Childhood Family Structure and Romantic Relationships during the Transition to Adulthood*

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Abstract

We use the Add Health to examine whether childhood family structure experiences influence the development of romantic relationships during adolescence and whether adolescent relationships, in turn, help to shape long-term relationship trajectories. Young people who live in "non-traditional" families during their childhood are more likely than their peers to engage in romantic relationships during adolescence. Individuals who were raised in step-parent and single-parent families are also more likely to cohabit during adulthood, and those who were raised in single-parent families are less likely to have ever married. Childhood family structure is not associated with serious relationship conflict during adolescence or adulthood, however. Moreover, while adolescent relationship experiences have long-term effects on relationship trajectories, they do not significantly mediate the associations between childhood family structure and relationship outcomes in adulthood.

Keywords: family structure, conflict, marriage, cohabitation, romantic relationships

Childhood Family Structure and Romantic Relationships during the Transition to Adulthood

Major shifts in the types of households found in the U.S. have led to an increase in the diversity of living arrangements experienced by American children, including an increase in single-parent, step-family, and cohabiting households. For example, in 1970, 85% of children lived in a home with two parents present, however, this percentage declined to only 70% by 2008 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Although the majority of children today continue to reside with both biological parents, children are increasingly likely to spend a portion of their childhood in an alternative family form (Bumpass & Lu, 2000). As a result, there has been increasing concern about the consequences of children's family structure and the experience of family change for the well-being of young people as they grow and develop.

Compared to children whose parents were never married, divorced, or remarried, children who grow up in two-biological parent households tend to fare better on a wide variety of well-being indicators (Moore et al., 2007; Teachman, 2002). For example, children from single-parent and step-parent households, on average, are more likely to use alcohol and drugs, to drop out of high school, to leave home at a young age, and to have early experiences with sexual activity (e.g. Carlson and Corcoran, 2001; Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1998; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Additionally, growing up in a step-family is associated with more emotional problems (Zill, Morrison, & Coiro, 1993), lower levels of academic achievement, and higher levels of school-related behavior problems during adolescence (Tillman, 2007; 2008).

Children's living arrangements also tend to be associated with engagement in their own romantic relationships during adolescence and early adulthood (Amato, 1996; Bumpass, Martin, & Sweet, 1991; Wolfinger, 2005). For example, compared to children from two-biological parent households, those from step-families and single-parent families are more likely to engage in a

romantic relationship during adolescence. Additionally, being raised in a single-parent family is associated with higher levels of early cohabitation (Cherlin, Kiernan, & Chase-Lansdale, 1995; Sassler, Cunningham, & Lichter, 2009), and being raised in a step-family is associated with an increased likelihood of early marriage (Wolfinger, 2005). Unfortunately, research has not yet adequately addressed the question of whether childhood family structure is associated with the quality of these early romantic relationships. Furthermore, we do not know whether experience with adolescent romantic relationships mediates the association between childhood family structure and relationship engagement and/or quality during adulthood.

The period of adolescence is filling a larger portion of the lifespan than ever before (Bianchi & Casper, 2000; Meier & Allen, 2009). As such, this time period is becoming increasingly important as a period of individual growth and for the development of social and behavioral trajectories that continue to influence people as they age throughout the lifecourse. While the fact that most individuals engage in romantic relationships is not necessarily concerning, more research is needed to examine how relationship experiences unfold. It may be that childhood family experiences set the stage for relationship development at an early age, and those early romantic relationships, in turn, shape long-term relationship trajectories.

The long-term effects of early relationship formation are of particular concern to many researchers, social workers, and family-related practitioners. Individuals who engage in relationships during their teen years are learning how to form and maintain romantic relationships. As such, they may be learning important, beneficial relationship skills. Yet, they also are more likely than their non-dating peers to be exposed to the potentially negative aspects of romantic relationships, such as intimate-partner conflict and violence. In fact, one study found that approximately one-third of teenagers have experienced conflict and violence in their dating

relationships (Halpern, Oslak, Young, Martin, & Kupper, 2001). Studies also indicate that girls who experience dating violence during high school are at greater risk for experiencing dating violence in subsequent years (Smith, White, & Holland, 2003). Moreover, between 25% to 50% of individuals who experience dating violence will experience violence in later marital unions (Gayford, 1975; Roscoe & Benaske, 1985).

Thus, if childhood family structure is associated with romantic relationship experiences during adolescence, it may also influence long-term relationship trajectories. Youth who date as teens may learn important relationship skills that help them to form positive adult relationships. On the other hand, engagement in adolescent relationships may also raise their risk of experiencing negative interpersonal interactions, setting the stage for a trajectory that includes adult unions marked by negative and potentially dangerous dynamics. This study uses rich, longitudinal data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) to further explicate these issues.

Childhood Family Structure and Adolescent Relationships

This study draws on a lifecourse perspective, which holds that events which occur during one stage of life are partly shaped by the events which occurred in the preceding stages. Thus, development is cumulative and a life-long process (Elder, 1998). According to this perspective, family structure experiences can be viewed as a trajectory of experiences that happen over a lifetime, from birth through adulthood. Family structure experiences during childhood are also expected to help shape the trajectories that individuals travel in the other spheres of their lives.

As the diversity of family forms has increased in our society, a growing number of children are spending significant portions of their lives in single-parent, step-parent and cohabiting-parent families and children are increasingly transitioning into and out of different

living arrangements. Research suggests that there is an intergenerational link between parents' relationship histories (and the resulting family structure experiences faced by children) and children's own union formation behaviors (Amato, 1996; Bumpass et al., 1991; Wolfinger, 2005). Young people who have grown up in "non-traditional" families face a greater likelihood of engaging in early romantic unions of their own (Cherlin, et al., 1995; Sassler, et al., 2009). Furthermore, some research has shown that a living in a non-traditional family structure, particularly residing in a single-mother family for boys, is a risk factor for experiencing violence during teen relationships (Cavanagh, Crissey, & Raley, 2008; Halpern et al., 2001). While the findings of these studies suggest that this association differs by gender, the issue of relationship conflict clearly warrants greater attention.

