

THE EFFECTS ON CHILDREN OF BEING RAISED BY COHABITING PARENTS AS OPPOSED TO OTHER FAMILY STRUCTURES.

Abstract

Research into the effects of being raised in a cohabiting household is still fairly underdeveloped within the discipline of sociology, due to the only recent real growth of cohabitation in the U.S. Research has tended to focus on possible negative behavioural effects, however a handful of studies have also explored academic and psychological outcomes. Studies have strongly leaned towards using cross-sectional data. This paper seeks to show that there is no conclusive agreement among the current research as to whether the negative outcomes linked to cohabitation are a direct effect of family structure, or a result of the stratified selection of individuals into family structures. Vital gaps remain in the literature, with suggestions for future lines of enquiry offered at the end of this review.

Introduction

The nuclear family consisting of a married couple with children has long been constructed as the 'superior' family arrangement in the U.S., however it remains to be seen if this is truly the case. The USA lags behind Western Europe in the deinstitutionalisation of marriage and the institutionalisation of cohabitation. In many Scandinavian countries, for example, cohabitation rates have over-taken marriage rates. The nuclear family is no more natural than any other family structure, but has been constructed as the 'ideal' family type by those in power who bestow benefits and privilege to those who attain it.

There is, however, a growing acceptance of cohabitation in America, evidenced by the fact that the 1990 census included the option of stating that you were in a cohabiting union, rather than non-married

individuals being classified as single. This is linked to the fact that a growing proportion of children are being born to cohabiting parents. Eleven percent of births between 1990 and 1994 were to cohabiting mothers, a figure which grew to eighteen percent between 1997 and 2001, and has continued to grow since (Cherlin 2010). This highlights the importance of furthering our understanding of the experience of children raised in cohabiting unions. The significance of this topic extends to both society and individuals. Society as a whole is affected by negative outcomes learnt in childhood, while individual children are strongly influenced by the surroundings in which they are raised.

The experience of being raised in a cohabiting family is an important topic to the discipline of sociology because of the need to establish whether the number of documented negative links between cohabiting parents and childhood outcomes are a direct effect of family structure and processes. Some have suggested that negative outcomes are instead the result of selection effects, as cohabitation is strongly stratified by income, and therefore class and ethnicity. In 2008, for example, there was a 16 percentage point gap in marriage rates between college graduates and those with a high school diploma or less (Pew 2010).

This paper will compare the effects on children under eighteen of being raised in cohabiting households compared to two-parent biological married families, married step-families, and single-parent families. This will be achieved through a survey of current studies documenting the behavioural outcomes, academic outcomes, and psychological outcomes of children raised in cohabiting family structures versus other family arrangements. The literature reviewed will be used to produce a table of contexts which hurt and help children based on the characteristics of the adults involved in their upbringing. This will aid discussion about whether it is family structure per se that is detrimental to children, or the selection process of those who cohabit.

A Review of the Current Literature

Behavioural Outcomes

The first childhood outcomes to be explored are behavioural outcomes. Heiland and Liu (2006) used data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study in order to test whether children's well-being is affected by their biological parent's relationship. The main downfall of this data set is that it is cross-sectional, thus preventing comparisons being made through the eighteen years from birth to adulthood. A strength of the study is that it was designed to assess exact measures of the biological parents' characteristics and explore the effects of family structure changes (Heiland and Liu 2006).

Some evidence was found that children of parents who marry within the first year of their birth displayed less problematic behaviour compared to those whose biological parents remain unmarried. The effect, however, was a negligible 0.13 unit reduction (Heiland and Liu 2006). The study found non-involvement with a parent to be a far more important factor than marital status. A persistently cohabiting family environment was found to produce significantly less behavioural problems than children whose parents ended their romantic relationship within a year of birth (Heiland and Liu 2006). Children were also positively affected when their visiting parents transitioned into cohabitation (Heiland and Liu 2006). This study therefore illustrates the importance of continued contact with both biological parents. This suggests that family structure strongly influences early behavioural outcomes, with stably cohabiting couples shown positively due to each biological parent's continued involvement in the child-rearing process.

Brown (2004) also explored behavioural problems linked to different family structures, albeit with less encouraging results for cohabiting families. This study used data from the 1999 National Survey of America's Families, which utilises a nationally representative sample, gathering information from over 100,000 people (Brown 2004). This includes children living with both biological cohabiting families and

step-parent cohabiting families. This data set does not, however, allow for the measurement of length of time spent in a certain family structure, or the number of family transitions experienced (Brown 2004).

