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INTRODUCTION

Significant changes have occurred in family patterns in the United States over the past several decades, with noteworthy transformations in age at marriage, marital stability, the prevalence of living together unmarried and in the relationship context of childbearing (Cherlin 2010; Perelli-Harris and Gerber 2011; Smock and Greenland 2010). Recent U.S. data indicate that 41% of births occurred outside of marriage in 2009 compared to 28% in 1990 (Wildsmith, Steward-Streng and Manlove 2011). Although levels of marital instability appear to have plateaued, they remain high with 40 – 50% of marriages ending in separation or divorce (Cherlin 2010).

Further, the role of cohabitation in family formation continues to increase. Three-quarters of first marriages are preceded by cohabitation (Manning 2010) and children born to unmarried mothers are increasingly born to cohabiting parents. Currently, 60% of all nonmarital births were to cohabiting couples (Manlove et al. 2010; Mincieli et al. 2007). The share of births to cohabiting women has therefore increased substantially whereas the share to single mothers living without a partner has held relatively steady (Kennedy and Bumpass 2008). By age 25, nearly half of U.S. men and women have spent some time in a cohabiting relationship. Of the 27% of young adults married by their 25th birthday, 61% cohabited first (Payne 2011). Thus, a sole focus on marital dissolution significantly misrepresents family instability (Raley and Wildsmith 2004).

Over two decades ago, in his presidential address to the Population Association of America, U.S. demographer Larry Bumpass posed the question: “What’s Happening to the Family?” (Bumpass 1990). The issues he raised in his address motivate this paper. Most broadly, we are interested in documenting the family backgrounds of young adults today and tracing processes that may continue to fuel family change. We thus examine the family structures and transitions that recent cohorts of young adults experienced while growing up and explore the linkages between these patterns and adult first union formation; our chief focus is on the connection between experiencing parental cohabitation and whether this is linked to young adults’ entry into marriage versus cohabitation. We draw on data from a large, nationally representative U.S. survey of mothers, adolescents and young adults.

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. Given family patterns at that time, these studies tended to focus on parental divorce, single parenthood, and stepfamily arrangements. This work was important in establishing that family structure instability, in general, tends to have negative effects on child well-being (Cherlin 1999; McLanahan and Sandefur

1994; Wu and Thomson 2001). Although some children fare perfectly well, family structure instability tends to decrease child well-being. The range of outcomes assessed in this literature are varied, including verbal development, academic achievement, behavioral problems, financial stability during adulthood, delinquency, and many other depending on the availability of measures in various data sets. Studies on family structure, instability, and child well-being using more recent data have begun to incorporate cohabitation (e.g., Bulanda and Manning 2008; Fomby and Cherlin 2007; Sweeney 2007).

Although it is generally acknowledged that family change has deep historical, cultural, and economic roots, research suggests that observable contemporary causal processes also play a role (Smock 2000). An important idea is that of “feedback loops” (e.g., Bumpass 1990; Rindfuss and VandenHeuvel 1990). The notion is that various trends are mutually reinforcing, with changes in one domain of family life being associated with and perhaps accelerating those in other domains. While studies have documented levels of change in family patterns, fewer have focused intergenerational feedback mechanisms as children witness and experience the family and marital careers of their parents, relatives, others in their milieus, and society at large; for example, high aggregate levels of marital disruption may increase the chances that people cohabit as they learn either through observation or experience that marriage is impermanent. In fact, Seltzer (2004) and others have noted that cohabitation is likely to become more prominent due to cohort replacement (i.e., as new generations of children and youth are socialized in contexts with increasing levels of cohabitation).

According to social learning theory, the initial and most fundamental socialization environment is the family of origin. Social learning operates through both the process of active parental socialization and also by observing parental relationships. While children do not simply act in accordance with parental views and behaviors, children learn how to form and maintain relationships based on their parents’ experiences. One way parents support young adult behavior is through socialization that lends support to specific types of families, such as cohabiting, married, divorced or step-family households.

While direct evidence of this type of socialization is generally lacking, empirical findings are at least consistent with this notion. For example, children raised in two-biological parent families are more likely to marry and stay married than are children from single-mother or divorced families (Amato 1996; Cherlin, Kiernan, and Chase-Lansdale 1995; McLanahan and Sandefur 1994). A series of papers by Thornton and colleagues also provide support for a social learning perspective, and illustrate possible ways social learning and feedback processes could operate at the individual level. Using data that follow a cohort of children and their mothers over time, their key finding is that children whose parents divorced and whose mothers expressed more approval of cohabitation are relatively more likely to cohabit as young adults than those whose mother expressed less approval (Axinn and Thornton 1993; Thornton 1991; Thornton et al. 1992). While these findings are unique in their portrayal of the intergenerational processes of union formation, the data have limitations: Their sample is selective of White married women living in

the Detroit metropolitan area who gave birth to a child in 1961. Their sample is therefore both relatively homogeneous and dated as these “children” are now over 50. Substantial family change has taken place since this group came of age in the 1970s and early 1980s.

A few studies using more recent, national data find parental union history is tied to later cohabitation. Ryan et al. (2009), using the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), examined very early union formation (i.e., by age 20). They find that early entry into cohabitation is linked to several dimensions of parental family structure experiences, with results showing that multiple transitions and living with a single mother have the largest correlation with early cohabitation. These authors are unable to consider parental cohabitation, however, because a full parental union history was unavailable.