There are three primary mechanisms through which childhood family structure is thought to contribute to the later relationship trajectories of young people: parent-based social support, socialization, and parental control and monitoring. First, children and adolescents receive social support from people within their surrounding environments, particularly their parents and families. Adolescents' perceptions of parental and familial support are strong indicators of psycho-social development (Blyth & Traeger, 1988; Cauce, 1986; Greenberg, Siegel, & Leitch, 1983), and tend to vary by family structure. In particular, children of divorced (Amato, 2005), remarried and cohabiting families (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1998) report lower levels of support from parents and other close family members. Adolescents who lack familial support often look to friends and romantic partners (Aquilino, 1991; Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1998) to provide them with emotional support and love. Thus, youth from non-traditional families may be more likely than their peers to engage in romantic relationships and to expect those relationships to provide them with high levels of emotional support. These expectations

may also lead youth from non-traditional families to become more dissatisfied with their romantic partners. At the same time, their need for support and love may increase the likelihood that these youth will remain involved in relationships of poor quality, even if they are marked by conflict or violence.

Socialization may also help to explain the relationship between childhood family structure and engagement in adolescent romantic relationships. Children in two-biological parent households may see their parents' relationship as stable and permanent, and adopt beliefs that their own relationships should be enduring and long-lasting as well. As a result, children from this type of household may delay relationship formation in search of a more permanent relationship. Children with unmarried parents, however, may come to see relationships as temporary and less permanent (Whitbeck, Simons, & Kao, 1994). They may also have fewer opportunities to observe and acquire relationships skills, such as conflict resolution skills and the ability to compromise (Amato & DeBoer, 2001). This, in turn, could lead those children to have more difficulty maintaining harmonious, conflict-free relationships of their own. Regardless of family structure, observing parental partner conflict/violence or experiencing child abuse has also been shown to lead to poor relationship quality in later life relationships (Doucet & Aseltine, 2003).

Finally, parental monitoring and control may also contribute to the link between childhood family structure and adolescent romantic relationships. Compared to two-parent families, single-parent families are less able to monitor their children because there are fewer adults in the household (Hogan & Kitagawa, 1985; Thomson, McLanahan, & Curtin, 1992) and the adults generally have to balance multiple tasks by themselves (i.e. going to work, raising children, etc.). Step-parent and cohabiting families may also provide less monitoring/control than

two-biological parent families because relationships between non-biological parent-figures and children often lack clear roles and norms that would establish the parent-figures' legitimacy and responsibility (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; Thomson et al., 1992). Moreover, biological parents within step-families tend to provide somewhat less supervision than their counterparts in two-biological parent families, as their attention may be split between their children and a relatively new romantic partner. Lower levels of parental supervision and control may allow youth in single-parent and step-parent households more opportunities to engage in romantic relationships and sexual activity. Engagement in relationships at earlier ages may also lead to an increased number of partners during adolescence, which is associated with an increased likelihood of experiencing physical aggression (Bergman, 1992). Additionally, insufficient monitoring/control has been shown to predict antisocial behavior, which in turn, increases the risk of aggression towards a romantic partner (Conger, Cui, Bryant, & Elder, 2000).

Childhood Family Structure and Adult Relationships

Some evidence also suggests that childhood family structure has long-term ramifications for union formation patterns in adulthood. For example, compared to individuals who grow up in two-biological parent households, those who experience parental divorce are more likely to enter into cohabiting unions (Sassler & Goldscheider, 2004), to cohabit prior to marriage (Teachman, 2004), and to cohabit at younger ages (Thornton, 1991). Individuals who grow up in a stable single-mother household (Ryan, Franzetta, Schelar, & Manlove, 2009) and other non-traditional families (Landale, Schoen, and Daniels, 2010) are also at a higher risk of cohabiting in early adulthood. In addition, individuals who grow up in non-traditional families, especially women, tend to move in with a romantic partner more rapidly (Sassler, Addo, & Hartmann, 2010; Teachman, 2003) and to enter into marital relations earlier in life than their peers (Axinn &

Thornton, 1996; Ryan et al., 2009; Sassler, et al., 2009).

Childhood family structure may also be related to the quality of adult relationships, as individuals from divorced families are more likely than their peers to experience romantic relationships of their own that are unstable and distressed (Amato & Booth, 1997; McLeod, 1991; Ross & Mirowsky, 1999). This association may be explained by the higher than average levels of parental conflict experienced by young people within families that have gone through a divorce. Some studies indicate that children exposed to parental conflict are more likely to experience lower quality relationships in adulthood (Amato & Booth, 2001), to form families early, and to experience union dissolution of their own (Musick & Meier, 2010).

Overall, however, there is little research that directly examines the connections between childhood family structure, patterns of relationship formation, and the quality of adult relationships. Moreover, while numerous studies have focused on the experience of conflict within relationships (Brownridge, 2008; Brownridge & Halli, 2002; DeMaris, Benson, Fox, Hill, & Van Wyk, 2003; Yllo & Straus, 1981), no studies to our knowledge have examined childhood family structure as a primary risk-factor underlying the level of conflict found within adult unions.

The Mediating Role of Adolescent Relationships

Despite the common tendency to consider adolescent romance as an inconsequential experience in the life course, recent studies indicate that adolescent romantic relationships can have more complicated and enduring implications than anticipated (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003). Of particular interest to this study, findings suggest that adolescent romantic relationships are likely to be an important factor in the transition into adult romantic relationships (Furman & Shaffer, 2003). Individuals who dated during adolescence are not only likely to have more

partners during young adulthood, but are also more likely to cohabit or marry early compared to their peers who did not experience adolescent relationships (Meier & Allen, 2009; Seiffge-Krenke, 2003). It may be, therefore, that part of the reason why childhood family structure has long-term consequences for adult union formation processes is that family structure influences the start of individuals' relationship trajectories during the adolescent years.