In order to determine the prevalence of behavioural issues, parents in the National Survey of America's Families were asked about how much their child does not get along with other children, cannot concentrate for long, and has been sad or depressed (Brown 2004). After controlling for children's characteristics, those residing in two-parent biological cohabiting families and cohabiting step-families were found to have considerably more behavioural problems than children living with two biological married parents (Brown 2004). Children living in married step-families and single-mother families were also found to have higher levels of behavioural issues (Brown 2004). The study also tellingly revealed that children raised in poor families were more likely to experience behavioural issues (Brown 2004). As marriage is more common among the wealthy, this finding could go some way to explaining the comparatively low levels of behavioural issues experienced by children raised by married biological parents. Brown (2004) thus posits that wealth mediates some of the influence of family structure. The study therefore once again raises the question over whether poverty or family structure has more influence over the prevalence of behavioural issues. Brown (2004) suggests that there is somewhat of a trade-off between the two.

Teenage births outside wedlock are widely regarded as deviant in American society, therefore justifying their use as a measure of negative behavioural outcomes. Bulanda and Manning (2008) drew upon data from the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth to explore the odds of a teenage birth amongst girls raised in cohabiting families compared to other family structures. They used two measurements of family structure. The first of these was a static measure of family structure at birth, whilst the second involved a complex family trajectory coding system which aimed to capture family living experiences throughout childhood (Bulanda and Manning 2008). The family transitions analysis represents a major

strength of this research, as it moves away from the static cross-sectional view of family structure which many other studies adopt.

The study found that girls born to cohabiting parents had considerably higher odds of having a teen birth outside wedlock than their counterparts born to married parents. Girls born to single mothers were found to have similar odds as those born to cohabiting parents (Bulanda and Manning 2008). The family trajectory analysis on the influence family transitions has on the odds of a teen birth found that the effects of such transitions vary according to family structure at birth. While family transitions were found to be related to greater odds of having a teenage birth among girls born to married parents, family transitions were shown to have no perceptible effect on those born to cohabiting or single parents (Bulanda and Manning 2008). This thus represents a statistically significant interaction between family transitions and family structure at birth.

Dunifon and Kowaleski-Jones (2002) explored the possible link between cohabitation and delinquency. They used data from the 1998 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth to assess levels of delinquency across different family structures. The longitudinal nature of this data set represents a major advantage, as the children involved were followed for a number of years. A disadvantage of the study is that data on maternal living arrangements were gathered only every year, thus making it likely that the study does not account for some short-term cohabiting or marital relationships that lasted less than twelve months (Dunifon and Kowaleski-Jones 2002). The measure of delinquency used in the research consisted of eight items from the Child Self-Administered Survey, which was given to children in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (Dunifon and Kowaleski-Jones 2002). Answers to questions about delinquency were then coded.

Dunifon and Kowaleski-Jones (2002), unlike the previous studies reviewed, were also interested in the effect of race in family structure outcomes. They found a number of important racial differences with regard to delinquency. For African American children, time spent in a cohabiting family was linked to

greater delinquency compared with time spent in a married family (Dunifon and Kowaleski-Jones 2002). For white children, on the other hand, time spent in a single-parent family was more closely associated with delinquency than time spent in a married-couple family (Dunifon and Kowaleski-Jones 2002). African American children, however, did not experience more delinquency when raised in a single-parent family (Dunifon and Kowaleski-Jones 2002). This study thus presents some interesting racial differences in delinquency across a range of family structures. Further research is needed to help explain these divergences.

Academic Outcomes

Manning and Lamb's (2003) study assessed the prevalence of school exclusions and suspensions among teenagers. They drew upon the 1995 National Longitudinal Adolescent Study of Adolescent Health, which exploits a representative sample of teenagers in the U.S. (Manning and Lamb 2003). The National Longitudinal Adolescent Study of Adolescent Health contains a substantial number of teenagers residing in cohabiting families. It also includes a number of key measures of teenage outcomes alongside complex measures of family processes (Manning and Lamb 2003). This additional data was used to explain some of the cited differences in family structure. Like many of the other reviewed studies, however, the data employed was cross-sectional (Manning and Lamb 2003). This rendered the research unable to assess the influence of family transitions or how age when living in a cohabiting union impacts on child outcomes

Teenagers living in married step-parent families were found to have perceptibly lower chances of being suspended or expelled from school than those living in in cohabiting step-parent families (Manning and Lamb 2003). The effect of family structure, however, was found to be explained by other variables, specifically sociodemographic variables (such as race and ethnicity) and parenting variables (such as closeness to mother and monitoring techniques) (Manning and Lamb 2003). This therefore suggests

that the selection process which occurs upon family structure assortment has the greatest influence on academic outcomes, rather than the family structure itself.