Sassler, Cunningham, and Lichter (2009), drawing on the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), also find evidence of intergenerational influences on union formation. They find that parental cohabitation following divorce is tied to cohabitation behavior of the offspring of NSFH respondents. However, they are unable to measure the number of parental family structure transitions, could not analyze cases in which children were born to never-married parents, and did not capture the full array of children’s union experiences as data were restricted to children’s union status at the last wave of the survey only. Given the relatively short duration of cohabiting unions (Kennedy and Bumpass 2008), this is a limitation. Further, the NSFH does not reflect recent union formation patterns; a study drawing on the NSFH to examine similarity between parent-child family trajectories notes that the NSFH parents were born anywhere from 1923 to 1968 (Liefbroer and Elzinga 2012). Other studies focus only on the intergenerational consequences of parental divorce or “intact” marriages rather than the full range of parents’ union experiences (e.g., Amato and Cheadle 2005; Li and Wu 2008; Teachman 2002, 2003; Willoughby 2012; Wolfinger 2011).

RESEARCH GOALS

We aim to extend knowledge on the childhood family experiences of contemporary young adults and the implications of these for their union formation behavior. We have two empirical goals. We first describe the family histories of the young adults in our sample using several different measures. While one potential limitation is our reliance on mothers’ experiences to describe these histories, most individuals spend most of their childhoods living with mothers. Second, we assess the possible connection between childhood family experiences, in particular parental 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 also take account of an array of sociodemographic variables that influence union formation. Just as cohabitation has become increasingly common, marrying directly has become increasingly uncommon, characterizing only about one-third of marriages today occur (Manning

2010). Thus, our analyses will help to illuminate family background experiences that encourage cohabitation but also some that may encourage direct marriage.

This study moves prior studies in at least three ways. First, we measure mothers' living arrangements across the span between birth and age 18; this is critical because about half of children's experiences in parental cohabitation are missed when relying on a static indicator such as cohabitation at age 14 (Manning and Bulanda 2006). Second, we use a diverse sample of young adults. Third, many prior studies have been limited to the experiences of older men and women. This study highlights the experiences of young adults and extends through 2010. The recent rapid spread of cohabitation requires analyzing the most contemporary time frames available.

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. These longitudinal data allow us to capture both mother's reports of children's living arrangements and young adult reports of their own union formation behavior. The NLSY79 ascertains information on fertility and union experiences, and permits the construction of detailed living arrangement and childbearing histories. The young adult questionnaire also includes a wealth of information relating to education, employment, school enrollment, fertility, and union formation. To date, no other data set in the United States includes such rich data on mother, adolescent, and adult child experiences.

Born between 1957 and 1965, main youth respondents in the NLSY79 represent the later Baby Boom and very early Generation Y birth cohorts and entered young adulthood in the late 1970s and early 1980s when divorce rates were still increasing and cohabitation was on the rise. These NLSY79 respondents have been interviewed every year from 1979 through 1994 and biennially thereafter. In 1986, biennial interviewing began with all children born to the NLSY79 women, and starting in 1994 all children ages 15 and older were interviewed every other year as "Young Adults." We focus on these young adults and link their data to information about their mothers, the female NLSY respondents.

Our key set of independent variables focus on the child's exposure to particular family types from birth to age 18, as well as the number of transitions, and draw from mother reports of union experiences. At each survey, respondents reported whether they were currently in a residential relationship, provided information on relationship type (marriage, cohabitation, single), up to three changes in relationship status that occurred since the prior survey (divorce, move out, marriage, move in), and start and end dates of each relationship (coded as century months). Since 1990, the NLSY79 has included a series of additional cohabitation questions about whether the participant cohabited before marriage (including a retrospective report of cohabitation prior to their current marriage). In later survey years, respondents are asked if the

cohabiting relationship was continuous, if a cohabiting partner was present at the time of the survey, whether there was a gap of singlehood in the past year in which cohabitation could occur, the month cohabitation began and ended, and the number of cohabitations occurring during the past year.

We drew on the NLSY79 Fertility File and Household Roster because it provided two constructed variables that allow us to identify individual men who live in the household: a unique partner ID number for every residential partner, and the identification of early cohabiting nonmarital partnerships where men were identified as living in the household, but for which no cohabitation data was collected prior to 1990. Because each of the mother's partners was given a unique ID number that was maintained for every year the man was present in the household, it is possible to identify birth fathers and calculate the total amount of time children lived with biological and step fathers. This strategy allows us to quantify several characteristics surrounding each birth, including the mother's relationship to the father (e.g. marital, cohabiting, or separated), the residential status of the father (resident or nonresident) and the marital status of the birth (marital or nonmarital). Importantly, it also made it possible to link children to specific residential relationships, with corollary information on the biological mother's and father's relationship start date, end date, duration, and type (more detail provided below).

Our analytic sample consists of firstborn children, ages 18 and over in 2010, with complete maternal union histories from birth to age 18, as well as self-reported histories of their own relationship formations and dissolutions from age 16 onwards.¹ We select firstborn children for two reasons. First, this gives us a reasonable spread of "mother's ages" when these young adults were born (11-45 with a mean of 22.6). Second, firstborn children are not influenced by the beliefs, living arrangements, and union formation choices of older siblings.