Although the literature does not clearly reveal an association between adolescent relationship quality and the quality of relationships in adulthood, one might speculate that such as association exists. If a young person's earliest interpersonal relationships are marked by arguments or violence, he or she may not develop the communication skills necessary to maintain stable, high quality relationships. On the other hand, adolescents who experienced stable relationships may transfer their successful relationship practices, such as open communication, patience, and healthy emotional coping methods, into their relationships during adulthood. If this is the case, childhood family structure may have long-term consequences for adult relationship quality because of its earlier influence on adolescent relationship quality.

Hypotheses

We make the following seven hypotheses. Compared to their peers who were raised in a two-biological parent family, individuals from "non-traditional" families (i.e. step-parent, single-parent, and non-parent families) are: (1) more likely to engage in a romantic relationship during adolescence; (2) more likely to have adolescent relationships marked by serious conflict; (3) more likely to have ever cohabited by adulthood; (4) more likely to have ever married by adulthood; and (5) more likely to have adult relationships marked by serious conflict. We also expect that (6) the relationship between childhood family structure and adolescent relationship experiences is mediated by family support, parental supervision, and control. Lastly, we

hypothesize that (7) the associations between childhood family structure and adult relationship outcomes are at least partially mediated by adolescent romantic relationship experiences.

Data and Methods

Data for this research comes from the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health (Add Health), a nationally representative study of adolescents in grades 7 through 12 in the United States in 1995. Add Health involves multiple components and several waves of data collection. This research utilizes contractual data collected from In-Home interviews during Wave I (1994-1995), Wave II (1996), and Wave IV (2008) and selected data from the Wave I Parental Questionnaire and School Administrator Questionnaire. This study included respondents who completed Waves I, II, and IV of the In-Home interview, those whose parents completed the Parental Questionnaire at Wave I, and those who had a valid sampling weight (N = 9,196). 567 respondents were dropped from the analytic sample due to a lack of valid information for all of the variables included in the multivariate analyses (N = 8,629). We also excluded respondents reporting same-sex partnerships (N = 236) and those who were older than 20 years of age at Wave II (N = 30). This yielded a final sample size of 8,363 respondents.

Dependent Variables

Adolescent Romantic Relationship. The first dependent variable is a dichotomous indicator of whether the respondent had been in a recent heterosexual romantic relationship at the time of Wave II. This measure was constructed from a question that directly asked respondents about their involvement in romantic relationships within the past 18 months, and from responses to additional questions regarding behaviors that are indicative of a romantic relationship, including hand holding, kissing, and telling another person that they like or love them. Following the convention set by others utilizing Add Health, if respondents responded yes to any of these

questions, even if they did not consider their relationship to be "romantic," they were coded as having been in a relationship (Carver, et al., 2003). [1]

Early Adult Union Formation. The second and third dependent variables, also dichotomous indicators, measure whether the respondent had ever been in a heterosexual cohabiting relationship (by Wave IV) and whether they had ever been married (by Wave IV).

Relationship Conflict. Adolescent conflict was measured at Wave II with a series of questions based on a short-form of the Conflict Tactics Scale (Strauss, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980). Respondents were asked if, within their three most recent relationships, a partner had ever done the following: "call you names, insult you, or treat you disrespectfully in front of others," "swear at you," "threaten you with violence," "push or shove you," and "throw something at you." Because few youth reported these behaviors, those who answered yes to any of the questions were coded as 1, all others as 0 (Halpern et al., 2001).

Similarly, at Wave IV respondents were asked about their relationship experiences with one current partner. If the respondent reported multiple current partners, priority was given in the following order: to the marriage partner, cohabitating partner, pregnancy partner, dating partner. If the respondent reported no current partner, questions were asked about the most recent partner. Specifically, respondents were asked how often their partner had ever done any of the following: "threatened you with violence, pushed or shoved you, or thrown something at you that could hurt," "slapped, hit, or kicked you," and caused "an injury, such as a sprain, bruise, or cut because of a fight." The respondents were also asked how often they had committed these acts against their partner. Respondents who answered that these behaviors were committed at least

[1] Multinomial logistic regression was used to examine whether family structure was associated with the likelihood of reporting no adolescent relationship even when "romantic" behaviors had occurred. There are no significant differences in the likelihood of being classified as having an "acknowledged" romantic relationship as opposed to being classified as having an "unacknowledged" romantic relationship (results available upon request).

once (by either their partner or themselves) were coded as 1 and all others were coded as 0.

Independent Variables

Childhood Family Structure. The primary independent variable is childhood family structure, constructed from the household roster at Wave I. Family structure is measured with five dummy variables – two-biological parent (reference category), married step-parent, single-mother, single-father, and non-parent families (i.e. grandparents, other relatives, etc.).

Family-Related Mechanisms. Measures of family-related mechanisms that might help to explain an association between childhood family structure and adolescent relationship outcomes are taken from the In-Home interview at Wave I. The mechanisms included here are family social support, parental control and parental supervision. Unfortunately, the Add Health does not contain information adequate to measure the influence of parental socialization. *Family social support* is a five-item index ($\alpha = 0.76$) that measures emotional support received from parents and other close family members. Respondents were asked to report, on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much), how much they felt that: 1) their parents care about them; 2) people in their family understand them; 3) they want to leave home (reverse coded); 4) they and their family have fun together; and 5) their family pays attention to them. *Parental control* is a count variable ranging from 0 to 7, indicating whether the adolescent makes his or her own decisions about: 1) time to be home on the weekends; 2) friends; 3) clothes; 4) how much TV to watch; 5) which TV shows to watch; 6) time to go to bed on week nights; and 7) what to eat. *Parental supervision* is a count variable ranging from 0 to 4, indicating whether at least one parent-figure is present in the home most or all of the time when the adolescent: 1) goes to school; 2) comes home from school; 3) eats the evening meal; and 4) goes to bed.

