

Family Instability, Childhood Relationship Skills, and Romance in Adolescence

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The intergenerational transmission of divorce remains one of the more robust findings in the vast literatures on divorce and union formation behaviors. Across samples and over time, children's family structure experiences during the first part of the life course often presages their own marital and romantic experiences in adulthood. Specifically, young people who experience a parental divorce often transition to unions earlier than do others, report lower relationship quality in their own marriages, and are more likely to get divorced themselves (Amato & Cheadle 2005; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Wolfinger 2005). Alternatively, young people raised in stably married families experience a lower risk of divorce, both obtain a higher education and choose better educated partners, and postpone marriage and childbearing (Amato & DeBoer, 2001; Wolfinger, 2005).

Scholars often point to young people's lesser commitment to marriage and compromised relationship skills as factors explaining the linkage between family instability in the parent generation and union formation behaviors in the child generation (Amato & DeBoer 2001). Briefly, the commitment to marriage hypothesis posits that the observed link between family instability in the parent and child generation is direct. That is, by living through parents' own unstable unions, young people learn that marriage or marriage-like unions can be broken, relationships do not last a lifetime, people do not have to remain in unsatisfying relationships, and happiness may be found with a new partner. These lessons, then, likely undermine young people's commitment to the norm of lifelong marriage in general, and to their marital partners, in particular. The compromised relationship skills perspective argues that the association between parent and child relationship history is explained, in part, by young people's failure to learn positive social skills and conflict resolution skills and to observe the process of compromise that is necessary to establish and maintain stable and healthy romantic union in adulthood.

Most of the research that has explored these mechanisms has focused on young people's relationship commitment and relationship skills *during* adulthood (e.g., Bumpass & Sweet, 2001; Amato & Keith, 1991; Amato, 1999). Yet, given that the developmental nature of social competency and relationship skills (Sullivan, 1953; Dunphy, 1963; Collins & Steinberg, 2006) and the growing evidence that parental divorce and family instability shape young people's opposite-sex relationships during adolescence (Pearson, Muller, & Frisco, 2006; South, Haynie, & Bose, 2005; Cavanagh, Crissey, & Raley, 2008; Johnson & Tyler, 2007), the goal of this study is to shift the observation window back in time and examine the interplay between experiences of family instability, not simply family status, and the development of relationship commitment and skills during childhood and adolescence. In other words, are the roots of the intergenerational transmission of family instability evident in children's social relationships in middle childhood and adolescence?

Drawing on the life course perspective and the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development (SECCYD), we will explore this goal through two aims. First, using multiple reporter assessments (i.e., teacher, mother, and child) of children's competence with peers, experiences of victimization, feelings of loneliness, and stability of friendships, captured across elementary school, we will examine the degree to which early experiences with peers shape young people's opportunities for, expectations of, and involvement with romance during middle adolescence. Second, using prospective measures of family structure captured across childhood, we will investigate whether cumulative family instability sets in motion compromised social development during middle childhood that alters the ways young people approach and engage in romantic relationships in adolescence. We will address these aims by paying special attention to variations by gender, recognizing that the consequences of family instability (Capaldi and Patterson, 1991; Cavanagh et al. 2008), the development of social competency (Maccoby 1998), and the meanings and significance of romance (Giordano, Longmore, & Manning, 2006) differ for boys and girls. Thus, by mapping out the linkages between gender, family instability, social development in elementary school, and romantic experiences in adolescence, this approach highlights the cumulative nature of social relationships across the life course. Moreover, it can illuminate pathways by which divorce and unstable partnerships are transmitted across generations.

Data and Method

This study used data from NICHD SECCYD, a national longitudinal study of American children (see <http://public.rti.org/secc> for more details). SECCYD families were recruited from hospitals located in 10 U.S. communities. During selected 24-hour sampling periods in 1991, 8,986 women were visited in the hospital shortly after giving birth. Of the 5,265 women—who were at least 18, healthy, and conversant in English, and had a healthy singleton child—agreed to be contacted when they returned home from the hospital. A month later, 1,364 families with healthy newborns were enrolled in the study. The study consists of three phases: Phase I (1991-1994) followed the children from birth to age 3, Phase II (1995-1999) from age 3 through 1st grade, Phase III (2000-2004) from 2nd through 6th grades, and Phase V (2005-2006) at age 15. This study was originally designed to examine the development significance of child care but has evolved into a study of general youth development.

