Occupational Uncertainty and the Transition to Coresidential Unions

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For much of the 20th century, entry into marriage marked a young person's transition to adulthood (Fussell and Gauthier 2005). Yet, as both a cause and consequence of changing cultural norms around marriage and sexual behavior, and rising rates of college enrollment and more precarious job prospects for young women and young men, the role of union formation during this transition has become much less clear cut (Luker 1997; Buchmann and DiPrete 2006). Compared with earlier generations, young people today are more likely to delay marriage, cohabit with romantic partners, or, in lieu of romantic unions, coreside with parents, live alone, or live with nonromantic peers (Fussell and Gauthier 2005; Sassler 2004; Casper and Bianchi 2002; Schoen, Landale, and Daniels 2007). As reflected in these changes, young people enjoy greater acceptance for their romantic, sexual, and reproductive decisions. Still, although a proliferation of life choices in early adulthood is available, not all options are equal or bring the same psychological, social, and economic returns (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Settersten, Furstenberg, and Rumbaut 2005; Lichter and Graefe 2001; Mouw 2005). Thus, how young adults navigate unions in this period of life can become a source of inequality later in their lives.

The life course paradigm, an *orienting* perspective, provides a useful framework for understanding the transition to coresidential unions in young adulthood. According to this perspective, union formation behaviors can be viewed as a linking mechanism, an event or set of events that translates experiences from earlier in the life course into prospects for status attainment and socioemotional well-being later on. It also specifies that a transition like the transition to first coresidential union is best viewed as one embedded in a set of related trajectories that define the transition to adulthood (Elder 1998). In this study, we recognize the significance of work and employment on union formation behaviors and look to occupational aspirations in adolescence, specifically young people's *lack* of certainty about occupational plans at age 16, as a factor that shapes union formation behavior in young adulthood.

To be sure, scholars have long noted the link between work and union formation (Oppenhiemer 1994; Kuo and Raley 2014; McClendon, Kuo, and Raley, 2014; Xie, Raymo, Goyette, and Thornton 2003). Most of this research considers concurrent employment status or wages as a predictor of marriage and cohabitation. Yet, work trajectories have roots in the earlier stages of the life course. Work aspirations often emerge in adolescence and can capture tastes for work as well as school and family roles in adulthood (Becker 1992). Furthermore, occupational aspirations in adolescence are linked with later occupational attainment (Sewell and Hauser 1975; Spenner and Featherman 1978). At the same time, recent work suggests that *uncertainty* in early occupational aspirations is also linked to later socioeconomic attainment, with those uncertain about occupational aspirations earning less in young adulthood than others (Staff et al. 2010). Occupational aspirations are by no means stable, and the rate at which young adults enter the occupations to which they earlier aspired is not high (Rindfuss et al. 1999). Yet highly uncertain aspirations may leave youth adrift. A plan, even one that may change, directs choices and facilitates investments in the future.

Given the salience of work and economic security to union formation, and marriage in particular (Cherlin 2010), we expect that occupational uncertainty in adolescence is not only linked with young people's later work lives but also their union formation behaviors. More specifically, we expect that young people who were uncertain about their occupational aspirations in adolescence will be significantly less likely to form any coresidential union in young adulthood, net of aspirations related to educational attainment and family roles.

We also consider the degree to which this association is gendered. As the employment prospects of women and men have changed over the past 40 years, scholars have considered the ways women's and men's changing attachment to work is linked with union transitions (Oppenhiemer 1994; McClendon et al. 2014). At the same time, future aspirations for boys and girls might be different in adolescence (Hakim 2002). The extent to which girls place greater salience on family may make the formation of occupational aspirations more complicated and uncertain for them compared with boys (Correll 2004; Staff et al. 2010). Given this, the meaning of uncertainty for later union formation behaviors might operate differently for young women and men.

Thus, in this paper, we use longitudinal data from the Youth Development Study (YDS), a randomly selected sample of 1,010 ninth graders in 1988 who were enrolled in the St. Paul Public School District in Minnesota (Mortimer 2003) to explore these linkages. Questionnaires were administered annually in school from the ninth to twelfth grades (or by mail if students had left St. Paul or school altogether). Between 1992 and 2011, questionnaires were administered every 1-2 years; life history calendars administered from 1992 on provide a continuous record of whether respondents were living with a romantic partner or spouse.

The analytic sample includes 996 respondents. Those who reported a coresidential union were no longer observed after the date of first union, whether marriage or cohabitation. Not all respondents remained in the sample across the observation window. Among those for whom no coresidential union date was identified (n = 143), about half remained in the sample until 2002 and another 36% remained in the sample until the last interview in 2011. Thus, attrition plays a role but we were still able to draw on cases that failed to remain in the sample.