Control Variables

The demographic characteristics of age, gender, and race/ethnicity are taken from the Wave I In-home interview. *Race/ethnicity* is self-identified and is measured with four dummy indicators – non-Hispanic White (reference category), non-Hispanic Black, Hispanic (of any race), and Asian. Due to small sample sizes, individuals of other races were dropped from the analyses. *Gender* is measured such that 1=Male and 0=Female. *Age* is measured in years.

Measures of total family income and parental education are taken from the Wave I Parental Questionnaire. Five dummy variables were created to measure *total family income* – $15,000 or less (reference category), $16-$34,000, $35-$59,000, $60,000 or more, and missing income data. Highest *educational attainment achieved by a parent* (either the mother or father) is measured with five dummy indicators – less than a high school diploma (reference category), high school diploma or a GED, some college, college degree or more, and missing education data.

Respondents' own income and education are taken from the Wave IV In-home interview. *Respondent Income* is measured with five dummy variables that capture total household income – less than $20,000 (reference category), $20-$49,999, $50-$74,999, $75,000 or more, and missing income data. *Respondent Education* is measured with six dummy indicators that capture educational attainment to date – less than high school (reference category), high school diploma/GED, vocational schooling, some college, college degree, and post- baccalaureate.

Analytic Strategy

Binary logistic regression is used to estimate the effects of childhood family structure on the likelihood of ever being in three types of relationships: adolescent romantic, adult cohabiting, and adult marital relationships. In these models we use Sobel-Goodman tests to also explore the potential mediating effects of family-related mechanisms on the association between childhood

family structure and adolescent relationships, and whether engagement in an adolescent relationship helps to explain the effect of childhood family structure on engagement in adult unions. For each of the three types of relationships, logistic regression is also used to estimate the effects of childhood family structure on the likelihood of being in a conflict-ridden relationship, as opposed to a conflict-free relationship. Finally, we assess whether adolescent relationship experiences help to explain any enduring effect of childhood family structure on the experience of conflict in adult unions.

All analyses account for the multistage, stratified, school-based, cluster sampling design of Add Health by using the robust estimator of variance procedure in STATA. We also control for differential sampling probabilities among individuals by using the Add Health grand sample weights in all estimation procedures (Chantala & Tabor, 1999).

Descriptive Results

---Table 1 about here---

Table 1 presents the distribution of childhood family structure and other background characteristics. At Wave I, when the average respondent was 15.5 years of age, the majority (58%) of the sample lived in a two-biological parent family. A substantial percentage lived in a single-parent family (20% with a mother and 3% with a father) or a step-parent family (16%), and an additional 3% lived in a non-parent family. The sample is evenly divided between men and women, and is predominantly non-Hispanic white. As indicated by parental education and income, the sample is largely from a middle class background. The average youth in this sample reported mid-to-high levels of parental support, supervision, and control. At Wave IV, the majority of the respondents had at least some college education and earned a mid-to-high level of income.

Table 1 also indicates that the vast majority of respondents in the sample reported some experience with romantic relationships over the course of their adolescence and adult years. At Wave II, nearly 67% of the sample reported having been in a recent adolescent relationship. By Wave IV, approximately half of the sample reported ever cohabiting and 49% of the sample reported having been married. Moreover, a substantial percentage of respondents reported serious relationship conflict. At Wave II, about one-fifth (19%) of those in adolescent relationships had experienced conflict at some point within in their last three relationships. Among respondents who reported ever cohabiting or marrying by Wave IV, one-third (33%) of those whose current or most recent relationship was cohabiting had experienced conflict in that relationship. Twenty-three percent of respondents whose current or most recent relationship was a marriage reported conflict within that marriage.

Multivariate Results

Adolescent Romantic Relationships

---Table 2 about here---

The baseline model (Model 1) presented in Table 2 shows that childhood family structure is significantly associated with the odds of engaging in a romantic relationship during adolescence. Compared to individuals who lived in two-biological parent families, those who lived in step-parent, single-mother, single-father, and non-parent families have a 52%, 26%, 94% and 109% higher odds, respectively, of engaging in an adolescent relationship. Controlling for socio-demographic characteristics does little to mediate these associations. As seen in Model 2, however, gender, race/ethnicity, and age have significant direct effects on adolescent romantic engagement, with boys, racial/ethnic minorities, and younger adolescents less likely to report romantic relationships.

Model 3 considers the mediating role of family-related mechanisms in the association between childhood family structure and adolescent romantic relationships. Results indicate that family-related social support and parental control are both significant independent predictors of adolescent romantic relationships. Specifically, for each unit increase in family support and parental control, the odds of being in a romantic relationship during adolescence decrease by 26% and 6%, respectively. With respect to mediating effects, the Sobel-Goodman test indicates that these family-related mechanisms were significant mediators ($p < 0.05$) and accounted for 44% of the total direct effect of family structure on engagement in an adolescent relationship. Yet, given that childhood family structure remains significantly associated with relationship formation, even in the face of controls for family support and parental control, additional factors that are not captured in this model will be important to consider in future research.

---Table 3 about here---

Table 3 shows findings regarding the relationship between childhood family structure and the experience of serious conflict among those who reported a recent adolescent relationship (N=5,604). Contrary to our expectations, Model 1 indicates that, with one exception, youth in nontraditional family structures are no more likely to report serious relationship conflict than are their peers in two-biological parent homes. Those from single-mother families, however, face a 25% higher odds of having a conflicted relationship as opposed to a conflict-free relationship.

The inclusion of socio-demographic characteristics in Model 2, particularly the measures of race/ethnicity and age, reduces to non-significance the association between living in a single-mother family and relationship conflict. These findings suggest that blacks, who are represented disproportionately within single-mother families, are more likely to experience adolescent relationships that include serious conflict. It also suggests that the increased risk of conflict

associated with single-mother families results largely from the socio-demographic characteristics of the youth within those families.

