The adolescent family environment and cohabitation across the transition to adulthood

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Abstract

This study draws upon a sample of men and women from Waves I and IV of Add Health to examine the linkages between the adolescent family environment and cohabitation behavior across the transition to adulthood. Using event history modeling the current paper considers the association between a variety of family factors and both the timing of first cohabiting unions and their outcomes (marriage, break up, still cohabiting). This paper also considers whether the impact of predictors for cohabitation timing and outcomes varies depending on the age of individuals. Results indicate that exposure during adolescence to family instability, parental cohabitation, lower parental SES, and low family belonging were associated with an elevated likelihood of entering into cohabiting unions, but primarily during adolescence and early adulthood. Family factors, including family belonging and parental relationship history, were also associated with the outcomes of first cohabitations.

1. Introduction

Non-marital cohabitation has become an increasingly common part of the American life course. Rates of cohabitation have increased substantially over the past few decades, with the majority of adults now having spent at least some time in a cohabiting union (Goodwin et al., 2010; Manning et al., 2014). Cohabitation has also surpassed marriage as the most common context of first coresidential romantic unions (Kennedy and Bumpass, 2008). The age when individuals enter into a first coresidential union, however, appears to shape outcomes in other domains, with early entrance into cohabiting unions associated with earlier childbearing (Manning and Cohen, 2015) and higher rates of serial cohabitation (Cohen and Manning, 2010). Given the increasing salience of cohabiting unions for the individual life course as well as broader demographic trends in the American family, it is important to advance our understanding of what contributes to when people first cohabit and the stability of these unions.

Various characteristics of the family environment during adolescence may shape offspring’s behavior within romantic partnerships. Looking at how more distal family experiences are associated with individuals’ first coresidential romantic unions will deepen our understanding of the reach of earlier family experiences for later behavior. The current study examines several family characteristics during adolescence and their association with the timing of entrance into and stability of first cohabiting unions. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first study that considers whether the impact of family factors on cohabitation formation and stability is proportional over time. That is, do experiences in the family of origin influence the
likelihood of entering into a cohabiting union in the same way during adolescence and through young adulthood? Are these factors associated with the stability of cohabiting unions and the likelihood of making transitions in similar ways regardless of the age when that union was formed? Additionally, the current study examines the cohabiting experiences of both men and women, while much prior research has focused solely on the experiences of young women. Using nationally representative data from waves I and IV of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health, the current study employs a competing-risk discrete time event history framework to examine the timing and stability of first cohabiting unions for men and women.

1.1. Background

There are several push and pull factors that might influence whether and when individuals begin cohabiting with a partner for the first time, as well as the trajectory the relationship takes, whether and when cohabiting partners break up or transition to marriage. While more contemporaneous factors may shape these relationship decisions, such as socioeconomic status and childbearing (e.g. Brien et al., 1999; Kennedy and Bumpass, 2008), experiences within the family of origin may also influence youth's behavior when forming their first coresidential romantic relationships as well as the stability of these unions.

Adolescence is an important time to examine the roots of later romantic relationship behavior. Experiences in the family environment during this period may continue to influence offspring's later behavior within romantic relationships, through their influence on offspring's social and economic circumstances and on their development of individual characteristics and relationship skills (Bryant and Conger, 2002). Parental socioeconomic resources have been linked with offspring union behavior, with individuals from lower SES backgrounds having a higher likelihood of cohabiting (Schoen et al., 2009), and more likely to start cohabiting or marry at earlier ages (Axinn and Thornton, 1992; Wilk, 2009). Research largely finds that individuals from non-intact family backgrounds have an increased likelihood of cohabiting, and do so at earlier ages (Amato and Kane, 2011; Ryan et al., 2009; Sasser et al., 2009). Research also finds that individuals who have experienced a parental divorce have more negative views about marriage (Rigio and Weiser, 2008). While some research suggests that parental divorce is more influential on the probability of offspring cohabitation than marriage (Thornton, 1991), other research finds that parental divorce increases the risk of either partnership (Kiernan and Hobcraft, 1997). Youth who were exposed to family instability and more parental relationship transitions growing up are more likely to have their transition to adulthood characterized by experiences of cohabitation and parenthood (Fomby and Bosick, 2013). Research also suggests that individuals who have a parent who has lived in a cohabiting union are more likely to cohabit themselves (Sasser et al., 2009; Smock et al., 2013). There is some suggestion that people who cohabit at relatively young ages (20) compared to those who date in non-residential relationships come from more conflictual and less supportive family environments (Conger et al., 2000; Ryan et al., 2009). Lacking support in the family environment, therefore, may increase the likelihood that youth enter into coresidential unions at earlier, and potentially less normative, ages. This body of research highlights that several dimensions of the family environment, (family structure, socioeconomic status, exposure to instability and parental cohabitation, and family belonging) are associated with the union formation behavior of offspring.

We know less about the role of prior family experiences for cohabitation outcomes. Research finds that cohabiting women who grew up in a two-biological parent family structure throughout childhood are more likely to make the transition to marriage (Bramlett and Mosher, 2002) while women who grew up in a single-parent family are more likely to separate (Manning, 2004). Individuals who were exposed to more family transitions growing up also reported less relationship satisfaction in their cohabiting unions (Sasser et al., 2009), which suggests that exposure to family instability may contribute to instability in cohabiting relationships. Close and involved relationships with parents during adolescence are associated with greater social competence in adolescence and young adulthood (Smetana et al., 2006) and more supportive and less hostile relationships with romantic partners (Collins et al., 2009; Conger et al., 2000). Having a greater sense of cohesion or belonging to the family during adolescence has also been linked with greater intimacy in young adults' relationships (Feldman et al., 1998). And adolescents whose relations with their parents are characterized by more negative interactions tend to have worse conflict management skills in their later romantic unions (Linder and Collins, 2005). Therefore, having a strong parent-child bond growing up and feeling a sense of belonging to one's family may positively shape the development of relationship skills in ways that promote commitment and stability in romantic relationships, reducing the likelihood of union dissolution. This body of literature suggests that several dimensions of the earlier family environment (family structure, belonging, socioeconomic status, exposure to instability and parental cohabitation) may also influence the stability of offspring’s cohabiting relationships, whether and when they make the transition into marriage or break up.

1.2. Conceptual framework

Together this research suggests that the family environment acts as a launching pad for youth that shapes their behavior in romantic partnerships, both in forming unions and the stability of these unions thereafter. However, it is not clear whether the influence of these family factors remains consistent over time, across adolescence and young adulthood; the strength of these influences may wane as youth transition into adulthood. In the progression across the life course, the salience of various experiences and contexts for development and behaviors may shift (Elder and Shanahan, 2006). While some experiences may guide behavior across the life course in a continuous and cumulative manner, the influences of other experiences are more

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