

Family Instability and Adolescents' Dating and Sexual Initiation

Katherine Stamps Mitchell
Louisiana State University
kstamps@lsu.edu

Cassandra Dorius
University of Michigan
cdorius@umich.edu

Daphne Hernandez
Pennsylvania State University
dch19@psu.edu

WORKING DRAFT

This research was supported in part by the National Center for Family and Marriage Research (NCFMR) at Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, OH. The NCFMR is supported with a grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, grant number 5 U01 AE000001-03. The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are solely those of the author(s) and should not be construed as representing the opinions or policy of any agency of the Federal Government.

Family Instability and Adolescents' Dating and Sexual Initiation

Background

There is great scholarly and popular interest in understanding the antecedents of adolescent dating and sexual activity. Many predictors of the onset of dating and sex have been identified, including peers (Ali & Dwyer 2011; Miller et al. 1997), romantic partners (Manning, Giordano, and Longmore, 2006; Vanoss Marin, Coyle. Gomez, Carvajal, & Kirby, 2000), and even content of adolescent television viewing (Collins et al. 2004). While a substantial amount of research has considered family structure as a predictor of adolescent sex or dating (e.g. Abma & Sonenstein, 2001; Giordano, Longmore, & Manning, 2006; Moore, 2001), to our knowledge, there is no study that considers long-term family instability as a possible predictor of sex and dating in adolescence using nationally representative, multigenerational, longitudinal data. Yet the growing body of research on family instability suggests that instability may be an important predictor of many adolescent outcomes (Cavanagh, Schiller, & Riegle-Crumb, 2006; Fomby and Cherlin 2007; Fomby, Mollborn, & Sennott, 2010).

Social scientists have long been interested in the impact of children's family structure experiences on diverse outcomes in adolescence and young adulthood, and extant research has consistently found that youth are strongly impacted by the family structures in which they grow up. In the past few decades, American families have become more complex and more unstable, and as a result it has become increasingly difficult (yet arguably more important) to understand the ways in which complex family structure experiences affect youth outcomes.

A growing body of research focuses on the predictors of adolescent dating and sexual activity. This topic is important partly because of concern about the consequences of early dating and sex among teens. Early sexual experience is often correlated with problem behaviors among adolescents, including increased risk of substance use and lower school attachment (Madkour, Farhat, Halpern, Godeau, & Gabhainn, 2010), and even increased risk of delinquency (McCarthy & Casey, 2008).

American adolescents' sexual experiences are extremely diverse. Nationally representative survey data from 2006-2008 suggest that about 42% of never-married females and 43% of never-married males between the ages of 15 and 19 years old have had sexual intercourse (Abma, Martinez, & Copen, 2010). Nearly 14% of high school students have had intercourse with four or more sexual partners, and 6% had intercourse for the first time before age 13 (CDC, 2010).

Extant research has revealed many clear correlates of adolescent sexual activity. Males and older teens are more likely to have had intercourse than females and younger teens (Abma, Martinez, & Copen, 2010). Adolescents also differ in their average age of sexual initiation by race/ethnicity and immigrant status. Asian teens have a significantly lower risk of early first sex compared to White teens, while Black teens have a higher risk of first sex compared to White teens. Hispanic teenagers differ in risk by gender, and immigrant status plays an important role in predicting sexual initiation (Spence & Brewster, 2009). After an extensive review of the literature, Buhi and Goodson (2007) concluded that children who perceive their parents and peers as being accepting of sexual activity, those spend more time alone, and those who are poorer tend to have sex earlier than their counterparts who perceive norms against early sex, who receive more monitoring, and who are more affluent. Longmore, Manning, Giordano, and Rudolph (2004) find that self-esteem and depressive symptoms are both important predictors of sexual onset, but depressive symptoms may be a particularly salient predictor.

Family experience is also an important predictor of adolescent sexual activity, and a large literature highlights the role of family characteristics in predicting sexual initiation. Recently, Longmore, Eng, Giordano, and Manning (2009) found that mothers' and fathers' preferences and parenting practices affect adolescents' decision-making about sex. Family structure also plays an important role in shaping adolescent choices regarding sex. In general, adolescents who live with two parents tend to be older at age of first sex than adolescents with single mothers (Baumer & South 2001; Cooksey, Mott, & Neubauer 2002; Longmore, Manning, & Giordano 2001). As the number of family forms a child might encounter in childhood has increased and as parental unions have become more unstable due to increased rates of divorce, cohabitation, cohabitation dissolution, and time in a single parent home, family scholars have increasingly focused on more dynamic measures of family structure, such as various measures of long-term family instability.

The present study investigates how patterns of family structure formation and dissolution experiences predict sexual initiation and romantic relationships in adolescence. Using merged mother and child data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79) and NLSY79 Child and Young Adults (CNLSY79), we explore the association between long-term family structure and adolescents' entrance into romantic relationships, including dating and sex. We also investigate self-esteem, depression, and age at menarche (for females) as possible mechanisms linking family instability and dating and sex.