Brown's (2004) previously outlined study also provided a useful analysis of school engagement. A school engagement index was used to assess this variable. The results were, again, difficult to draw solid conclusions from regarding the nature of the relationship between family structure and childhood outcomes. It was found that, among children aged between six and eleven, those residing in biological cohabiting families and step-parent cohabiting families displayed lower school engagement, on average, than those in two-parent biological married families (Brown, 2004). When, however, economic resources were included in the assessments, the difference was reduced to non-statistically significant (Brown, 2004). This suggests a stronger link between economic resources and school engagement, than family structure.

Adolescents living in two-parent biological cohabiting families were found to not be significantly less engaged in school than those in two-parent biological married families (Brown 2004). Other family structures also fell short of the traditional nuclear family in terms of adolescent school engagement (Brown 2004). In comparison to the analysis of children, economic resources were not found to have a noticeable influence on teenage school engagement (Brown 2004).

Brown's (2004) study thus found family structure to have a greater influence on the school engagement of adolescents than children. This suggests that a stable economic environment is more of a key concern for younger children, as income was found to offset family structure differences among those aged between six and eleven. The lack of mediation of family structure for teenagers may be linked to the fact that those raised outside the traditional nuclear family are more likely to have experienced a greater number of family transitions during their childhood.

Artis (2007) used data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998 – 1999 to analyse children's cognitive outcomes across different family structures. This was judged by their math, reading and general knowledge abilities. The sample included nearly 20,000 children, and was representative of all children enrolled in kindergarten at the time (Artis 2007). The size of the sample meant that a good number of both types of cohabiting families were included.

Artis (2007), unlike Brown (2004) and Manning and Lamb (2003), found empirical evidence to show that cognitive outcomes are strongly linked to family structure. Children from two-parent biological cohabiting families displayed markedly lower cognitive test scores compared to those raised in two-parent married families (Artis 2007). Children from cohabiting biological unions, for example, scored over five percentage points lower on general knowledge tests, on average, than their counterparts from married biological unions (Artis, 2007). When comparing cohabiting step-families and married step-families the results displayed a similar pattern, with children from cohabiting families faring significantly worse on all three cognitive tests than their married family counterparts (Artic 2007). In a comparison of the cognitive outcomes of children from the two types of cohabiting families, results showed that, after controlling for demographic characteristics, there were no significant differences between children raised by both biological cohabiting parents and those raised by just one biological cohabiting parent (Artis 2007). The author, however, pointed out the need for further multivariate models before drawing any definitive conclusions, as both economic resources and parenting practices may also influence cognitive development (Artis 2007). Both of these factors could have either a mediating or a causal effect on family structure.

Raley, Frisco and Wildsmith (2005) used data from the National Survey of Families and Households to measure educational attainment. They cite a key advantage of this data as being the fact that it includes retrospective histories of respondents' marriages, cohabitations, separations and divorces (Raley, Frisco and Wildsmith 2005). A major drawback, however, is that the study suffered badly from

sample attrition. Those who left the study were more likely to come from non-nuclear family units, thus leaving the truncated sample not representative of the wider population (Raley, Frisco and Wildsmith 2005).

Two measures of educational attainment were employed, that is high school graduation status and levels of postsecondary enrolment. Those who experienced maternal cohabitation were found to have lower odds of graduating compared to children from two-parent married biological or married step-parent families. It is interesting to note that these results were found to be attributable to mother's educational expectations of their offspring (Raley, Frisco and Wildsmith 2005). This suggests a selection effect of those who cohabit. Children from cohabiting step-families were also found to possess lower odds of postsecondary enrolment compared to their counterparts from two-parent married biological or step-parent families (Raley, Frisco and Wildsmith 2005). This difference was still noteworthy after controlling for demographic background, including income (Raley, Frisco and Wildsmith 2005).

The authors interpreted the results of these two outcomes as offering support for both the family instability (suggesting that more family transitions results in worse outcomes for children) and family structure (suggesting that family organisation per se influences offspring's outcomes) arguments (Raley, Frisco and Wildsmith 2005). Caution, however, should be taken when drawing conclusions from this study due to its lack of generalisability to the wider population as a result of its sample attrition.

Psychological Outcomes

Artis's (2007) previously outlined study also explored emotional adjustment among Kindergarten children through an evaluation of levels of sadness / loneliness. This variable was determined by mothers' assessments of their children. A flaw with this method is that some mothers may glorify the

truth in order to appear better parents, or genuinely not recognise the true depth of their child's sadness / loneliness.