Our final sample is the result of several steps. While 6,283 women were part of the original cross-sectional and supplemental samples of the 1979 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, we excluded 1,353 women who had not had children, and 892 respondents who were part of the military and economically disadvantaged oversample; these oversamples were dropped in the 1980s and 1990s. Another 152 respondents had died or were permanently excluded from interviews by the time of the final survey. In addition, we excluded 520 women who participated in too few surveys to adequately assess relationship formation and disruption over time. The criteria for exclusion on this basis were either missing five or more surveys (406) or three consecutive surveys (114).²

¹ Our decision to include respondents' marriages and cohabitations from age 16+ stemmed from wanting to ensure inclusion of early cohabitations and marriages. The upshot is a slight disconnect in that family histories measure events up to age 18. Thus, we have estimated models starting exposure to first union formation at age 18 as well as measuring family histories only up to age 16. Results are substantively similar to those we present here.

² We plan to examine the repercussions of this exclusion for our results. It may well be that these women were less advantaged and thus our estimates of instability may be underestimates given the correlation between economic well-being and relationship stability.

These steps left us 3,366 eligible mothers (and their firstborn children). Further exclusions were made. We excluded 75 children who died and 384 who were not yet age 16 by 2008, resulting in 2,907 young adults. (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.) Seven youth who did not respond to questions after turning 16 were also excluded, resulting in 2,900 respondents. Because family histories are anchored around children's experiences with mothers, 209 young adults who spent less than 75% of their childhood living with their mother were excluded as were a very small number who did not live with a married, single, or cohabiting mother at birth ($n=27$).³ We excluded respondents who did not respond to questions about union formation (61), reported invalid data (7) or cohabited or married before age 16 (44). Thus, our final sample consists of 2,552 men and women.

Measures: Family experiences growing up

We use four main measures to describe young adults' family experiences growing up. One taps whether the young adult respondent *ever* experienced a certain family form between birth and age 18; these forms include married two biological parents, cohabiting two biological parents, married stepfamily, cohabiting stepfamily, and single-mother family. The second captures *family structure instability*. We count the number of family transitions (e.g., maternal union dissolutions, union formation) experienced from birth to age 18. Note that we do not count as a transition the marriage of cohabiting biological parents; 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). To the extent that some children do experience this transition as a type of instability, our results may be considered underestimates.

Our third measure focuses on those whose mothers cohabited, measuring the amount of *exposure* to living with biological cohabiting fathers and cohabiting (nonmarital) stepfathers. We operationalize this concept with a three-category variable indicated whether the young adult spent less than 25%, 25-75%, or more than 75% of his or time life from birth to age 18 living with that father.⁴ Based on the distribution of responses, we recoded these variables into a dichotomous indicator, less than 25% or 25% or greater, for our multivariate analyses. Finally, in one analysis discussed below we draw on a fourth measure: Whether the child lived with two married biological parents from birth to age 18.

³ Similarly, we are interested in the young adults who spent less than 75% of their childhoods living with their mothers and will explore how this exclusion may affect our results and interpretations.

⁴ In preliminary analyses we also explored other measures such as family structure at birth, and found that measure did not provide additional information although we are exploring measures of types of family structure sequences or trajectories (see Raley and Wildsmith 2004).

Measures: Multivariate analyses of union formation

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 current cohabitations and marriages. Union status and timing in the NLSY is ascertained in several ways. In every wave marital/cohabitation status is assessed as: "What is your current marital status? Are you living with a partner but not married (coded as cohabiting), married, separated, divorced, widowed, or never married?" Respondents are also asked directly about cohabitation with the question "Nowadays, many unmarried couples live together; sometimes they eventually marry and sometimes they don't. Have you ever lived with someone of the opposite sex to whom you were not married?" In both situations, follow-up questions include information on the type of relationship formed or dissolved and the month and year in which they began and ended.

Our multivariate analyses also include several variables relevant 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), urban residence, and religiosity as measured by religious attendance. In addition, we control for 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. See Appendix Table A for descriptive statistics for these variables.

Methods

We first provide simple descriptive results illustrating the family experiences of respondents in the sample. Life tables are constructed to illustrate timing to first union formation according to family experiences, with a specific emphasis on whether the child had ever experiencing parental cohabitation.

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. We have 188,432 person months of exposure. Our 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).

For each key family measure comparison, we estimate two models: zero-order model and a model with all of the static and time-varying covariates included. Because influences of family histories may differ for daughters and sons, in preliminary analyses we also estimated models for men and women separately. Here we show pooled results because we found little or no variation in patterns.

RESULTS: CHILDHOOD FAMILY EXPERIENCES

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics for our family background variables. Perusal of the table shows considerable family diversity and flux growing up for our respondents. Beginning with Panel A, nearly 78% 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 includes cases where parents married after childbirth. At the same time, large fractions of our respondents experienced other family forms. Approximately 54% lived at some point in a single-mother household and 32% in a married stepfamily. While only a small proportion ever experienced living with their biological cohabiting parents (6.5%), 27% experienced a cohabiting stepfamily. As the first panel shows, just 43.7% spent their entire childhood with married biological parents.

Table 1 also indicates that, overall, slightly more than half of our sample experienced some family structure instability (see also Figure 1a), with 15% experiencing one transition and nearly 36% experienced two or more instances of instability. The mean (not in table) is 1.24 transitions overall. Raley and Wildsmith (2004) estimate that children in the early 1990s could expect to undergo slightly less than 1 (.92) transition by age 12. Our findings suggest somewhat higher levels of instability, in part due to our data extending to age 18. Our data are also more recent and we use different methodologies.

