Union formation among young adults with disabilities

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Abstract

While researchers consistently find that the experience of disability in childhood can impact future life trajectories, particularly with regard to economic and educational outcomes, relatively little work has been done to explore the impact of disability on family-related transitions to adulthood. Previous research has found that different types of disabilities differentially affect the timing of entry into a first marriage, however there has not been a systematic evaluation of the effect of type of disability on entry into cohabitation. This study uses data from waves I and IV of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health in order to explore the impact of physical, learning and multiple disabilities on the likelihood that young adults will have entered into marital or cohabitational unions by wave IV compared to remaining single.

Extended abstract

Introduction

Disability affects a considerable proportion of children. Though estimates vary, somewhere between 12 and 18% of American youth experience some sort of disability condition (Hogan et al, 1997; Newacheck et al., 1998). Experiencing disability can have a profound impact on the lives of these children and their families; further, disability can profoundly alter their transitions to adulthood. A rather limited body of research has explored the impact of disability on transitions to adulthood. The majority of such research has focused primarily or exclusively on the impact of disability on the economic or educational outcomes experienced by young adults as they transition into adulthood (Janus, 2009; Wells, Hogan & Sandefur 2003). Scholars have found that young adults with disabilities often achieve less schooling and are less likely to be gainfully employed than are their peers without disability.

While this body of work can be seen as providing insight into the ways in which having a disability may alter the transition to adulthood, these studies typically ignore or only marginally investigate the impact of disability on other sorts of transitions to adulthood, particularly family-formation related transitions. Latent class analysis studies, such as those conducted by Wells, Hogan and Sandefur (2003) and by Janus (2009) have found some differences with regard to marital status outcomes: Wells, Hogan and Sandefur found some evidence that young women with disabilities are more likely than those without disabilities to form families of their own at a relatively young age, while Janus found that having a disabling condition makes individuals less likely to be "married with children" compared to being in a dependent class marked by not being in school, being unmarried and not living independently at the age of 26. While these studies suggests that disability can affect transitions to adulthood, they do not directly address the issue of how disability generally, and types of disability in particular, affect the types of first unions formed.

Research that directly explores the impact of disability on union formation is scarce. Cross-sectional studies found that adults with disabilities are more likely to be single (Nosek et al., 2001; US Census Bureau, 1997; Taleporos & McCabe 2003). A study by MacInnes (2011) explored the impact of disability on the hazard of entry into a first marriage. This study found that while disability generally decreases the hazard of entry into a first marriage, there is considerable variability by type of disability. In particular, young adults with physical disabilities do not seem to differ from their peers without disability, while those with learning disabilities or multiple disabilities are at a notably lower hazard of entry into a first marriage.

Taken as a whole, these studies suggest that the experience of disability in childhood can put individuals on a different trajectory as they transition into adulthood. Disability does seem to have some effect on the timing of entry into marriage. However, the research also suggests that disability does not have a monolithic effect; type of disability is a

relevant consideration. While the impact of disability on entry into marriage has been explored to some degree, there has not been research undertaken to explore the impact of disability on entry into other unions, particularly cohabiting unions. This is a noteworthy hole in the literature, as cohabitation is becoming increasingly common (Smock, 2000). The majority of contemporary marriages are preceded by cohabitation (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Manning & Jones, 2006), and for some adults, cohabitation serves as an alternative to marriage (Smock, 2000).

This study aims to address this void in the literature. It us currently unknown whether individuals with disabilities are more, less, or equally likely to enter into a cohabiting first union. It seems reasonable that couples in which one individual has a disability would be equally, if not more likely to wish to live together before committing to marriage. Some young adults view cohabitation as a trial marriage (Huang et al., 2011); if an individual with a disability requires some degree of additional help and caregiving, his or her partner may wish to see what daily life would be like with that individual before committing to marriage. Whether disability generally has such an effect, though, is unknown. Equally unknown is whether all types of disability have the same effect on the likelihood of entry into a cohabiting first union or whether different types of disability will have different effects.

Data and methods

This study makes use of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), waves I and IV in order to assess the impact of disability type on entry into first unions. Conducted by the University of North Carolina Population Center, this survey has followed a nationally-representative sample of adolescents who were between the ages of 11 and 19 in 1994-1995 through present day; wave IV data was collected in 2008-2009 when the respondents were between the ages of 24 and 32. All of the wave I adolescents who participated in the in-home interview during that wave were eligible for re-interview in wave IV. Of the 20,745 adolescent about whom in-home data were gathered in wave I, 15,701 were re-interviewed in wave IV.