With the inclusion of controls for child characteristics, education and economic resources, there were found to be no statistically significant differences between the sadness / loneliness of children raised in married step-families and cohabiting biological two-parent families compared to those living in two-parent biological married households (Artis 2007). The study found that the number of residences, family outings, and parental warmth were important factors determining a child's level of sadness / loneliness (Artis 2007). This therefore suggests that family structure is not inherently linked to the prevalence of sadness / loneliness among young children, rather that parental practices are more important determining factors.

Marriage as a Luxury Good

There is therefore a great degree of debate among the current sociological literature as to the effects of cohabitation on child outcomes. It is of key importance that sociologists conduct further studies exploring the possible link between family structure and both negative and positive child outcomes. This will help to ascertain whether a certain family type truly is superior and thus warrants government policies to promote it, or whether it is the selection process of individuals into certain family types that fosters negative outcomes. The literature reviewed in this paper tends to suggest the latter, although the debate still continues. More work needs to be done to empirically document these complex relationships.

The growing institutionalisation of cohabitation in the U.S. – from a marriage prelude to a family arrangement in its own right – necessitates its further sociological explanation. A study by Smock, Manning and Porter (2005), which drew on in-depth interviews with 115 young cohabiting adults, found economic circumstance to be a key factor determining family structure choice. They found that

perceptions of having 'enough' money were critical in the decision of couples to forgo marriage (Smock, Manning and Porter 2005). Marriage was therefore viewed as a marker that you were no longer struggling economically.

These findings fit with the argument that marriage is becoming a luxury good which increasingly fewer couples are able to finance. This is reflected in the demographics of those who marry versus those who do not. In 2008, for example, the Pew Research Centre found that 64% of college graduates were married compared to only 48% of those with a high school diploma or less (2010). It consequently appears accurate to speculate that disadvantaged couples are more likely to cohabit in the U.S. As poverty has long been associated with a higher concentration of negative child outcomes, the demographics of cohabiters may go some way to explaining the generally worse outcomes of the children raised in this family structure. The negative childhood outcomes documented in this paper and elsewhere help contribute to creating a cycle of poverty. Much of the literature reviewed in this paper has suggested that implementing policies to tackle underlying poverty issues would be more fruitful than those aimed at promoting marriage.

Important Studies

Bulanda and Manning's (2008) study into the odds of a teen birth represents an important contribution to the growing body of literature on the implications of cohabitation on children. Their exploration of the interaction of family transitions with family structure at birth made the important finding that family changes have different consequences depending on family structure at birth (Bulanda and Manning's 2008). The data also showed that time spent in two-parent biological cohabiting families raised the chances of a teen birth compared to time spent in cohabitation step-families (Bulanda and Manning's 2008). This outcome is somewhat surprising as two-parent biological cohabiting families more closely resemble two-parent biological married families, which have the lowest odds. Bulanda and Manning (2008) suggest that this could be because the daughters of biological cohabiters use of their parents as

role models may make them more willing to also have a baby outside wedlock with their partner. No data was given to back up this assertion.

Brown's study's (2004) offers a useful comparative of the experiences of younger children versus adolescents. In terms of younger children (aged six to eleven), poverty was found to be a key dynamic influencing school engagement levels. This was coupled with the benefits of having a parent with at least a college degree, good parental well-being and low levels of aggravation in parenting (Brown 2004). This therefore portrays the influence family structure has on school engagement as emerging because of the selection of couples who cohabit. For teenagers, however, the family structure coefficients remained unaltered by the inclusion of parental resources (Brown 2004). This contrast between the two different ages requires closer attention as it may provide supporting evidence for the family instability argument that an increased number of family transitions results in worse outcomes for children. Cohabiting unions are generally more unstable than married unions, therefore teenagers in the cohabiting family structure, by virtue of their advanced age, have an increased likelihood of experiencing a number of transitions compared to younger children.

Both these studies have made important contributions to research on cohabitation's outcomes on the children involved. They also illustrate the different conclusions that studies on the topic generally arrive at, thus demonstrating the complexity of the issue.

Contexts that Help and Hurt Children

A template of contexts that help and hurt children, based on the characteristics of the adults involved in their up-bringing, can now be produced from the literature reviewed. Children have been documented to be positively impacted by wealth (Brown 2004), being born to parents with a college degree (Brown 2004), their parents' well-being (Brown 2004), closeness to their mother, (Manning and Lamb 2003) parental warmth (Artis 2007), family outings (Artis 2007), and high maternal educational expectations of

them (Raley, Frisco and Wildsmith 2005). Children are negatively impacted by poverty (Brown 2004), non-involvement with a biological parent (Heiland and Liu 2006), family transitions (Raley, Frisco and Wildsmith 2005) (especially when born to married biological parents) (Bulanda and Manning 2008), a high number of different residences (Artis 2007), and aggravation in parenting (Brown 2004).

