The Effects of Family Instability on Adolescents’ Sexual Initiation

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Family structures have vastly changed over the past sixty years due to a number of factors, such as divorce, stepfamilies, non-marital childbirths, and cohabitation (Brown, 2004). In the mid-twentieth century, seventy-five percent of children in the United States lived in two-parent families; today, however, this statistic does not hold true (Cavanagh & Fomby, 2012). About half of children in the United States will spend part of their lives in single-parent homes before the age of eighteen (Carlson & Corcoran, 2001). Today, researchers estimate that approximately five percent of children in the United States live with cohabiting parents, and roughly forty percent of children in the United States will live in cohabiting families at some point in their lives (Brown, 2004). Furthermore, cohabitation and marriage are less stable in the United States than in any other developed country (Fomby & Cherlin, 2007).

These constant changes in families’ structures result in family instability. Family instability is defined as the adding and exiting of the mother’s partners (Raley & Wildsmith, 2004). Family instability can negatively affect adolescents’ well-being. The continuous exiting and entering of new partners creates miniature crises for the adolescents, which interferes with their development (Fomby & Cherlin, 2007). Researchers interested in family instability have recently focused on adolescents’ sexual behaviors. Studies observe the correlation of family instability and adolescents’ sexual initiation due to the implications premarital sex imposes on adolescents. Adolescents who engage in premarital sex tend to have higher rates of school incompletion and unemployment (Albrecht & Teachman, 2003). This literature review will expound upon the relationship between family instability and adolescents’ sexual initiation, the effects of this relationship on adolescents’ well-being, the effects of married and cohabiting parental relationships on adolescents’ well-being, and areas for further research in this field of family life.

***The Implications of Family Instability on Adolescents’ Well-Being***

Though many adolescents will never experience a family transition first hand, those who do are most at risk for experiencing multiple family transitions, creating family instability (Cavanagh & Hutson, 2006). According to researchers Andrew J. Cherlin and Paula Fomby (2007), “Children who experience multiple transitions in family structure may face worse developmental outcomes than children raised in stable, two-parent families, and perhaps even worse than children raised in stable, single-parent families – a point denoted in much prior research” (p. 181). Most scholars agree on the association between poor outcomes in adolescents and family instability (Raley & Wildsmith, 2004). With family transitions come changes in income, parental expectations, daily routines, and housing locations, all which distress adolescents (Cavanagh & Hutson, 2008). Research has examined the relationship between recent transitions in family structures and adolescents’ well-being, questioning which is more influential, family change or family structure. Children born into family instability, such as cohabiting couples or single mothers, who experience further family transitioning later in life, are at a higher risk for worse outcomes than children born into stable families who experience family transitioning later in life (Cavanagh & Hutson, 2006). According to a study using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, surveying 80 high schools and 52 middle schools in the United States, family transitions negatively influence adolescents’ well-being. Adolescents who experienced a transition in their family structure displayed higher levels of delinquency and depression and lower levels of school engagement (Brown, 2006). Another research study examining family instability and its implications on adolescents’ outcomes showed similar results (Cavanagh & Hutson, 2006). The research suggests adolescents who experienced family instability showed higher levels of behavioral problems in the classroom than those who had not experienced family instability (Brown, 2006; Cavanagh & Hutson, 2006). These studies suggest the effects of family instability on children are multifaceted and influence more than age at premarital intercourse (Brown, 2006).

***The Changing Trends of Adolescents’ Dating and Sexual Relationships***

Research suggests a trend occurring in adolescents’ dating relationships. Dating relationships decline around the age of adolescence, while rates of adolescents engaging in sexual behavior, or “hooking up,” are increasing (Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2006). Since the 1970s, research shows an increasing trend in adolescents’ engagement in premarital sex (Albrecht & Teachman, 2003). Alarming statistics report that almost half of tenth graders are sexually active. Research suggests adolescents who begin dating at an earlier age, engage in premarital sex at an earlier age (Whitbeck, Yoder, Hoyt, & Conger, 1999). It is important to examine adolescents’ dating and sexual contexts because the number of adolescents engaging in sexual encounters is rising. Another area of concern when researching adolescents’ sexual encounters is with whom adolescents are having sex. Although it may be typical for adolescents to have sex when in a dating relationship, research indicates now that almost half of adolescents engage in sex outside of a dating relationship (Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2006). Adolescents’ sexual encounters have completely transformed, making this an interesting topic for researchers.