The data contain a wealth of information on respondent's social and economic characteristics, as well as data on health and well-being, family relationships and other social relationships. Data collected in wave I allow us to determine the disability status of respondents. In wave IV, the data contain information on all unions, including the date entry into both cohabiting and marital unions. We can thus use this information to assess whether adolescents with various types of disabilities differ from one another and from their peers without disability with regard to their trajectory into first unions. The analyses that follow are limited to respondents who participated in both the wave I and wave IV interviews; further, the sample is limited to individuals who have valid in-home and parental questionnaires for wave I. After exclusions for non-response and missing items, the final sample size here is 13,204 (all valid respondents, used in full models); descriptive results are limited to 12,482 respondents with valid case weights.

I use these data to conduct a series of categorical regression models that compare the likelihood of the three possible outcomes of interest: first union is a cohabiting union, first union is a marital union, or no first union has occurred by time of the wave IV survey. I include the following measures in these models.

Disability is measured in wave I. I distinguish between individuals with physical disabilities, those with mental disabilities, those with learning disabilities, and those with multiple types of disabilities. I draw upon the operationalization used by Cheng and Udry (2002) to classify individuals as having physical disabilities. During the in-home portion of the first wave, adolescents and their parents were asked a series of questions assessing physical disability status: whether the adolescent had difficulties with their limbs, used equipment like a wheelchair or cane, whether they required personal-care assistance, had difficulty walking, standing, holding things, and the like, and about self-perceptions, parent perceptions, and other's perceptions of the adolescent as having a disability. A positive response to any of these items from either the adolescent or the parent of the adolescent resulted in a classification as having a physical disability. In these data, about 4.8% of respondents have a physical disability.

I follow the operational definition used by Svetaz, Ireland and Blum (2000) to measure learning disabilities. Learning disabilities are assessed using two questions from the parent portion of the wave one in-home questionnaire. In this section, parents were asked two questions: 1) does the adolescent have a specific learning disability, such as difficulties with attention, dyslexia, or some other reading, spelling, writing, or math disability and 2) did the adolescent receive any type of special educations services during the past 12 months. If the parent responded "yes" to both of these questions, the respondent was coded as having a learning disability. In these data, 5.8% of individuals are classified here as having a learning disability.

To assess the presence of mental disabilities, I draw upon a single question contained in the parental questionnaire administered during wave I. Here, the parent of the adolescent was asked whether the adolescent was "mentally retarded." A response of "yes" results in the individual being coded as having a mental disability. A very small percent (0.15%) of individuals are identified as having a mental disability – a number considerably below national estimates, and a number likely too small to be of much use in statistical analysis. An alternative specification of the variable made use of the approach used by Cheng and Udry (2003). Using the Peabody Vocabulary Test as administered in wave I, any individual who scored more than two standard deviations below the mean was considered to have a mental disability However, bivariate analysis suggests that this operationalization is likely not assessing mental disability, per se, and is rather assessing familiarity with and usage of the English language. Thus this later operationalization was rejected in favor of the more conservative classification based solely on assessments of mental retardation.

Finally, approximately 1.8% of individuals can be classified as having more than one type of disability. Those individuals are thus classed as having multiple disabilities. In this study, some models compare those with disabilities to those without disabilities,

while others compare those without disabilities to those with either mental, physical, learning, or multiple disabilities. For the broad comparison, individuals are categorized as either having a disability or not having a disability where the presence of any of the types of disability delineated above result in a classification as 'having a disability.'

The outcome of interest is the type of first union. This variable is constructed from a series of indicators found in the wave IV dataset in the relationship history series. Each individual is asked, among other things, to list every relationship they have been a part of, its start date, and the type of relationship. Thus I am able to find the temporally first union listed for each respondent, and can distinguish whether that union was a cohabiting union or a marital union.

Controls for factors which influence the likelihood of entry into a first union are included. Controls include basic sociodemographics: race, sex, and educational attainment. I also include controls for religiosity and nativity, as well as for parents' education and for whether the respondent lived with both parents during the wave one interview. Race compares non-Hispanic blacks, Hispanics regardless of race, and members of other racial groups to non-Hispanic whites. Sex compares females to males. Educational attainment compares those with less than a high school degree, those with some college education, and those with a college degree or more to those with a high school degree, and is measured in wave IV. Religiosity serves as a background characteristic and is a scalar measure taken from three questions measured in wave one that ask about religious importance, frequency of religious service attendance, and frequency of church-related youth group activities. Nativity compares the foreign born to those born within the United States. Parents' education follows the same categories as own education. Childhood family structure looks compares those who were living with a mother and a father at the time of the wave I interview to those living in any other family structure.