Panels B and C of Table 1 turn to two groups of particular interest given the growth in cohabitation and the growth in children being born to cohabiting couples. These are young adults who experienced maternal cohabitation with either biological fathers or quasi-stepfathers. 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 of Table 1 focuses on children whose mother cohabited with their biological fathers. While most of these children were born to cohabiting couples, a minority are cases in which the parents cohabited at some point after childbirth. Only roughly one-quarter experienced no further transitions while 37% experienced one or two, and 36.5% experienced three or more family transitions (see Figure 1b). Panel C shows results for those who ever lived with a mother's cohabiting partner (i.e., a quasi-stepfather). Levels of instability for these children are higher: 40 percent experience two such transitions and over 50 percent experience at least three transitions from birth to age 18 (see also Figure 1c).

Panels B and C also show the proportion of time growing up spent with cohabiting biological or cohabiting stepfathers. For those whose biological parents cohabited, the vast majority (71%) spent less than 25% of their childhoods with their fathers, and only a very small minority of children (7.4%) spent more than 75% of their childhoods living with their biological fathers. As Panel C shows, the situation is not all that different for children who lived with their mother's cohabiting boyfriend; about three-quarters spent less than 25% of their childhoods with a cohabiting stepfather and only 2.5% spent more than 75% of their childhoods with a cohabiting stepfather.

Table 1. Distribution of Family Experience Variables**A. Total Sample**

Family experiences from birth-18	
<i>Ever married two bio</i>	77.7%
<i>Ever cohabit two bio</i>	6.5%
<i>Ever married step</i>	31.5%
<i>Ever cohabit step</i>	27.0%
<i>Ever single mother</i>	54.5%
Number of transitions from birth-18	
0	49.3%
1	14.9%
2	17.6%
3+	18.2%
Grew up with married biological parents birth-18	43.7%
Unweighted sample size (<i>N</i>)	2,552

B. Those ever experiencing cohabiting bio dad

% of childhood spent with cohabiting bio dad	
<25%	70.7%
25-75%	21.9%
>75%	7.4%
Number of transitions from birth-18	
0	26.4%
1	20.4%
2	16.7%
3+	36.5%
Unweighted sample size (<i>N</i>)	191

C. Those ever living with mother's cohabiting partner

% childhood with cohabiting step dad	
<25%	74.8%
25-75%	22.7%
>75%	2.5%
Number of transitions from birth-18	
0	0.0%
1	8.5%
2	39.4%
3+	52.1%
Unweighted sample size (<i>N</i>)	756

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

Weighted percentages and unweighted *N*s.

Figure 1a. Percent experiencing 0, 1, 2, or 3+ transitions from birth to age 18.

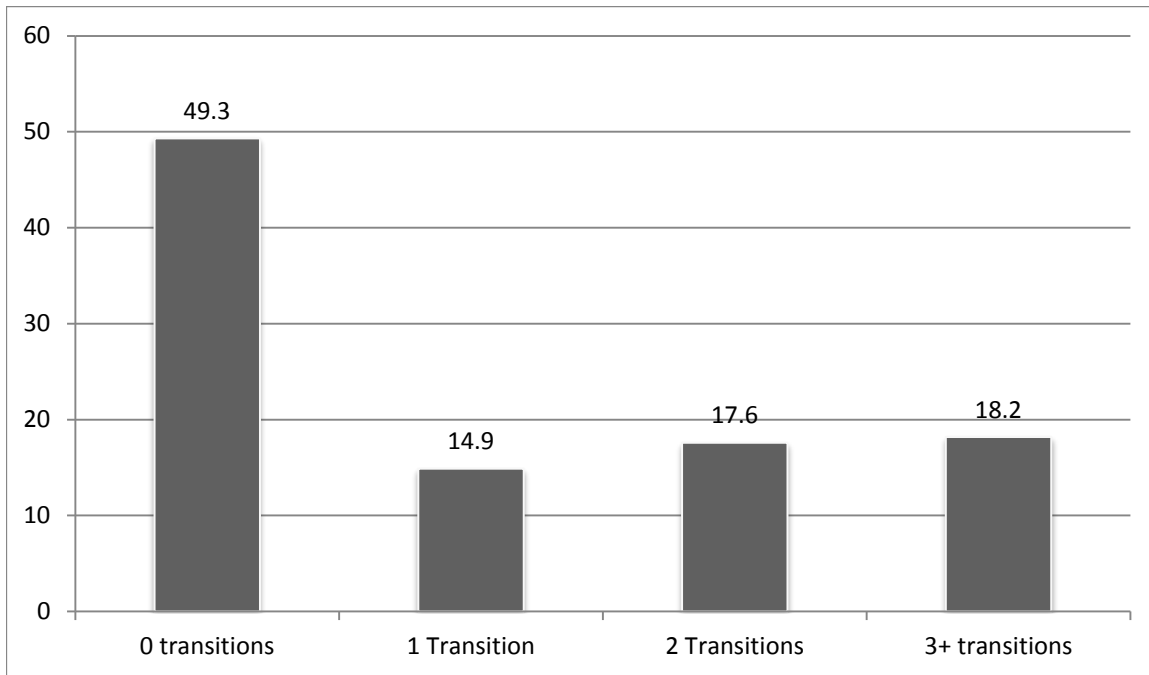


Figure 1b. Percent experiencing 0, 1, 2, or 3+ transition for those born to cohabiting parents.