Although no significant family structure differences in conflict remain, we include our measures of family-related mechanisms in Model 3 to examine their direct effects on adolescent relationship quality. We find that, among youth who have had a recent relationship, an increase in family support and parental supervision is associated with a significant decrease in the likelihood of having experienced a conflicted relationship (by 26% and 15%, respectively).

---Table 4 about here---

Adult Unions

Table 4 shows the results of several nested binary logistic regression models predicting two outcomes at Wave IV: having been in a cohabiting relationship and in a marital union.

Cohabiting Unions

Model 1 of the analysis on cohabiting unions indicates that, compared to youth who lived in two-biological parent families, those from step-parent, single-mother, single-father, and non-parent families face odds of cohabiting that are 80%, 90%, 99%, and 76% higher, respectively. Except for youth in non-parent families, results shown in Model 2 indicate that the association between family structure and cohabitation remains even after controlling for respondents' socio-demographic characteristics. In general, though, blacks are more likely and Hispanics are less likely than their Non-Hispanic white counterparts to report cohabitation experiences in adulthood. Additionally, we see that older, more educated, and higher-income respondents are less likely to have ever cohabited.

The results shown in Model 3 reveal that adolescent relationship engagement is a significant independent predictor of cohabitation during adulthood. Compared to those who had not engaged in a romantic relationship by Wave II, young people who had done so face a 55%

higher odds of cohabiting during adulthood. Contrary to our hypothesis, however, experience with adolescent romantic relationships helps to account for only a small portion of the increased propensity to cohabit found among youth from non-traditional families. While statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), a Sobel-Goodman test for mediation indicates that being in an adolescent relationship accounts for only 4% of the total family structure effect on engagement in cohabiting unions.

Marital Unions

The baseline model (Model 1) for the analysis of marital unions indicates that individuals who lived in single-mother and single-father families during their childhood have significantly lower odds of marrying (26% and 29% lower odds, respectively) than do those who lived in two-biological parent families. These associations remain with the inclusion of the socio-demographic characteristics in Model 2. In terms of direct effects, this model indicates that respondents who are male, racial/ethnic minorities, younger, college-educated (as compared to having less than a high school diploma) and those who have parents with higher levels of income are less likely to have been married than are their peers. High levels of personal income, however, are associated with a higher odds of ever marrying.

As with cohabitation, having experienced an adolescent romantic relationship is significantly related to the likelihood of marriage (see Model 3). Those who were in a romantic relationship during their adolescence have a 29% higher odds of marrying than do their counterparts who did not date during their teen years. Despite the direct relationship between adolescent relationship and the odds of marrying, a Sobel-Goodman test indicates that adolescent relationship experiences do not significantly mediate the remaining association between childhood family structure and marriage.

---Table 5 about here---

Table 5 presents the associations between childhood family structure and the experience of serious conflict among respondents within current or recent adult cohabiting (N=2,464) and marital unions (N=2,593). In this table, we present two models: the unadjusted model which includes only childhood family structure and an adjusted model which includes measures of socio-demographic characteristics and adolescent relationship experiences.

Conflict in Cohabiting Unions

Childhood family structure does not predict the likelihood of experiencing conflict within a current or recent cohabiting union, with two exceptions. Those from step-parent and non-parent families have a higher odds of experiencing a conflicted cohabiting union (36% and 88%, respectively). These associations, however, are reduced to non-significance when we account for parent SES (results not shown on table). Thus, there is little evidence to suggest that young people who grow up in "non-traditional" families are at greater risk for problematic or dangerous cohabiting unions in adulthood. Although, experiencing conflict in an adolescent relationship is not associated with conflict in cohabiting unions, not dating during one's teen years appears to have a marginal protective effect of experiencing conflict. In fact, the only variables examined here that significantly predict conflict in cohabiting relationships is respondent race/ethnicity and education (not shown on table). Specifically, blacks have a 55% higher odds of experiencing conflict in cohabiting unions than their white peers. Compared to respondents with less than a high school diploma, those with a college degree and a post- baccalaureate degree face 47% and 67% lower odds, respectively, of experiencing serious conflict in a cohabiting relationship (results available upon request).

Conflict in Marital Unions

Childhood family structure is not a significant predictor of conflict in marital unions, except in single-mother families. Individuals who lived in single-mother families have a 50% higher odds of experiencing conflict in a current or recent marriage than their peers from two-biological parent families. However, this association is reduced to non-significance when respondent socio-demographic characteristics are taken into account (results not shown, available upon request). In particular, respondents who are male and black or Hispanic face a higher odds of experiencing marital conflict than do women and non-Hispanic white respondents. Higher levels of personal income and educational attainment are associated with a lower odds of experiencing marital conflict. Thus, adults from "non-traditional" families are no more likely to experience marital conflict than their peers of similar racial/ethnic and SES characteristics. Interestingly, however, we see in Model 2 that the experience of serious conflict in an adolescent relationship is a significant predictor of conflict in a marital union. Compared to their socio-demographically similar peers, individuals who experienced a conflicted adolescent relationship face a 48% higher odds of engaging in a conflicted marital union.

Discussion

This research makes several important contributions to our knowledge about relationship formation during the transition to adulthood. First, the findings of this study reveal that a vast majority of adolescents have been involved in a romantic relationship. Moreover, consistent with previous research (Raley, Crissey, & Muller, 2007), engagement in an adolescent relationship is a significant predictor of union formation in adulthood, in the form of both cohabitation and marriage. These results strongly suggest that romantic involvement during adolescence is a normative and consequential step within the lifecourse trajectory of relationship development. As such, the use of longitudinal data, such as we employ here, is imperative to this area of study.