Multiple reporter assessments of peer relationships across elementary school will serve as measures of children's social competency. Every year, in grades 1 through 6, teachers and mothers rated children's peer competency using a scale of 10 items from the Social Skills Rating Scale (SSRS). This scale measured children's responses to peers, including their ability to control their temper in conflict situations and respond appropriately to teasing (Gresham and Elliott 1990). For each item, the teacher and mother were asked how well it described the child (0 = never to 2 = very often). At 3, 5, and 6 grade, children answered questions that tapped whether they were victims of bullying at school, including being picked on at school or having people say mean things about them at school. For each item, children was asked how well it described their experience (1 = never to 5 = always). At 1, 3, and 5 grade, children also reported on *peer loneliness*, a sum of 16 items on the Loneliness and Social Dissatisfaction Scale (Cassidy & Asher, 1992) that measured children's own feelings of loneliness and appraisals of whether important relationship needs were being met, including having no one to talk to and feeling left out of things (1 = not true to 5 = always true).

At age 15, children were asked a series of questions about their expectations of and involvement in romantic relationships. From these questions, three dimensions of romance will be considered. First, to tap opportunities to engage in opposite-sex relationships, we examine young people's reports of whether they go out with mixed sex groups at night. Second, to measure relationship wantedness, we examine young people's report of how much they want a romantic relationship (1 = don't care; 2 = want one but not important; 3 = want one now). Third, to capture behavior, we consider the percent who is currently engaged in a relationship. Comparisons to published statistics for romantic involvement in national data sets (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003) suggest similar rates of involvement in the SECCYD sample.

Measures of *family instability in early childhood* are based on telephone interviews (at 3, 9, 12, 18, 21, 27, 30, 33, 42, 46, 50, 60, 66 months, fall, spring Kindergarten) and home interviews (at 1, 6, 15, 24, 36, 54 months) in which the mother (typically) completed a household roster listing each household member and that person's relationship to her and the study child; she also reported residential moves between contacts. Family structure was coded into nine mutually exclusive categories: 1) two biological parents (married); 2) two biological parents (cohabiting); 3) biological mother and stepfather (married); 4) biological father/stepmother (married); 5) biological mom and cohabiting partner; 6) biological father/cohabiting partner; 7) biological mother-only; 8) biological father-only; 9) all other family types (Cavanagh & Huston, 2006; 2008). From these data, 21 binary variables indicating a family transition between a contact and the one that preceded it will be created. Family structure at birth and a time-varying count of transitions will be included.

All analyses will also take into account child and maternal characteristics that both select young people into different family structure trajectories and shape their social development, including maternal education and personality profile, family structure at birth, and child race.

Analyses Plan

We will begin with descriptive analyses of children's family structure trajectories, mother, teacher, and child reports of children's social competency across adolescence, and romantic expectations and involvement in adolescence. With this as background, we will test whether the focal association between cumulative family instability and adolescent romance is present in the SECCYD sample. Next, we will use growth curve analyses to determine whether trajectories of social competency predict young people's romantic involvement at middle adolescence. Assuming a high degree of correlation across indicators of social competence, mother, teacher, and child reports will serve as the manifest variables for a latent construct of social competency. A latent growth model will evaluate growth in social competence across childhood and ultimately predict romantic expectations and involvement in middle adolescence. Finally, we will incorporate measures of family instability to explore the degree to which the linkage between family instability and adolescent romantic behavior and expectations are explained by trajectories of social competence during childhood.

Preliminary Findings

Exposure to family instability during early childhood was associated with a greater likelihood of romantic involvement at age 15 (see Figure 1). Those who experienced no family instability (in continuously married, single or cohabiting households) in early childhood were less likely to be romantically involved at age 15 whereas those who experienced three or more family transitions had the highest likelihood of romantic involvement ($p < .001$).

Using growth mixture modeling in M+ (Muthen & Muthen, 2008), we also explored adolescents' trajectories of social development across elementary school. Indices of fit suggested that two trajectories of peer competence, as reported by teachers, were statistically and substantively meaningful. The first trajectory was characterized by a low initial peer competence rating at 1st grade and a negative slope thereafter ($N = 220$); the second trajectory was characterized by a higher rating of social competence at 1st grade that remained stable over time ($N = 737$). Importantly, assignment to the high or low trajectory of social competence predicted the likelihood of current romantic involvement (Figure 2). Adolescents classified in the low trajectory of peer competence were significantly more likely to be in a romantic relationship at age 15 compared to adolescents classified into the trajectory of higher social competence ($p < .001$).

Together, these preliminary findings highlight the intersections between family instability, relationship skills, and romantic behavior in adolescence. Subsequent analyses will explore these linkages more comprehensively, controlling for potential spurious factors that drive both family instability and child development, exploring gender as a potential moderator, and including dynamic measures of family instability to determine how family transitions might 'shock' trajectories of development and increase the likelihood of romantic involvement.

Building on emerging evidence of that indicates romantic experiences in adolescence presage union formation behaviors in young adulthood, the findings from this study can help illuminate the social processes that shape human development in the early life course and help sort individuals into different relationship trajectories in adolescence.