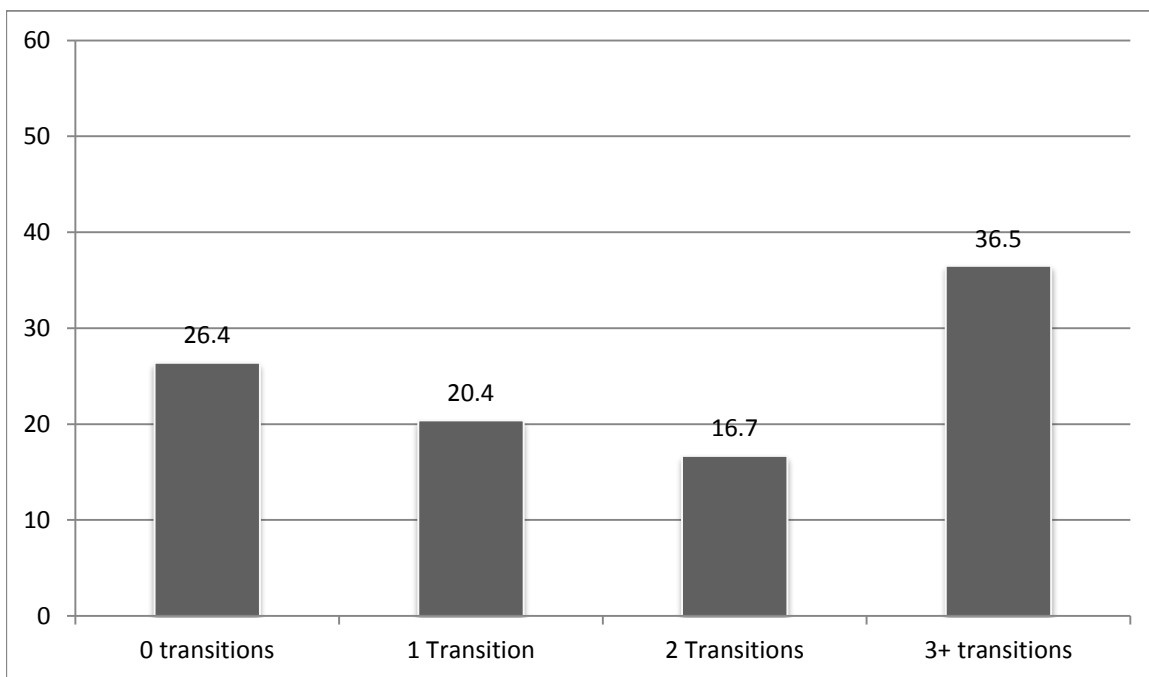
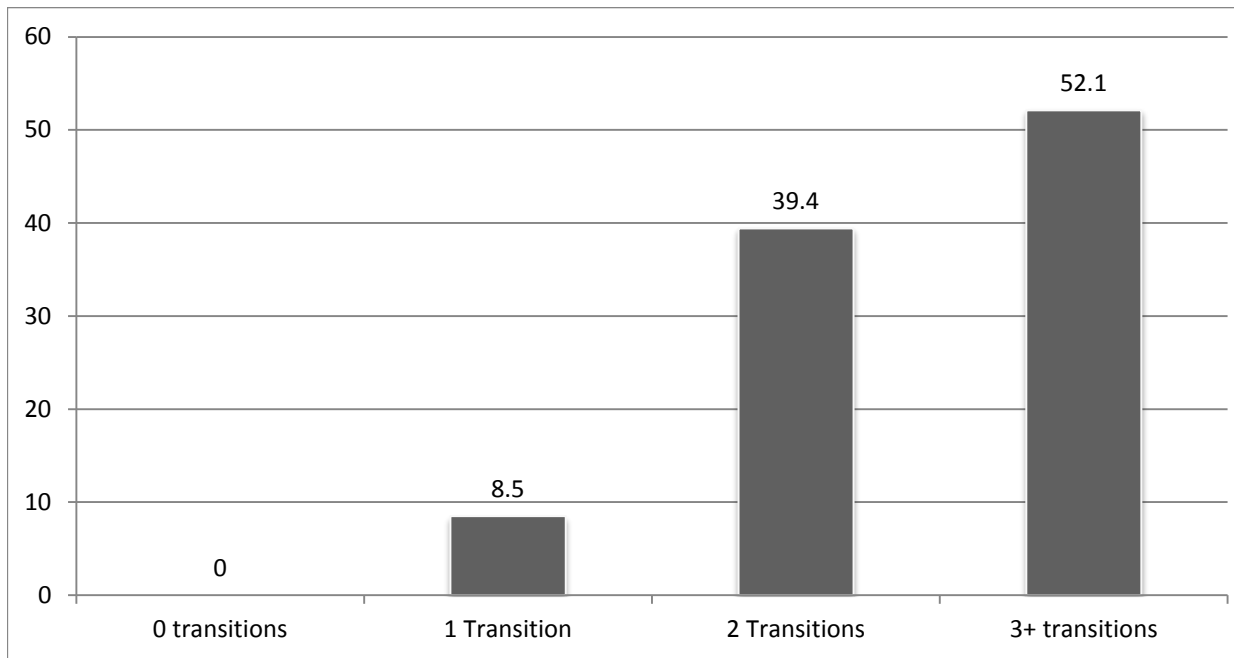


Figure 1c. Percent experiencing 0, 1, 2, or 3+ transitions for those with mothers ever living with a (step) cohabiting partner.