Measures

Timing to first co-residential union, either cohabitation or marriage, is measured as the number of months from age 17 (in 1991) until first union, or last interview date. In nearly every survey year, respondents were asked if they were or had ever been married and for the dates of current and past marriages. In several early waves respondents were only asked if they were currently married and were not asked to provide entry dates. For nearly all of those cases, dates were provided retrospectively in later waves. For small handful of cases that reported marriage in these waves but did not participate in later data collections, we assigned the date midway between consecutive waves in which marital entry was reported. Beginning in 1992 respondents also completed life history calendars at each wave, collectively covering the entire period from 1992- 2011. Month of entry into cohabiting unions was derived from these reports. For those reporting living with a boyfriend or girlfriend in the 1991 survey, before the calendars were introduced, we assigned the date midway between that and the previous wave.

Uncertainty in occupational aspirations is measured in 1990, when respondents were aged 16-17. Respondents were asked: "What occupation would you like to go into? If you are unsure, what kind of work are you thinking about?" They were then asked, "How certain are you about these plans?" Responses included (1) Very certain; (2) Somewhat certain; (3) Not very certain; and (4) Not at all certain. If respondents answered "not at all certain", they were coded as having *occupational uncertainty*.

Lack of educational direction is a binary indicator limited to those who answered "don't know" to the question: "What is the highest level of schooling you really think you will finish?" compared to those who provided an educational plan (responses ranged from 1 =Less than a high school graduate to 6 = Ph.D. or professional degree). An indicator anticipated importance of marriage is included to tap *lack of interest in marriage*. Respondents were asked, "How important do you think marriage or relationship with my husband or wife will be to you when you are an adult?" Responses ranged from 1 (Not at all important) to 4 (Extremely important), those who reported not at all important are coded as 1, all others 0.

We also control for a set of socio-demographic factors and family background characteristics measured in 1988, including gender, race/ethnicity, parents' educational attainment, and family structure. *Gender* is self-reported with 1 = male and 0 = female. *Race/ethnicity* is a self-identified and is measured with six dummy variables –White (reference group), Black, Hispanic, Asian American, mixed race, and Other. Highest *educational attainment achieved by a parent* (either the mother or father) is taken from the parent survey and is measured with four dummy indictors – less than high school graduate, high school graduate (reference group), some college, and college degree or more. *Family structure* is created with a series of dichotomous variables – two-biological/adoptive parent family (reference group), single-mother family, married step-father family, single-father family, married step-mother family, joint custody living arrangement, and other family type (i.e., grandparents, other relatives, etc.).

Preliminary findings

By age 2011, most YDS sample members transitioned into at least one coresidential union. Overall, about 14% reported no union, 13% married only, 21% cohabited only and half of the sample both cohabited and married at least once. Among those that did transition to a coresidential union, most first unions were cohabitations. More than two-thirds of the sample started their coresidential romantic lives in cohabiting unions; 18% married first.

We begin by looking at mean differences in our key independent variables. First, about 5% of the sample reported being not at all certain about their career aspirations. Still, about 11% of those in no union reported being uncertain compared to about 4% of those who married first or cohabited first. Similar patterns in ratings of the importance of marriage and educational expectations were also identified. For example, 30% of those who rated marriage as not at all important to them never entered a coresidential union, compared with 17% of married folks and 15% of cohabitors. Finally, those who did not know how far they expected to go in school were also more likely not to be in a union than all others. Finally, although men were significantly less likely to enter any coresidential union, they were about as likely as women to marry or cohabit in adulthood (see Table 1).

Next, we estimated the time to first union, and time to first marriage (for those who do not cohabit first) and time to first cohabitation union (for those who do not marry first), using proportional hazard models, net of important covariates. We examine the contribution of uncertain occupational aspirations in Model 1, controlling for race, gender, family structure in adolescence, parents' educational attainment and whether the respondent reported being not interested in marriage in adulthood. Occupational uncertainty significantly slows union formation and time to first cohabiting union. The magnitude of the effect for marital timing is stronger than it is for union formation overall and cohabiting union timing, but is not statistically significant. The proportion of this cohort who entered marriage directly, without cohabiting first, is fairly small and so our power to detect differences in time to marriage is lower. Echoing bivariate associations, males were also slower to enter unions than females, as were youth from more highly educated families (see Table 2).

In Model 2 we examined whether the effects of having uncertain occupational aspirations hold controlling for whether the adolescents had a plan for how long they would stay in school. Occupational uncertainty's influence on union timing is not merely a result of youth lacking educational direction. The coefficients were virtually unchanged (and the coefficient for uncertainty on marital timing becomes significant at the $p<.10$ level) once educational expectations (or lack thereof) are controlled. Model 3 includes an interaction between gender and occupational uncertainty. We find large gender differences in the influence of aspirational uncertainty on union formation by gender. Uncertainty delays union formation among girls much more so than among boys. Again the effects are significant for union formation overall and timing of first cohabitation, but not for timing of first marriage.