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Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

Gender	
Male	0.50
Race	
non-Hispanic White	0.77
non-Hispanic Black	0.12
Hispanic	0.06
Other	0.05
Mother's race differs from child's race	0.06
Parent Education at birth	
No HS grad	0.04
HS grad	0.15
Some college	0.33
College Grad	0.47
Family Structure	
Structure at birth	
Married	0.79
Cohabiting	0.08
Not married	0.13
Instability prior to 1 st grade	
0 transitions	0.62
1 transitions	0.14
2 transitions	0.11
3+ transitions	0.13
<i>Peer Competency</i>	
1 st grade	15.30
3 rd grade	14.91
4 th grade	14.88
5 th grade	14.99
6 th grade	15.03
<i>Romantic Expectations & Involvement at age 15</i>	
Go out with mixed sex group at night	0.69
Currently in a romantic relationship	0.22
Desire for a romantic relationship (scale of 0-2)	1.22

N = 957

Figure 1. Predicted probabilities of current romantic by cumulative number of family transitions during early childhood.

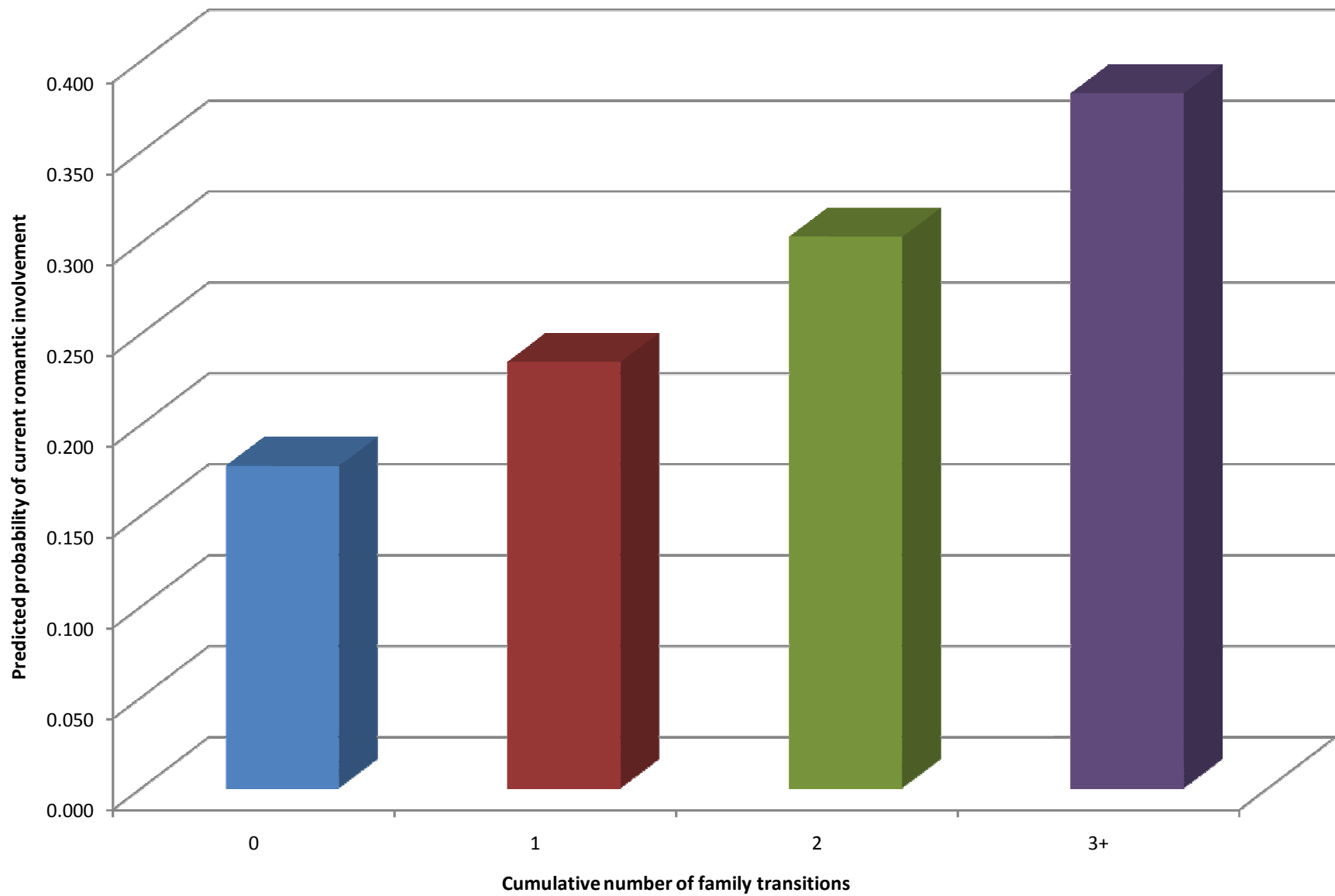


Figure 1. Predicted probabilities of current romantic by trajectories of social competence.