RESULTS: FIRST UNION FORMATION

Altogether, approximately 50% of our sample had entered a cohabiting union, with the mean age at the start being 20.6, and 33% had entered a marriage at some during the observed time span. The mean age at marriage is approximately 23 years old (not in table). These numbers are reasonably consistent with other research on family formation in early adulthood; Payne (2011) relies on the NLSY97 (youths ages 12-16 in 1996) and reports that 47% of young adult have cohabited by age 25 and that 27% had married by age 25.

Figures 2a and 2b show life table estimates of the cumulative proportion of a first union being a cohabitation (2a) or a marriage (2b) by whether or not the respondent experienced parental cohabitation. As expected, the life tables indicate that entering a first cohabitation is quite common, and marrying directly less so, during young adulthood. The key point is that both figures show that whether or not parental cohabitation was experienced plays a role; estimated proportions marrying for those experiencing no parental cohabitation are higher than for those who did. Similarly, experiencing parental cohabitation is associated with higher cumulative proportions entering cohabitation as a first union.

Figure 2a. Cumulative proportions entering a first union that is a cohabitation by mothers' cohabitation experience.

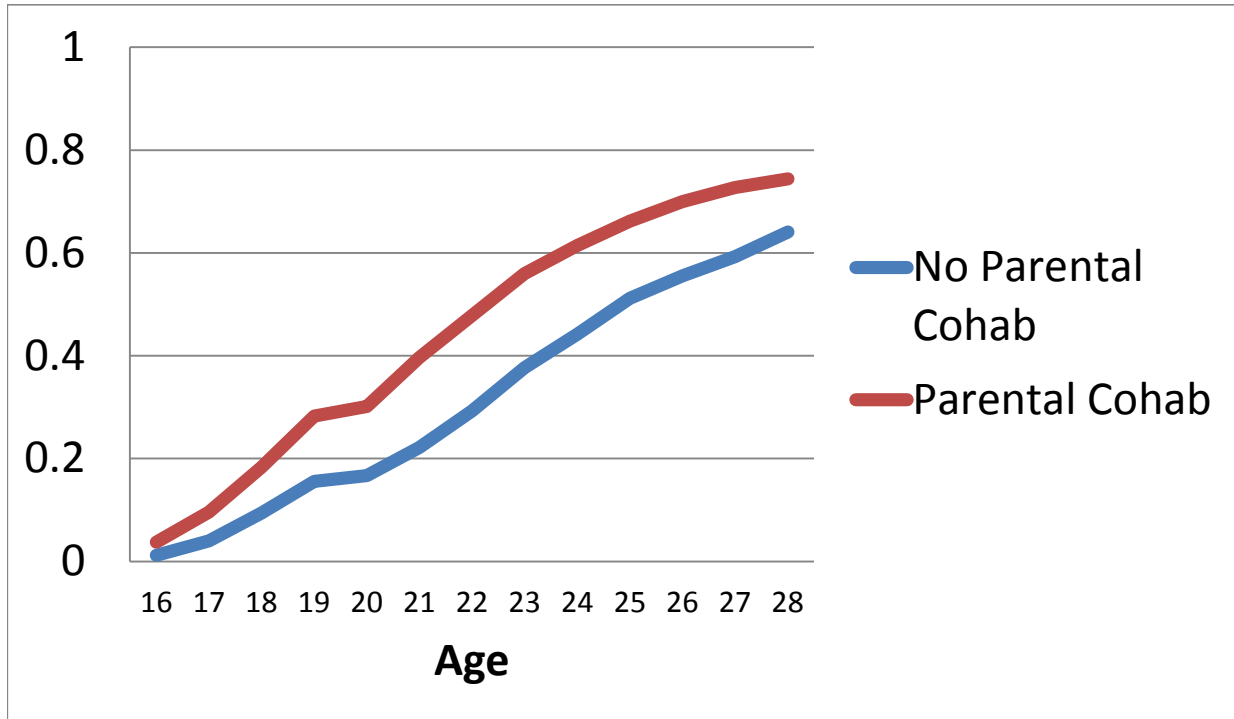


Figure 2b. Cumulative proportions marrying directly by mothers' cohabitation experience.

