

Birds of a Feather Have Babies together?:

Childhood Family Structure, Assortative Mating, and the Union Stability

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INTRODUCTION

Research on the intergenerational transmission of divorce consistently shows that children of divorced parents are more likely themselves to experience a divorce (Wolfinger Forthcoming; Amato and Cheadle 2005; Wolfinger 2003; Amato 1996; Bumpass, Martin, and Sweet 199; Meuller and Pope 1977). While much has been learned about this process, little is known about how parental divorce of couples (i.e., husband's and wife's parents) influences their likelihood of experiencing a divorce. Two studies (Wolfinger 2003; Amato 1996), however, found that when both spouses are from divorced families, the likelihood of divorce is greater than if only one or neither spouse's parents divorced. This tendency among married couples raises the question of whether the childhood family structure of unmarried couples who cohabit influences the stability of their relationships. This is an important question given that current figures show 41% (Hamilton et al. 2010) of children are born to unmarried parents and cohabitation more generally has increased dramatically in recent decades.

The current paper attempts to fill this gap by examining the impact of both mother's and father's childhood family structure on their union stability for both cohabiting and married couples. We begin by analyzing the matching patterns of married and cohabiting parents with respect to their childhood family structure (intact versus non-intact). To the extent that both mothers and fathers are from non-intact childhood family structures, we would expect these couples to repeat their parents' behaviors and break up during the course of their child's lives. Therefore, the second part of the analysis estimates the effect of both the mother's and the father's childhood family structure on their union stability five years after the birth of their common child. Given that previous research shows that parental divorce (of both spouses) transmits across generations among married couples, we are particularly interested whether matching on family structure among cohabiting couples influences the stability of their unions. Our preliminary results suggest that basic demographic characteristics account for the bivariate association between the mother's and father's childhood family structure. We also find that among cohabiting couples, the odds of union dissolution increase when both members of the couple are from non-intact families.

DATA & METHODS

The data used in this analysis are from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a longitudinal birth cohort study with an oversample of unmarried parents. The study includes 4,897 births—3,710 to unmarried parents and 1,187 to married parents. The weighted sample represents nonmarital births in U.S. cities with populations more than 200,000. Baseline interviews with mothers

and fathers took place in 75 hospitals in 20 U.S. cities just after the baby's birth. Response rates were 88% for unmarried mothers and 75% for unmarried fathers at baseline; 85% of mothers were retained in the study by the five-year interview, and 88% of fathers were interviewed at least once.

At baseline, both mothers and fathers were asked whether or not they lived with both biological parents at age 15. This measure was used to indicate whether mothers and fathers were from intact or non-intact families. In the first part of the analysis, we use logistic regression to estimate the odds that a mother from a non-intact family had a child with a man who is also from a non-intact family. Basic demographic characteristics (e.g. education, race, and age), measures of religious attendance, and indicators for cohabitation and nonresident status were included as controls. In the second part of the analysis, we examined whether union stability depended on the childhood family structure of both the mother and the father. Logistic regression models were used to estimate the odds that a marriage or a cohabiting union ended by the time their child was five. Again, we controlled for basic demographic characteristics among other factors.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

The bivariate association between mothers' and fathers' childhood family background suggests a strong tendency to match on this characteristic. However, this association becomes weak and statistically insignificant when conditioning on race, age, education, religious attendance, and cohabitation. This finding differs from the results of Wolfinger (2003), and suggests that assortative mating on childhood family structure may be less important among fragile families. Although mothers from non-intact family backgrounds are not more likely to have children with fathers from a similar background, the results do suggest a higher probability of union dissolution when both parents share this characteristic. This finding is robust to demographic controls and indicators of religious attendance. Additional analyses will account for attitudes towards cohabitation, marriage, and divorce, which have been shown to be important mechanisms for explaining the intergenerational transmission of divorce (Amato 1996). We will also examine whether labor market experiences of mothers and fathers, and educational differences moderate the relationship between their childhood family structure backgrounds and their likelihood of having a stable relationship during the first five years of their child's life. This study will contribute to our understanding of how intergenerational processes—in terms of transmitting instability from one generation to the next—play out for unmarried couples, something research has not previously examined (to the authors knowledge).

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