage in the zero order model; after taking account of all the covariates, having lived with a single mother lowers the odds of marriage by 44%. The underscores indicate that this family experience lowers the odds of direct marriage compared to cohabitation.

Table 4 focuses on stability, showing selected contrasts for two subsamples: married and cohabitating two-biological parent families. The full model indicates that being raised in a stable married two parent family increases the odds of direct marriage by 58%, and lowers chances of cohabitation by 23%, relative to their counterparts who experienced marital dissolution. The analogous results for growing up in a stable biological two parent cohabiting household tell a different story. The full model indicates that stability in cohabiting unions is associated with substantially decreased odds of marriage as well as slightly decreased odds of cohabitation compared to staying single. Thus, these young adults appear to be delaying entrance into any coresidential union.

5. Summary

Parents' union experiences during childhood represent an important source of potential heterogeneity impacting young adult's union formation behavior. The goal of this research note has been to document childhood family experience for recent cohorts of young adults and to examine the linkages of childhood experiences of various family types to young adults' union formation behavior.

Our findings indicate that many young adults nowadays experienced nontraditional families and considerable family flux. Less than half of our sample experienced what may be termed the most "traditional" family structure and no instability: Growing up with two biological married parents from birth to age 16. Nearly 50% of our sample spent at least some time in a single mother family and 44% experienced at least one family structure transition during childhood, with 30% experiencing two or more. Approximately 30% experienced parental cohabitation, with the vast majority these young adults having lived with a cohabiting step-parent. Levels of instability are relatively high among young adults who experienced parental cohabitation. These results are important because research suggests instability carries important ramifications for well-being (e.g., Fomby and Cherlin 2007).

Our multivariate analyses show that the only family experience that raises the odds of marriage as a first union is having lived in a two biological parent married family. Notably, the odds ratios for the full model indicate that living in a married stepfamily is not linked to either cohabitation or marriage. Cohabiting parent experiences (either with the biological father or as a stepfamily) are associated with decreased odds of entering a marriage compared to a cohabiting union. For cohabiting stepfamilies, our results show higher odds of cohabiting compared to remaining single, even when including our cumulative measure of family instability. Having lived with two biological cohabiting parents is associated with lower odds of direct marriage compared to staying single.

Our findings also show that not all stable two biological parent families are associated with union formation in the same manner. Married stable two biological parent families are associated with greater odds of marriage and lower odds of cohabitation than unstable ones. Growing up in stable two biological parent cohabiting families is associated with lower odds of

both cohabitation and marriage, indicating that these young adults are delaying entrance into coresidential unions.

This research has some limitations, one being that we only account for maternal cohabitation. Nonetheless, our findings are suggestive that parental cohabitation has implications for young adult union choice: Those who experience it are less likely to marry directly and more likely to enter cohabitation as a first union. While some coefficients diminish in magnitude or statistical significance, this central theme is robust to inclusion of a range of variables, including family structure instability. Directions for future research include taking account of the duration spent in various family statuses and attention to social class and race/ethnic variation in the connections between parental union histories and children's union formation.

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disadvantage, or transmission. *Journal of Family Issues* 36: 299-325.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for control variables

	Prop./Mean (SD)	
Race/ethnicity		
Black	16.4%	
Hispanic	7.8%	
White	75.9%	
Gender		
Female	47.9%	
Male	52.1%	
Mother's age at birth	24.8	(4.63)
Mother's education at birth		
Less than high school	18.3%	
High school graduate	47.6%	
Some college	19.3%	
College graduate	14.7%	
Respondent education (TV)		
Less than high school	37.8%	
High school	28.2%	
More than high school	33.9%	
Respondent religious attendance (TV)	2.9	(1.24)
Respondent has child (TV)	25.1%	
Activity status (TV)		
None	4.5%	
Employed, not in school	37.0%	
In school (whether or not employed)	58.5%	
Number of family transitions	1.14	(1.48)
Unweighted sample size (*N*).	5820	

*Source:*NLSY79 main youth and Young Adult (YA) surveys.

Notes: All means and proportions are weighted.

TV indicates time-varying. Means and proportions are measured at last observation.

Table 2. Distribution of Family Experience Variables

A. Total Sample
Family experiences from birth-16

Ever married two bio	81.5%
Ever cohabit two bio	7.2%
Ever married step	23.8%
Ever cohabit step	22.7%
Ever single mother	49.6%

Number of transitions from birth-16

0	55.7%
1	15.2%
2	15.0%
3+	14.1%
Married biological parents birth-16	49.7%
Unweighted sample size (*N*)	5820

B. Those ever experiencing two biological parent cohabitation
Number of transitions from birth-16

0	30.7%
1	19.3%
2	23.0%
3+	36.5%
Unweighted sample size (*N*)	502

C. Those ever living with mother's cohabiting partner
Number of transitions from birth-16

0	
1	11.4%
2	41.5%
3+	47.1%
Unweighted sample size (*N*)	1469

Source: NLSY79 main youth and Young Adult (YA) surveys.

Notes: Weighted percentages and unweighted Ns.

Table 3. Discrete-time multinomial logistic regression odds ratios predicting union formation

	Zero-order model				Full model			
	Cohabit		Marry		Cohabit		Marry	
Ever married two bio	0.640	***	1.576	**	1.190		1.848	***
Ever cohabit two bio	1.093		0.313	***	1.213		0.434	*
Ever married step	1.789	***	1.207		0.859		0.925	
Ever cohabit step	2.111	***	0.851		1.252	*	0.694	
Ever single mother	2.035	***	0.739	*	1.046		0.562	*
Unweighted sample size (*N*)				400,734				400,734

Source: NLSY79 main youth and Young Adult (YA) surveys.

Notes: The reference union behavior is neither married nor cohabiting.

The covariates in the full model include all variables in Table 1.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Underline indicates $p < .05$ significant difference in cohabitation and marriage.

Table 4. Discrete-time multinomial logistic regression odds ratios predicting union formation

	Zero-order model		Full model	
	Cohabit	Marry	Cohabit	Marry
Stable bio parent marriage, birth to 16 *(0=2 married bio birth not stable)* *n=251,718)*	0.531***	1.237	0.77**	1.582**
Stable bio parent cohab, birth to 16 *(0=2 bio cohab birth not stable)* *n=25,841)*	0.737***	0.287*	0.906**	0.341**

Source: NLSY79 main youth and Young Adult (YA) surveys.

Notes: The reference union behavior is neither married nor cohabiting. The full model includes all covariates in table 1 except the number of family transitions. Underline indicates significant ($p < .05$) difference cohabitation and marriage.

$* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001$.

Appendix

The young adult questionnaire includes a wealth of information relating to education, employment, school enrollment, fertility, and union formation which we use to construct our dependent variables and a broad array of covariates. In the main youth surveys, the NLSY79 ascertains information on mother's fertility and union experiences which permits the construction of detailed living arrangement and childbearing histories that are the basis for our key independent variables.

The fertility file provides a unique ID number for every residential partner that was maintained for each year the man was present in the household. Using this, it is possible to distinguish birth fathers from other men and to link these men to specific residential relationships throughout childhood, a critical task in creating child-specific family biographies. Of similar import, the fertility file provides a roster-based assessment of cohabitation that captures nonmarital residential partnerships from 1979-1989. From 1990 onwards, the NLSY79 asked respondents directly about their current cohabiting partnerships, as well as retrospective reports of cohabitation prior to their marriage. And beginning in 1994, mother's reported on all current and prior cohabitations that occurred either as part of, or independent from, marriage.