This template of contexts demonstrates the vast amount of factors which influence children's well-being. It therefore helps to illustrate the difficulty which is encountered when one attempts to blame negative outcomes on a single specific factor, such as family structure, as many of these dynamics are closely linked. This paper consequently suggests that government policies and interventions should focus more on family processes and poverty rather than family structure.

Suggestions for Future Research

Recent sociological research into the implications of cohabitation on children has yielded a number of insightful findings. The body of literature on the topic is, however, still limited due to the only recent rise of cohabitation in the U.S. Throughout the course of this literature review a number of vital unanswered questions have arisen alongside flaws with current research designs. A number of these will now be discussed in order to provide direction for future sociological research on the topic.

There appears to be a significant link between economic resources and family structure, however the nature of this relationship remains unclear. That is to say, do economic resources cause or mediate the effects of family structure? Artis (2007) accurately notes that future research must address the influence of selection effects on children's well-being in cohabiting families. We currently cannot extricate whether the differences in childhood outcomes between cohabiting and married households are the result of characteristics linked to the selection into family structure, or a cost / benefit of the family arrangements themselves (Artis 2007). A possible means for this could be to look into case studies of the outcomes of children raised by affluent cohabiting parents compared to case studies of children raised by poor married parents. Future research must explore this line of inquiry as it has great

implications for the direction of future government policy, specifically whether or not the promotion of marriage should continue.

Most of the literature reviewed in this paper was based on cross-sectional data, thus limiting analyses to a snapshot of a single point in time. A notable exception to this is Bulanda and Manning's study (2008), which included a model illustrating family arrangement changes over time alongside a static measure of family structure. Longitudinal studies like this one will be important in the future for assessing the influence of fluctuations in family structure during the course of childhood in order to test the family instability argument. Future work ought to also explore the impacts of cohabitation on younger versus older children, as well as the effects of the length of time spent in a cohabiting family.

While cohabitation is generally more closely related to instability than marriage is, this is not always the case. Some cohabiting unions last decades. Future studies need to look more closely at the effects of cohabitation on children who remain consistently living with both biological cohabiting parents up to the age of eighteen. It would be useful to compare the outcomes of these children to those who experience number of parental divorces and remarriages (the trend of 'serial divorce'). This would help to tease out the distinction between family structure and family instability, in order to assess if it is specifically the relative instability of the average cohabiting union which generates negative outcomes for the children involved. This approach again necessitates a longitudinal design.

Dunifon and Kowaleski-Jones's (2002) study made the interesting finding that African American children suffer worst outcomes when raised in a cohabiting household, while white children suffer the most in single parent families. This suggests that there is a mediating force, which varies in its intensity according the race, between family structure and child outcomes. This is the only study reviewed in this paper which explores racial differences in the links between cohabitation and child outcomes. More research therefore needs to be done into this area in order to help explain the differing impact of family structures on children from different races. Forthcoming studies would benefit greatly from the inclusion

of race as an additional variable in their analysis to uncover the nature of this suggested mediating force.

Closing Thoughts

The literature reviewed in the paper has generally portrayed children from cohabiting unions as having a higher concentration of negative behavioural outcomes, academic outcomes, and psychological outcomes than children raised in married families. While children from cohabiting unions have been generally found to fare better than children raised in single-parent families, they are more closely aligned to this group than children of married parents. There is a lack of consistent statistically significant differences between children from two-parent biological cohabiting families compared to step-parent cohabiting families. There is a great absence of consensus over whether these observed differences between family structures are due to the influence of parental cohabitation per se or the selection of those who cohabit. Manning and Lamb's (2003) study into the prevalence of school exclusions and suspensions, for example, found the selection process to be more important. Artis's (2007) exploration of cognitive outcomes, in contrast, found math, reading and general knowledge abilities to be directly linked to family structure.

The results of this critical literature review tentatively suggest that it is more helpful to look at the context in which cohabitation occurs as opposed to family structure itself. Family structure generally appears to be a consequence of one's resources or lack thereof, which serve to either restrict or enhance the range of available family arrangements. Research suggests that the trend of blaming cohabitation for negative childhood outcomes is misled, and a reflection of the misplaced premium that American society gives to marriage. Marriage has long been constructed as the 'superior' family type by those with power, as their ability to attain this family structure helps ensure their continued dominance over those who cannot. A move away from this fallacy – which is occurring in a number of Scandinavian

countries and wider Western Europe – is needed to reduce the unequal and unfair stratification into family structures which currently continues in America.

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