Along with studying the context and partners of adolescents engaging in sex, researchers must also examine why adolescents initiate sex. Predicting risk factors for adolescents’ sexual initiation include: romantic partners (Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2006), low-income schools (Kirby, 2002), low rates of parental monitoring (Longmore, Manning, & Giordano, 2001), and sexually active older siblings (Whitbeck, Yoder, Hoyt, & Conger, 1999). Adolescents are more likely to engage in sexual activity as the number of risk factors increase (Small & Luster, 1994). Understanding the influences of adolescents’ sexual initiation is crucial, because adolescents’ sexual initiation is linked to increased rates of behavioral problems and substance abuse and lower rates of school attachment (Madkour, Farkat, Godeau, & Gabhainn, 2010). According to scholars Stephen A. Small and Tom Luster (1994), “The most effective efforts to delay precocious teen sexual intercourse and early pregnancy must recognize the range of pathways through which these outcomes can occur and implement comprehensive prevention strategies that address a broad array of possible risk factors” (p. 191). Policy makers and scholars continue to stress this area of research, because adolescents’ sexual initiation leads to premarital births, which, in turn, decreases rates of school completion and employment (Albrecht & Teachman, 2003). Adolescents comprise of one quarter of the twelve million people infected by sexually transmitted diseases each year (Small & Luster, 1994). With the growing normalcy of adolescent premarital sex, this issue is urgent in the United States because of its high ranking in the number of teenage pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections compared to the other industrialized countries (Davis & Friel, 2001).

***The Implications of Family Instability on Adolescents’ Sexual Initiation***

Research has questioned the relationship between children’s living arrangements and the ages of children’s first sexual intercourse. Because of the growing normalcy and detrimental effects family instability and early adolescent sexual initiation impose on adolescents’ well-being, examining their relationship to one another appeals to scholars (Albrecht & Teachman, 2003; Brown, 2006; Raley & Wildsmith, 2004). Overall, researchers can agree on the influence of parental marital status on adolescents’ sexual development (Albrecht & Teachman, 2003). Adolescents from single-parent families initiate sex at an earlier age than adolescents from two-parent families. This outcome may be because adolescents from single-parent families are more exposed to their mothers’ dating relationships and behaviors, making them more aware of their mothers’ sexual attitudes and behaviors (Whitbeck, Simons, Kao, 1994).

Research studies suggest a similar correlation between family instability and adolescents’ sexual initiation (Albrecht & Teachman, 2003; Whitbeck, Yoder, Hoyt, & Conger, 1999). According to a study that analyzed data from the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth, surveying women born in 1950 to 1969, researchers examined the participants’ childhood living arrangements by observing the number of transitions in family structure and the status of the family structure at the age of the children’s first premarital intercourse (Albrecht & Teachman, 2003). This study explains that adolescents from families of instability tend to make the transition to adulthood earlier than adolescents from intact families. This phenomenon of transitioning to adulthood at earlier ages is now viewed as normative, making adult-like behaviors acceptable as adolescent behaviors (Whitbeck, Yoder, Hoyt, & Conger, 1999). The results indicated women who experienced family transitions and instability as adolescent girls participated in premarital intercourse at earlier ages than women who were from intact families (Albrecht & Teachman, 2003). This highlights the direct relationship between family instability and adolescents’ sexual initiation.

Three hypotheses are offered to explain the reasoning behind this relationship between family instability and adolescents’ sexual initiation: the socialization perspective, the social control perspective, and the instability and change perspective (Albrecht & Teachman, 2003). The socialization perspective believes women from non-intact families hold different beliefs on sex outside of marriage than women from intact families. This hypothesis suggests women from non-intact families believe in more lenient views on sex because of the frequent changes in their mothers’ romantic partners. The social control perspective theorizes intact families have more control over their children’s exposure to sex than non-intact families because of the increased rates of parental monitoring. The instability and change perspective predicts women from non-intact families are more likely to have premarital intercourse, because they experienced social and psychological stresses from their families’ instability (Albrecht & Teachman, 2003). All of these theories provide different interpretations as to why adolescents from families of instability engage in sex earlier.

Further studies conclude similar results, supporting this relationship between family instability and adolescents’ sexual initiation. Another study examining the relationship between family instability and adolescents’ sexual initiation suggests similar results. Adolescents who experienced frequent family transitions engaged in sex at earlier ages (Fomby, Mollborn, & Sennott, 2010). According to a study conducted by researchers Les B. Whitbeck, Ronald L. Simons, and Meei-Ying Kao, examining adolescent boys’ and girls’ sexual behaviors, mothers’ dating behaviors are influential towards their adolescents’ sexual behaviors (1994). Furthermore, adolescent boys’ sexual behaviors are directly influenced by their mothers’ dating behaviors, while adolescent girls’ sexual behaviors are influenced indirectly. Adolescent girls’ sexual attitudes were heavily influenced by their mothers’ sexual permissiveness; however, adolescent boys did not show a similar indirect relationship with their mothers’ dating behaviors. Because adolescent girls were influenced by their mothers’ sexual attitudes, adolescent girls may be more affected by their mothers’ sexual behaviors than adolescent boys (Whitbeck, Simons, Kao, 1994). Small and Luster explain how it is not uncommon for adolescents to be more sexually active when they perceive their parents as tolerant of premarital sex (1994).