Second, this research helps to further explicate the mechanisms linking childhood family structure to relationship formation during adolescence and adulthood. While the majority of respondents from all types of family structures have engaged in an adolescent romantic relationship, youth from "non-traditional" families (i.e. step-parent, single-parent, and non-parent families) have a significantly greater likelihood of having done so than youth from two-biological parent families. Our findings indicate that lower levels of family support and parental control help to explain a significant portion (44%) of this increased likelihood. Low levels of support and control may lead these youth to search for external sources of social support in the form of boyfriends/girlfriends and may allow them more freedom to make their own decisions regarding where and with whom they spend time.

In addition to a higher likelihood of engaging in adolescent relationships, young people raised in step-parent and single-parent families face a significantly greater likelihood of cohabiting as adults than do their counterparts from two-biological parent families. At the same time, those raised in single-parent families are less likely to have married by their mid-twenties to early thirties. In contrast to our expectations, we find that controlling for engagement in an adolescent relationship does not have a strong mediating effect on the association between childhood family structure and adult union formation. In fact, doing so only explains 4% of the total family structure effect on the likelihood of cohabiting and explains none of the total family structure effect on the likelihood of marriage. Thus, it appears that there is something about childhood family structure experiences, above and beyond their influence over people's initial forays into romantic relationships, that continues to affect their likelihood of entering into co-residential unions during adulthood. To further explicate the mechanisms at work here, future research should explore in greater detail the family and peer contexts in which youth from

differing family structures are raised.

A third important contribution of this study is its focus on serious relationship conflict, including behaviors that are verbally and physically abusive. Overall, we find that a relatively high percentage of adolescents (19% of those with recent relationships) and adults (33% of those in current/recent cohabitations and 23% of those in current/recent marriages) have experienced serious relationship conflict. Our findings suggest that, in general, parental supervision and perceptions of family support are important factors influencing adolescents' likelihood of engaging in dangerous relationships. As found in at least one previous study (Cavanagh, et al., 2008), however, childhood family structure is not a significant independent predictor of conflict within adolescent relationships once socio-demographic characteristics are held constant.

Contrary to our hypotheses, we also find few long-term effects of childhood family structure on the likelihood of experiencing conflict-ridden relationships during adulthood. While childhood family structure may influence the likelihood with which young people engage in co-residential adult relationships, it does not seem to influence the likelihood that those unions, when entered into, will be marked by overt conflict or violence. What does appear to influence the likelihood that individuals' marital unions will include conflict is their experience with adolescent relationships, particularly if those earlier relationships included serious conflict.

These findings confirm the results of earlier studies that show that both childhood family structure and experiences in early-life relationships have long-term effects on relationship trajectories (Gayford, 1975; Roscoe & Benaske, 1985). Yet, engagement in adolescent romantic relationships only explains a small portion of the association between childhood family structure and engagement in adult cohabitation and does not appear to be important in explaining the association between childhood family structure and marriage. Experiencing a "bad" relationship

during adolescence, however, is predictive of engaging in a conflict-ridden marriage.

Limitations

Although these findings offer important contributions to the existing literature, there are several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, we use a cross-sectional measure of childhood family structure. As such, we have not captured any family structure transitions that respondents may have experienced prior to Wave I. The literature suggests that both the number and type of family structure transitions that children experience may have lasting effects on their future outcomes (e.g. Cavanagh & Hutson, 2006; Fomby & Cherlin, 2007; Tillman, 2007; Wu & Thomson, 2001). Future research on the predictors of relationship formation and quality would benefit from a more detailed examination of the family structure histories that individuals experience throughout the course of their lifetime. Another limitation is the overly conservative nature of our measure of relationship conflict in adult unions. Because we are only able to measure conflict within one current or most recent cohabiting/marital union, we cannot capture serious relationship conflict that occurred in previous relationships or in a current relationship about which no questions were asked.

Finally, the adolescent interviews in the Add Health lack measures to examine respondents' experience with family-related violence during their childhood (either in the form of child abuse or exposure to parental spousal/partner abuse). Research indicates that exposure to parental violence is associated with offsprings' own dating violence (O'Leary & Cascardi, 1998; Simons, Lin, & Gordon, 1998). The long-term association between relationship conflict during adolescence and later marital conflict may be explained, therefore, by the greater likelihood of having experienced family-related violence during childhood. Future data collection efforts should aim to include this kind of information so that research can better examine the family-

related factors that influence the development of conflicted and/or violent relationship trajectories.

Conclusion

In sum, the findings of this study suggest that we must continue to focus our efforts on understanding the experiences that affect relationship outcomes among adolescents and young adults. Youth from non-traditional families are more likely to engage in adolescent relationships and to cohabit as adults, and are less likely to engage in marital unions than their peers from two-biological parent families. Contrary to expectations, childhood family structure does not predict serious conflict in teen or current/recent cohabiting or marital relationships.

Thus, if young people from non-traditional families are at an increased risk of engaging in problematic behaviors, as some previous research has suggested (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Tillman, 2007, 2008), these behaviors do not appear to be manifesting most frequently within romantic relationships in the form of overt physical and verbal conflict. While this finding is reassuring, we recognize that further research is needed to examine other potential relationship problems that may be linked to the experience of non-traditional family structures. In addition to childhood family structure, contextual factors, such as school environment, peer networks, and neighborhood characteristics should also be included in future studies that examine romantic relationship trajectories and the likelihood of engaging in a "problematic" or dangerous relationship during adolescence and adulthood.