We conclude that uncertainty in occupational plans in adolescence influences not only later work outcomes (Staff et al. 2010), but romantic unions as well. We further document a dramatic gender difference, with uncertainty among girls having much larger effects on union formation than among boys. Drawing on the rich longitudinal data of the Youth Development Study, next steps include examining the intervening experiences in schooling, work, and home leaving that we expect to illuminate how uncertainty operates over time to shape union formation for young women and men.

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Table 1. Bivariate Association between Union Type and Key Independent Variables (n = 996)

	No Union (n=143)	Marriage First (n=176)	Cohabitation First (n= 677)
Aspirations at age 16			
Not certain about occupations	0.11	0.04	0.04
Not interested in marriage	0.30	0.17	0.15
Not certain about eductional attainment	0.11	0.07	0.08
Select individual and family characteristics			
Male	0.65	0.49	0.43
Parents' educational attainment			
Less than high school	0.06	0.10	0.05
High school degree	0.29	0.26	0.36
Some college	0.26	0.31	0.30
At least a college degree	0.25	0.27	0.26

Table 2. Proportional Hazard Model Estimates of Time to First Coresidential Union (n = 996)

	Any union				Cohabitation				Direct Marriage			
	Haz. Ratio	SE	Haz. Ratio	Haz. Ratio	Haz. Ratio	SE	Haz. Ratio	Haz. Ratio	Haz. Ratio	SE	Haz. Ratio	Haz. Ratio
Aspirations at age 16												
Not interested in marriage	0.86	(0.09)	0.86	0.87	0.88	(0.10)	0.88	0.88	0.83	(0.19)	0.83	0.83
Not certain about occupations	0.60 **	(0.11)	0.61 **	0.36 **	0.65 *	(0.13)	0.66 *	0.36 **	0.42	(0.18)	0.47 +	0.32
Not certain about eductional attainment			0.84	0.85			0.89	0.91			0.61	0.61
Male*not certain about occupation				2.49 *				2.67 *				1.84
Individual Characteristics												
Male	0.75 ***	(0.06)	0.74 ***	0.72 ***	0.73 ***	(0.06)	0.72 ***	0.69 ***	0.84	(0.14)	0.83	0.81
Race/ethnicity												
African American	0.99	(0.13)	1.00	0.98	0.85	(0.13)	0.85	0.84	1.61 +	(0.41)	1.62 +	1.60 +
Hispanic	1.47 *	(0.25)	1.46 *	1.44 *	1.55 *	(0.28)	1.55 *	1.53 *	1.06	(0.49)	1.03	1.03
Asian American	1.05	(0.22)	1.03	1.06	0.70	(0.20)	0.70	0.72	2.27 **	(0.72)	2.18 *	2.23 *
Mixed race	1.00	(0.16)	0.98	0.96	0.89	(0.16)	0.88	0.85	1.46	(0.45)	1.40	1.38
Other race	0.74	(0.24)	0.77	0.80	0.69	(0.25)	0.71	0.74	1.07	(0.78)	1.19	1.21
Family structure in 1990												
Single mother only	1.00	(0.10)	1.01	1.02	1.03	(0.11)	1.03	1.04	0.89	(0.19)	0.91	0.93
Bio mother and stepparent	1.18	(0.14)	1.19	1.18	1.23	(0.16)	1.24 +	1.24 +	0.97	(0.26)	0.99	0.99
Single father only	2.61 ***	(0.60)	2.61 ***	2.60 ***	2.89 ***	(0.69)	2.89 ***	2.88 ***	0.88	(0.89)	0.89	0.88
Bio father and stepparent	1.28	(0.33)	1.26	1.26	1.57 +	(0.40)	1.55 +	1.55 +				
Joint custody	1.25	(0.28)	1.24	1.33	1.39	(0.34)	1.39	1.51 +	0.76	(0.46)	0.75	0.77
Other family structure	0.92	(0.18)	0.92	0.91	0.74	(0.18)	0.74	0.73	1.47	(0.48)	1.49	1.47
Parents' education												
Less than high school	1.08	(0.19)	1.10	1.10	0.94	(0.19)	0.96	0.96	1.78	(0.60)	1.86 +	1.86
Some college	1.00	(0.09)	1.00	1.00	0.96	(0.09)	0.96	0.96	1.19	(0.24)	1.19	1.19
At least a college degree	0.75 **	(0.07)	0.74 ***	0.74 ***	0.71 ***	(0.07)	0.71 ***	0.71 ***	0.90	(0.19)	0.89	0.89
Log likelihood	-4764.0		-4756.0	-4753.0	-3818.0		-3811.0	-3808.3	-929.0		-927.8	-927.5