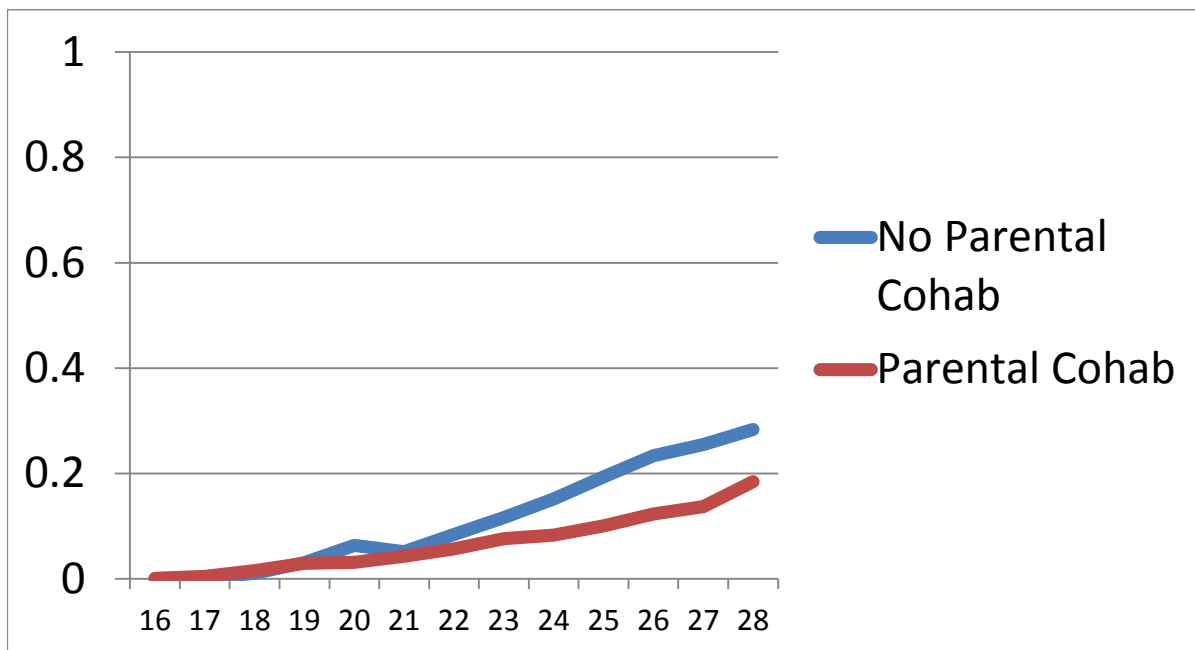


Table 2 shows results from multinomial logistic event history models predicting the timing and likelihood of entrance into cohabitation or marriage versus staying single. Panel A focuses on our “ever” indicators. Appendix Table A shows descriptive statistics for the sociodemographic control variables used in our multivariate models of first union formation; to simplify the presentation of findings, we do not present them here. For the same reason, we do not show the odds ratios of the likelihood of marriage versus cohabitation. However, we denote significant differences in the odds of cohabiting versus marrying by underlining the odds ratios.

Table 2. Discrete-time multinomial logit models predicting union behavior using "ever" family experiences

	Zero-order model		Full model	
	Cohab	Marry	Cohab	Marry
<i>Ever married two bio</i>	<u>0.670</u> ***	<u>2.072</u> ***	<u>1.315</u> ***	<u>3.081</u> ***
<i>Ever cohabit two bio</i>	<u>1.154</u> ***	<u>0.273</u> ***	<u>1.400</u> ***	<u>0.378</u> ***
<i>Ever married step</i>	<u>1.168</u> ***	<u>1.056</u> **	0.989	<u>0.698</u> ***
<i>Ever cohabit step</i>	<u>1.860</u> ***	<u>0.902</u> ***	<u>1.230</u> ***	<u>0.670</u> ***
<i>Ever single mother</i>	<u>1.969</u> ***	<u>0.761</u> ***	<u>1.125</u> ***	<u>0.580</u> ***
Unweighted sample size (<i>N</i>)		188,432		188,432

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 Appendix Table A.

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

Our results conform to a general pattern. Without controlling for any other covariates, there are clear patterns of association between having ever experienced a particular family form and first union entry. Having lived with two biological married parents lowers the odds of entering a cohabiting union and increases the odds of marrying directly. In the second set of columns, which controls for our other covariates, the lowered odds of cohabitation disappear but the odds of direct marriage (versus staying single) are of much greater magnitude than the chances of cohabitation (versus staying single). Another way to state this is that, even in the full model, having ever experienced living with married biological parents triples the odds of marrying directly. Remarriages do not have the same result: The odds ratios for the full model indicate that living in a stepfamily lowers the odds of marrying directly and has no effect on cohabitation versus staying single.

Results from the full models for either type of parental cohabitation and ever living with a single parent tell a consistent story. Having experienced any of these significantly raises the odds of entering cohabitation as a first coresidential union, simultaneously lowering the odds of marrying directly. To illustrate, having experienced living with cohabiting biological parents lowers the odds of marrying directly by about 62% and raises the odds of cohabitation by about 40%, relative to being single. Living in a cohabiting stepfamily is associated with a 33% reduction in the odds of marrying directly, and raises

the odds that a first union is a cohabiting one by about 23%. (We discuss possible differences between experiencing the two types of cohabiting families below.) Recall that the underscores in the table also indicate that the effects on marriage and cohabitation are distinct from one another at statistically significant levels.

In analyses not shown, we are able to replicate these findings with various model specifications including various interactions (e.g., mother’s education) and, notably, incorporation our measure of cumulative instability (e.g., the number of transitions experienced over the course of childhood and youth). The latter is particularly important because some scholars argue that what really matters for children is not necessarily the family form experienced but the amount of instability. If this is the case, our measure of instability should account for the effects of ever living in a cohabiting family. At least in the case of young adult union formation, net of instability and all covariates in Appendix Table A, experiencing any time in a cohabiting family as a child or adolescent lowers the likelihood of direct marriage and increases the chances of cohabitation.