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Tables

Table 1: Weighted Percentages, Means and Standard Deviations of Socio-Demographic and Relationship Variables (N=8,363)

	Percent	M	SD
Respondent Characteristics at Wave I			
Family Structure			
Two-biological parent family	58.20	------	------
Married step-parent family	16.30	------	------
Single-mother family	19.73	------	------
Single-father family	2.85	------	------
Non-parent family	2.92	------	------
Gender (Male)	48.84	------	------
Age in Years (at Wave I)	------	15.47	1.57
Race/Ethnicity			
White	69.32	------	------
Black	14.90	------	------
Hispanic	11.86	------	------
Asian	3.92	------	------
Parental Characteristics at Wave I			
Parents' Education			
Less than HS	10.96	------	------
HS degree	30.78	------	------
Some College	20.52	------	------
College	34.21	------	------
Missing Education Data	3.53	------	------
Parents' Income			
$15,000 or less	13.45	------	------
$16,000-$34,000	20.78	------	------
$35,000-$59,000	25.43	------	------
$60,000+	21.67	------	------
Missing Income Data	18.67	------	------
Respondent Characteristics at Wave IV			
Respondent Education			
Less than HS	8.33	------	------
High School Diploma	16.10	------	------
Vocational School	9.53	------	------
Some College	33.57	------	------
College	20.55	------	------
Post-baccalaureate	11.92	------	------

Table 1: Weighted Percentages, Means and Standard Deviations of Relationship and Socio-Demographic Variables (N = 8,363) (cont'd)

	Percent	M	SD
Respondent Income			
Less than $20,000	10.97	------	------
$20,000-$49,999	31.26	------	------
$50,000-$74,999	23.15	------	------
$75,000+	28.29	------	------
Missing Income Data	6.33	------	------
Mediating Factors for			
Adolescent Analyses at Wave I			
Family Social Support (Range 0-5)	------	4.01	0.68
Parental Supervision (Range 0-4)	------	2.93	0.98
Parental Control (Range 0-7)	------	2.00	1.56
Outcomes for Relationships			
Ever in adolescent relationship	67.06	------	------
Ever cohabited	50.41	------	------
Ever married	49.26	------	------
Outcomes for Conflict			
Adolescent Outcomes (N = 5,604)			
Relationship marked by conflict	18.76	------	------
Relationship with no conflict	81.24	------	------
Cohabiting Outcomes (N = 2,464)			
Relationship marked by conflict	33.50	------	------
Relationship with no conflict	66.50	------	------
Marital Outcomes (N = 2,593)			
Relationship marked by conflict	22.65	------	------
Relationship with no conflict	77.35	------	------

Table 2. Odds Ratios for the Effects of Childhood Family Structure on Engagement in Adolescent Relationship (N=8,363)

	Adolescent Relationship at Wave II: Odds Ratio (SE)		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Family Structure at Wave I			
(Two-biological parent family)			
Married step-parent family	1.52*** (0.14)	1.55*** (0.15)	1.43*** (0.15)
Single-mother family	1.26** (0.11)	1.45*** (0.14)	1.32** (0.14)
Single-father family	1.94*** (0.39)	1.96** (0.43)	1.67* (0.39)
Non-parent family	2.09*** (0.43)	2.20*** (0.47)	2.11*** (0.48)
Male		0.73*** (0.05)	0.75*** (0.06)
Race			
(White)			
Black		0.70*** (0.06)	0.71*** (0.07)
Hispanic		0.78** (0.08)	0.79* (0.08)
Asian		0.45*** (0.06)	0.44*** (0.07)
Age of Respondent (in years)		1.33*** (0.03)	1.26*** (0.03)
Parents' Education at Wave I			
(Less than High School)			
High School		1.02 (0.11)	0.99 (0.11)
Some College		1.03 (0.12)	1.01 (0.12)
College		0.95 (0.11)	0.93 (0.11)
Parents' Education Missing		0.59** (0.11)	0.57** (0.11)
Parental Income at Wave I			
(≤$15,000)			
$16,000-$34,000		1.08 (0.14)	1.07 (0.14)
$35,000-$59,000		1.17 (0.14)	1.15 (0.14)
$60,000+		1.36* (0.17)	1.32* (0.17)
Parental Income Missing		1.14 (0.14)	1.11 (0.13)
Family Support at Wave I			0.74*** (0.04)
Parental Supervision at Wave I			0.93 (0.03)
Parental Control at Wave I			0.94** (0.02)
Log-Likelihood	-10336536	-9872484	-9781992

*p≤0.05; **p≤0.01; ***p≤0.001

Table 3. Odds Ratios for the Effects of Childhood Family Structure on Serious Conflict in Adolescent Relationships (N=5,604)

	Serious Conflict in Adolescent Relationship at Wave II: Odds Ratio (SE)					
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
Family Structure at Wave I						
(Two-biological parent family)						
Married step-parent family	1.04	(0.13)	1.00	(0.13)	0.89	(0.12)
Single-mother family	1.25*	(0.15)	1.05	(0.14)	0.90	(0.13)
Single-father family	1.27	(0.29)	1.14	(0.26)	0.93	(0.22)
Non-parent family	1.59	(0.43)	1.16	(0.32)	1.14	(0.31)
Male			1.00	(0.10)	1.04	(0.11)
Race						
(White)						
Black			1.40**	(0.18)	1.42**	(0.19)
Hispanic			0.93	(0.13)	0.95	(0.13)
Asian			1.27	(0.29)	1.19	(0.26)
Age of Respondent (in years)			1.14***	(0.04)	1.09*	(0.04)
Parents' Education at Wave I						
(Less than High School)						
High School			0.99	(0.14)	0.95	(0.14)
Some College			0.81	(0.13)	0.79	(0.13)
College			0.84	(0.14)	0.81	(0.13)
Parents' Education Missing			1.05	(0.28)	0.99	(0.26)
Parental Income at Wave I						
(≤$15,000)						
$16,000-$34,000			0.84	(0.13)	0.81	(0.12)
$35,000-$59,000			0.86	(0.17)	0.83	(0.16)
$60,000+			0.83	(0.15)	0.78	(0.14)
Parental Income Missing			0.88	(0.15)	0.84	(0.15)
Family Support at Wave I					0.74***	(0.05)
Parental Supervision at Wave I					0.85***	(0.04)
Parental Control at Wave I					0.97	(0.03)
Log-Likelihood	-5305390		-5241585		-5174879	