This research contributes to current knowledge about how the social institution of the family may be affecting adolescents' dating and sexual behaviors in four main ways. First, this paper takes full advantage of the longitudinal and multigenerational nature of the NSLY data in order to capture children's entire trajectories of living arrangements. As we discuss in the paper, we have developed a unique algorithm to capture cohabiting relationships which may have been missed in previous studies due to missing data. We also consider varied aspects of family instability, including the nature of instability (e.g. relationship entrances vs. exits) and the partners involved (e.g. fathers vs. stepfathers). Second, we contribute to understanding of how cumulative long-term family structure experiences impact adolescents' romantic relationships. Previous research has investigated family structure effects on these outcomes, but has not captured cumulative family structure effects. Third, we investigate differences by gender in order to determine whether males and females differ in dating and sexual behaviors associated with their family structure experiences. Fourth, we consider several mediators in an effort to shed light on why family structure experiences and dating and sexual activities may be linked.

Method

Data and Sample

The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY79) is a nationally representative sample of 12,686 young men and women who were living in the United States and aged 14-22 years old when they were first interviewed in 1979. Three independent probability samples were drawn to represent the entire population of youth who were born between January 1, 1957 and December 31, 1964, including: (1) a cross-sectional sample of noninstitutionalized civilians, (2) a set of supplemental samples designed to oversample civilian Hispanic or Latino, and Black youth, as well as a supplemental sample of economically disadvantaged non-Hispanic, non-Black youth, and (3) a sample of youth serving in the U.S. military. The military sample was discontinued due to lack of funding in 1985 and the economically disadvantaged sample was dropped due to lack of funding in 1994. Both the cross-sectional sample and the supplemental

Hispanic and Black oversample have been consistently assessed throughout the survey period. Beginning in 1986, additional information was collected about children born to female NLSY79 respondents in the form of both mother's self-reports about their children, and children's self-reports about their families.

Since the time of the first survey in 1979, the respondents have been interviewed every year until 1994, and biennially thereafter until 2006, for a total of 22 waves of data collection. Over this time, many of the respondents have left their childhood homes, gone to college, started a career, cohabited with partners, gotten married, and had children of their own, making this an ideal sample in which to study family and individual change across the life course. At the time of the most recent wave of data collection, conducted in 2006 and early 2007, the women in the sample were in their forties and had completed over 99% of their expected childbearing. The final sample in this study is drawn from the offspring of NLSY women, and is composed of xxxx children who were 14-19 years old in 2006.

Family Structure Variables in the Present Study

To create accurate measures of family structure, each woman's residential relationship history from 1979 to 2006 was coded using the constructed variables found in the NLSY79 Fertility and Relationship File and the Household Roster for each of the 22 waves of data collection. At each survey round, participants reported whether they were currently in a residential relationship as well as 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 the respondent was also 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 the cohabitation began and ended, and the number of cohabitations during the past year.

A key advantage to using the Household Roster is the provision of two constructed variables that allow researchers to identify individual men who live in the household: a unique partner ID number for every residential partner during the 27 year period, 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.

Although the information provided by NLSY79 is excellent on many counts, there were a number of problems with the data that had to be addressed before relationship histories could be reliably constructed. As a result, a complex algorithm was developed to predetermine answers to difficult coding decisions so that the results were precise and easily replicated by others. The guiding principles for establishing decision rules for the algorithm were to be consistent, logical, and conservative in estimation choices. For example, when women reported several start dates for the same relationship, we used the most consistently reported date. Likewise, when two start dates were given but one occurred before the end of the prior relationship, we used the most logical date (e.g. the one that didn't conflict with other information). Finally, when one had to estimate a start or end date with no information other than the relationship was occurring at the time of a particular interview, we used the rule of thumb of estimating start dates one month before the first time the relationship is reported and end dates six months after the last time the

relationship was reported. This way the estimates of the length of relationships are conservative so when children are linked to particular men we are less likely to make the error of associating children's births with men who were not actually in the home.

Analytic Strategy

In preliminary analyses with OLS and logistic regression, family instability measures were used to predict the age at which adolescents first started dating and first had sex as well as whether adolescents started dating or had sex before age 17, and the number of sexual partners adolescents have had. In ongoing work, we are expanding these analyses to test effects of long-term family structure change (including measures of number and duration of time biological and step-fathers were in the home, duration of time in single parent homes, and type and count of total number of family transitions between birth and age 18) on nonmarital births among adolescents. We are also exploring the mechanisms which may link family living arrangements to these young adults' relationship patterns, including self-esteem, depression, and menarche (for females).

Preliminary Results

Preliminary results suggest that the number of family structure transitions a child experiences over the course of childhood is not a significant predictor of the age at which he or she begins dating. Race, sex, importance of religion, self-esteem, and depression are all significant predictors of the age of first date, but long-term family structure experiences do not appear to predict this experience.

In contrast, the number of family structure transitions experienced over the course of childhood is significantly associated with the age at which adolescents first have sex and the number of sexual partners they have had. Results also suggest that the effect of family instability on early sex appears to be slightly stronger for male and Black adolescents compared to female and non-Black, non-Hispanic adolescents.

Our ongoing investigation expands these analyses in order to gain a far clearer picture of whether and how various measures of long-term family structure experiences predict various measures of sexual and romantic relationships in adolescence.