Thus, what consistently emerges is a distinction at conventional levels of statistical significance between experiencing parental marriage versus experiencing parental cohabitation, either with two biological parents or in a quasi-stepfamily. For example, consider a model examining one family measure: Those who grew up with both biological parents from age 0 to age 18. The omitted category is any other type of experience. These results are shown in Panel A of Table 3. Even in the full model that takes account of education, religious attendance and the like, living in this family form raises the odds of direct marriage by about 87% and depresses the odds of cohabitation as a first union by about 16%.

Table 3. Discrete-time multinomial logit models predicting union behavior

	Zero-order model		Full model	
	Cohab	Marry	Cohab	Marry
Panel A				
<i>Stable bio parent marriage, birth to 18</i> (0=all other family backgrounds, n=188,432)	<u>0.489</u> ***	<u>1.400</u> ***	<u>0.844</u> ***	<u>1.868</u> ***
Panel B				
<i>Cohab bio</i> (0=Cohab step; N=63,398)	<u>0.710</u> ***	<u>0.281</u> ***	<u>1.104</u> ***	<u>0.445</u> ***
<i>Cohab bio</i> (0=Married bio; N=127,197)	<u>1.362</u> ***	<u>0.235</u> **	<u>1.254</u> ***	<u>0.281</u> ***

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 Appendix Table A.

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

Panel B of Table 3 shows two other selected contrasts: The contrasts are between two types of cohabitation (biological and step) and cohabiting biological parents versus married biological parents. Focusing on the first, estimates indicate a distinction between the two with ramifications for young adult union formation behavior. The full model indicates that having lived in a cohabiting biological family somewhat raises the odds of marrying (versus staying single) by a modest amount (10%) but decreases the odds of marrying directly by a much larger amount (55%) in comparison to a step cohabiting family. Thus, cohabiting with two biological parents appears to be more strongly associated with lower odds of marriage than cohabiting with a stepparent. Moreover, the results for the second contrast show that not all two biological parent experiences are the same. Living with cohabiting two biological parents is associated with greater odds of cohabitation and lower odds of direct marriage than for married two biological parent families.

SUMMARY

Parents' union experiences during childhood represent an important source of potential heterogeneity impacting young adult's union formation behavior. The goal of this paper 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 have experienced nontraditional families and considerable family flux. Only 43% experience what may be termed the most "traditional" family structure and no instability: Growing up with two biological married parents from birth to age 18. Nearly 55% of our sample spent at least some time in a single mother family and over half experienced at least one family structure transition during childhood, with 36% experiencing two or more. Approximately one-third had experienced parental cohabitation, with the vast majority these young adults having lived with a cohabiting step-parent.

Further, those who experienced parental cohabitation have substantially higher levels of instability than that reported for the full sample: 37% and 52% of young adults who lived in a cohabiting biological family or stepfamily, respectively, experienced at least three instances of instability. These results are particularly important because research suggests instability carries important ramifications for well-being (e.g., Fomby and Cherlin 2007). Also notable is that even for children who experienced a biological cohabiting family, the father's presence in the same household tends to be short-lived. Only 7% lived with their fathers at least 75% of their childhood. This is consistent with studies that show that children born to cohabiting families are at much higher risk of instability than children born to married couples (e.g., Manning et al. 2004).

This paper is also suggestive that, at least in part, parental cohabitation does have implications for young adult union choice: Those who experienced it are, quite simply, less likely to marry directly and

more likely to enter cohabitation as a first union. Our results are robust to a number of specifications and to inclusion of a range of variables including mother's education, the respondent's activity status, and religiosity. They are also robust when we include an indicator for the number of family transitions experienced as a child; the "cohabitation effect" remains.

Future steps include examining measures that identify the age of the child when various transitions occurred. This will assess whether and how a child's developmental stage at instances of instability may shape future union formation choices.

While we characterize this paper as descriptive, and thus limited in any claim to causality, our results are consistent with the idea that the increase in cohabitation over time is, in part, fueled and reinforced by childhood family experience. At least to some extent, cohabitation and marriage are "transmitted" inter-generationally. This is consistent with a social learning perspective. In addition to observing the world and what peers are saying and doing, observing parents' behavior and hearing what they have to say has long-run implications for the family trajectories of children.

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Appendix Table A. Descriptive statistics for control variables

	Prop./Mean(SD)
Race/ethnicity of respondent	
<i>Black</i>	15.1%
<i>Hispanic</i>	7.1%
<i>White</i>	77.8%
Gender	
<i>Female</i>	47.2%
<i>Male</i>	52.8%
Mother's age at birth	22.6(4.6)
Mothers' education at birth	
<i>Less than high school</i>	19.1%
<i>High school graduate</i>	47.4%
<i>Some college</i>	18.6%
<i>College graduate</i>	14.8%
Respondent education (TV)	
<i>Less than high school</i>	30.6%
<i>High school</i>	30.1%
<i>More than high school</i>	39.2%
Respondent religious attendance (TV)	2.8(1.6)
Respondent has child (TV)	10.5%
Urban residence (TV)	69.7%
Activity status (TV)	
<i>None</i>	2.8%
<i>Employed, not in school</i>	43.7%
<i>In school (whethr or not employed)</i>	53.5%
Unweighted sample size (<i>N</i>)	2552

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

Note: All means and proportions are weighted.

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



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