*p≤0.05; **p≤0.01; ***p≤0.001

Table 4. Odds Ratios for the Effects of Childhood Family Structure on Engagement in Cohabiting and Marital Relationship (N=8,363)

	Cohabiting Relationship at Wave IV Odds Ratio (SE)			Marital Relationship at Wave IV Odds Ratio (SE)		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Family Structure at Wave I						
(Two-biological parent family)						
Married step-parent family	1.80*** (0.14)	1.58*** (0.13)	1.53*** (0.12)	1.02 (0.08)	0.96 (0.08)	0.94 (0.08)
Single-mother family	1.90*** (0.16)	1.49*** (0.14)	1.44*** (0.13)	0.74*** (0.06)	0.79** (0.07)	0.78** (0.07)
Single-father family	1.99*** (0.33)	1.71*** (0.28)	1.63** (0.27)	0.71* (0.12)	0.62** (0.12)	0.60** (0.11)
Non-parent family	1.76** (0.35)	1.27 (0.25)	1.19 (0.23)	0.97 (0.20)	0.99 (0.21)	0.95 (0.20)
Male		1.07 (0.06)	1.11 (0.06)		0.54*** (0.04)	0.55*** (0.04)
Race						
(White)						
Black		1.22* (0.12)	1.26* (0.12)		0.35*** (0.04)	0.36*** (0.04)
Hispanic		0.70** (0.08)	0.71** (0.09)		0.76* (0.09)	0.77* (0.09)
Asian		0.94 (0.17)	1.01 (0.18)		0.54*** (0.09)	0.56*** (0.09)
Age of Respondent (in years)		0.93*** (0.02)	0.91*** (0.02)		1.32*** (0.04)	1.30*** (0.04)
Parents' Education at Wave I						
(Less than High School)						
High School		1.00 (0.12)	1.00 (0.12)		0.94 (0.12)	0.94 (0.12)
Some College		0.94 (0.11)	0.93 (0.11)		1.02 (0.14)	1.01 (0.14)
College		0.94 (0.11)	0.93 (0.11)		0.86 (0.12)	0.86 (0.12)
Parents' Education Missing		1.08 (0.20)	1.14 (0.22)		0.98 (0.17)	1.01 (0.18)
Parental Income at Wave I						
(≤$15,000)						
$16,000-$34,000		0.98 (0.11)	0.98 (0.11)		0.84 (0.09)	0.84 (0.09)
$35,000-$59,000		0.92 (0.11)	0.90 (0.11)		0.72** (0.09)	0.71** (0.09)
$60,000+		1.11 (0.14)	1.08 (0.14)		0.60*** (0.08)	0.59*** (0.08)
Parental Income Missing		0.88 (0.11)	0.87 (0.11)		0.90 (0.10)	0.89 (0.10)

Table 4. Odds Ratios for the Effects of Childhood Family Structure on Engagement in Cohabiting and Marital Relationship (N=8,363) (cont'd)

	Cohabiting Relationship at Wave IV Odds Ratio (SE)			Marital Relationship at Wave IV Odds Ratio (SE)		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Respondent Education at Wave IV (Less than HS)						
High School diploma		0.69* (0.11)	0.70* (0.11)		0.88 (0.14)	0.89 (0.14)
Vocational School		0.74* (0.11)	0.75* (0.11)		1.14 (0.18)	1.15 (0.18)
Some College		0.56*** (0.08)	0.57*** (0.08)		0.86 (0.12)	0.88 (0.13)
College		0.37*** (0.06)	0.38*** (0.06)		0.55*** (0.09)	0.57*** (0.09)
Post- baccalaureate		0.31*** (0.05)	0.32*** (0.06)		0.67* (0.11)	0.70* (0.12)
Respondent Income at Wave IV (<$20,000)						
$20,000-$49,999		0.71*** (0.09)	0.71** (0.09)		1.59*** (0.18)	1.59*** (0.18)
$50,000-$74,999		0.49*** (0.06)	0.48*** (0.06)		3.14*** (0.38)	3.12*** (0.39)
$75,000+		0.53*** (0.06)	0.51*** (0.06)		3.24*** (0.40)	3.17*** (0.40)
Respondent Income Missing		0.75 (0.12)	0.77 (0.13)		0.69 (0.13)	0.70 (0.13)
Adolescent Relationship at Wave II			1.55*** (0.10)			1.29*** (0.08)
Log-Likelihood	-11195149	-10727754	-10654815	-11350560	-10179683	-10156140

*p≤0.05; **p≤0.01; ***p≤0.001

Table 5. Odds Ratios for the Effects of Childhood Family Structure on Serious Conflict in Cohabiting and Marital Relationships

	Cohabiting Relationships at Wave IV (N = 2,464)		Marital Relationships at Wave IV (N=2,593)	
	Odds Ratio (SE)			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Family Structure at Wave I				
(Two-biological parent family)				
Married step-parent family	1.36* (0.21)	1.23 (0.21)	1.06 (0.19)	1.00 (0.18)
Single-mother family	1.27 (0.18)	0.97 (0.15)	1.50* (0.28)	1.25 (0.26)
Single-father family	1.05 (0.38)	0.85 (0.33)	1.04 (0.41)	0.93 (0.37)
Non-parent family	1.88* (0.53)	1.37 (0.40)	1.17 (0.42)	0.97 (0.41)
Adolescent Relationship at Wave II				
(Adolescent Relationship with No Conflict)				
Adolescent Relationship with Conflict		1.04 (0.19)		1.48* (0.24)
No Adolescent Relationship		0.74* (0.11)		0.84 (0.24)
Log-Likelihood	-3260213	-3176462	-2607035	-2470066

*p≤0.05; **p≤0.01; ***p≤0.001

Note: Model 2 for each of the outcomes also includes controls for gender, race/ethnicity, parent education and income, and respondent education and income