

The Intergenerational Transmission of Cohabitation and Marriage in the U.S.:  
The Role of Parental Union Histories

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## **I. 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. Between 1997 and 2001, slightly over half of all nonmarital births were to cohabiting couples (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 tracing processes that may continue to fuel family change. Specifically, we explore the intergenerational transmission of cohabitation and marriage, focusing on parents and their adolescent and young adult children. Drawing on social learning theory and data from a large, nationally representative U.S. survey of parents, adolescents and young adults, this paper extends knowledge about the potential role of parents’ cohabitation and marital histories on children’s own union formation behavior.

## **II. Background**

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. As one 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. While many studies have documented levels of change in patterns of family formation, few have considered possible mechanisms underlying these shifts.

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 (Axinn and Thornton 1993; Thornton 1991; Thornton et al. 1992). 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 who 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 represents a significant limitation. Further, the NSFH reflects cohabitation experiences that occurred 25 years ago and does not reflect current 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).

### **III. Research Goals**

Our central goal is to examine whether and how parental union experiences - in particular mothers’ cohabitation experiences - are linked to first union formation (i.e., marriage or cohabitation) among a contemporary cohort of young adults in the United States. Parents’ union experiences during childhood represent an important source of potential heterogeneity impacting young adult’s union formation behavior.

We move beyond prior studies in at least three ways. First, we measure parental living arrangements across childhood; 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.

We have two empirical goals. We first describe the detailed family histories of the young adults in our sample. Second, we address the role of childhood family experiences in shaping entrance into cohabitation versus marrying directly.

### **IV. Data, Measures, and Methods**

*Data and Sample.* We draw on 23 waves (1979-2008) of nationally representative data from the 1979 National Longitudinal Study of Youth (NLSY79) main youth and 2 waves (2008 and 2010) of the young adult (YA) surveys. Born between 1957 and 1965, main youth respondents 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. The NLSY79 ascertains information on fertility and union experiences, and permits the construction of detailed living arrangement and childbearing histories.

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, female NLSY respondents, on their own relationship histories. The young adult questionnaire also includes a wealth of information relating to education, training, employment, school enrollment, health, dating, fertility parent-child conflict, sexual activity, and participation in delinquency. To date, no other data set in the United States includes such rich data on mother, adolescent, and adult child experiences.

Our key set of independent variables focus on the child’s exposure to particular family types from birth to age 18 and draw from mother reports of union experiences. We used the original 6,282 women from the cross-sectional and supplemental samples of the 1979 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, with military and economically disadvantaged respondents excluded because these oversamples were dropped in the 1990s. We also excluded respondents who had missed at least three consecutive or five total waves of data collection as this degree of missing data would have made it difficult to reliably measure relationships over time.

Creating family change histories is complex and time-consuming but we believe that the quality of the data produced is high. 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 also 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.

Our analytic sample consists of young adults ages 18 or older in 2008, and includes firstborn children of NLSY, those who lived with their mothers 75% of more during childhood, gave at least one valid response to questions on union formation as of 2010, and had mothers who were either single, married to the child’s biological father, or cohabiting with the child’s biological father at birth. We select first born children for two reasons. First, this gives us a good spread of “mother’s ages” when these young adults were born (11-45 with a mean of 23.2). Second, first born children are not influenced by the living arrangements and union choices of older siblings. The final sample size is 2416.

*Measures.* Our outcome variables, entrance into first cohabitation or direct marriage, are based on responses to questions about the start of cohabitations and/or marriages. At the time of this writing, our plan is to include the following independent family and sociodemographic measures. First, we create a set of variables for family structure at birth (married two biological parents, cohabiting two biological

parents, single mother). We also use a set of “ever” measures that tap whether the young adult respondent ever experienced a certain family form between birth and age 18; these categories include ever married two biological parents, ever cohabiting two biological parents, ever married stepfamily, ever cohabiting stepfamily, and ever single-mother family. In addition, to capture family structure instability we count the number of family transitions (e.g., parental 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 unlikely to experience that as instability (see Manning, Smock, and Majumdar 2004). We also create more detailed indicators to provide additional depth. As an example, for respondents ever experiencing a cohabiting biological family or cohabiting stepfamily, we calculate duration of exposure from birth to age 18 in that family type and the number of transitions experienced.

Our analyses also include several variables used in prior work on union formation. Time varying covariates include young adult’s activity status (e.g., lagged measures of employment, school enrollment) and educational attainment. Other variables include mother’s education (as a rough proxy for social class), mother’s employment when child was 15, child’s religiosity at age 15, and poverty status at childbirth. Also included are child’s race/ethnicity (non-Hispanic White, non-Hispanic Black, Hispanic), mother’s religiosity at childbirth, and number of siblings, child’s age, and child’s sex).

*Methods.* We first provide rich descriptive information on young adults’ family experiences growing up. Preliminary analyses suggest, for example, that a large fraction of children experienced parental cohabitation either by being born to cohabiting parents or via a cohabiting “step-family” (n=860 out of 2416). Approximately 840 experienced parental divorce.

Our multivariate models are discrete-time event history models to examine the determinants into cohabitation or marriage as first union. Our analyses are based on person-months, with exposure to risk of entering a first cohabitation or marriage beginning at age 16. 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). Preliminary analyses show we have a sufficient number of events with nearly 800 young adults having cohabited as first union, and 215 marrying directly.

We plan to estimate a series of models, the first focusing on family structure at birth. We present four models: zero-order model, family structure at birth and the number of family transitions, family structure at birth along with the number of family transitions and sociodemographic control variables, and a final model that includes interactions of family structure at birth and number of transitions. We plan to add interactions because family transitions may be differentially associated with first union formation based on family structure at birth (Bulanda and Manning 2008; Spruijt and Goede 1997).

Because influences of family histories may differ for daughters and sons, we also estimate models for young men and young women separately when possible and meaningful. That is, we estimate all models separately by gender when sample size permits but show results here pooled by gender when there is little or no variation in patterns.

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