***The Effects of Cohabiting Relationships versus Married Relationships on Adolescents’ Well-Being***

Overall, research suggests children living in two-parent families ‘do better’ than children living in single-parent families (Brown, 2004). However, questions arise about the structure of the two-parent families, wondering if there are differences in adolescents’ well-being from two-parent cohabiting families and two-parent married families. Most research looks at the differences in family structures between married and divorced families, but not cohabiting and married families (Brown, 2004). Research indicates children living in cohabiting two-parent families demonstrate worse outcomes than children living in married two-parent families. Additionally, mothers in cohabiting unions tend to have higher levels of depression (Brown, 2006). Considering the strong influence parental well-being has on children, children from cohabiting families are at a higher risk for decreased academic performance, as well as, behavioral and psychological problems. The majority of children from cohabiting unions tend to have a low socioeconomic status. The relationship of family structure and children’s well-being is influenced by parental economic resources and parental socialization (Brown, 2004). Cohabiting couples tend to earn less than married couples due to their lower levels of education. Cohabiting families also struggle with providing their children with the proper services and goods for healthy child development (Brown, 2006). When both parents are not available to parent children, less monitoring and supervision of the children occurs (Albrecht & Teachman, 2003). Even though cohabitation supplies the two-parent household standard, because one of the cohabiting adults is not the biological parent of the child, the cohabiting adult creates an ambiguous role in the child’s mind (Brown, 2004). However, when examining the dissolution of both married and cohabiting parental relationships, neither is found to be more detrimental than the other to adolescents’ well-being. The instability of both relationships has devastating effects on adolescents (Brown, 2006).

***Gaps and Suggested Further Questions in the Research***

Gaps in the research on this particular topic are present when searching the peer-reviewed articles. Further research on family instability at certain ages of adolescents can help clarify the relationship between family instability and adolescent well-being. Questions that demonstrate the path of this further research include: Do family instability and transitioning experienced at a certain age have a stronger influence on adolescents’ sexual initiation? Which is more influential on adolescents’ well-being, the amount of family transitioning or the age at which it occurs? In order to better understand the relationship between family instability and adolescents’ sexual initiation, further research must be done.

Further questioning on the growing topic of “hooking up” can better explain this phenomenon. Questions that may aid in the clearer understanding of this topic include: Just as cohabitation is becoming more popular and may overshadow marriage in the future (Brown, 2004), will “hooking up” eventually overshadow dating relationships? Adolescents who experienced instability in cohabiting families displayed worse outcomes than those who experienced instability in married families (Brown, 2004). Will this theme hold true for the comparison between the instability of partners in “hooking up” and the instability of partners in a dating relationship? These questions will further the research and understanding of the “hooking up” phenomenon.

Another area of research that can be further examined is adolescent marriage. Questions to further this research could include: Because research has demonstrated the effects family instability have on adolescents’ sexual initiation (Albrecht & Teachman, 2003; Fomby, Mollborn, & Sennott, 2010), does family instability have a similar influence on the age of adolescents’ marriage? Do adolescents who have experienced more family instability and transitioning marry at an earlier age than adolescents who have not had these experiences? Not only could researchers further investigate the relationship between family instability and adolescents’ age at marriage, but also the relationship between family instability and the number of times adolescents marry. A research question examining this relationship includes: Do adolescents who experienced more family instability and transitioning marry and divorce more often in their life than adolescents who did not experience family instability and transitioning? This question would help to further the research on this particular topic of family instability and adolescents’ outcomes. Further research in questions such as this would provide a better understanding of the implications family instability imposes on adolescents’ well-being.

***Conclusion***

This literature review has discussed the negative effects of family instability on adolescents’ sexual initiation. Family dynamics have changed drastically over the past decades (Brown, 2004). Because family structures are in constant transition, children are being raised in different types of family structures before they reach the age of eighteen (Carlson & Corcoran, 2001). Adolescents are experiencing more stress because of these family changes and uncertainty (Cavanagh & Hutson, 2008). Adolescents are also turning to unconventional ways of dating. Dating is no longer a common phenomenon among adolescents; however, the term “hooking up” is becoming popular. Adolescents today not only engage in sex earlier, but with partners outside of a relationship (Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2006). The stress and turmoil of instability of family structures is an influential predictor of adolescents’ sexual initiation (Albrecht & Teachman, 2003; Fomby, Mollborn, & Sennott, 2010). The more frequent family structures change, the earlier adolescents engage in sexual intercourse (Fomby, Mollborn, & Sennott, 2010). Policy makers need to account for the progressing attitudes and behaviors of adolescents’ sexuality and develop new ways of adolescent sex prevention. According to scholars, Whitbeck, Yoder, Hoyt, and Conger (1999), “Preventative measures aimed at abstinence will need to counter entry into other adult behaviors such as alcohol use, association with adult-behaving and rebelling peers, and particularly the adoption of sexually permissive attitudes” (p. 944). The difference of adolescents’ effects from cohabiting versus married parental unions were also examined, indicating, overall, adolescents from cohabiting families portrayed worse outcomes than adolescents from married families (Brown, 2004). Because constantly evolving family dynamics greatly influence adolescents and their well-being, researchers must be knowledgeable of all the changes in family life occurring today and their implications.

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