Published in final edited form as:

J Fam Issues. 2016 July ; 37(10): 1458–1480. doi:10.1177/0192513X14540158.

Romantic Relationship Experiences of Adolescents and Young Adults: The Role of Mothers' Relationship History

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Abstract

With most current studies focusing on the snapshot of family structure and offspring relationship outcomes, this study examined how children's exposure to mothers' cumulative relationship history affected the likelihood of their own romantic involvement in adolescence and relationship frequency from adolescence to young adulthood. Using a large, nationally representative dataset, this study found that the number of mothers' relationship transitions was positively associated with both the likelihood of romantic involvement among adolescent children and relationship frequency their children had from adolescence to young adulthood. Further, the association between mothers' relationship transitions and young adults' relationship frequency was mediated by mother-adolescent relationship closeness and young adults' attitude towards marriage and relationships. Finally, an interaction between mother-adolescent relationship closeness and adolescent gender on young adults' relationship frequency was found.

Keywords

adolescents; dating/relationship formation; quantitative; young adults; intergenerational; intimate relationships

In his 2009 book, *The Marriage-Go-Round*, Andrew Cherlin accurately captures the unique feature of today's American families: the constant movement of stepping on and off the relationship carousel. Cherlin explains that, compared with other Western countries, "what truly makes American families different is the sum total of these differences—frequent marriage, frequent divorce, more short-term cohabiting relationships" (2009, p. 5). With the frequent transitions and shorter relationships, more than ever, Americans are constantly in and out of intimate relationships (e.g., marriage, cohabitation). With such a unique feature in American families, one pressing issue for family and relationship researchers is the developmental outcome of children whose parents enter and exit marriages and relationships at comparatively high rates (Brown, 2006; Cavanagh, Crissey, & Raley, 2008; McLanahan &

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Beck, 2010). This is a new challenge to researchers because previous efforts have focused on family structure (e.g., single parent family, stepfamily)—a rather static feature that provides only a snapshot of family arrangements. In their decade review, Crosnoe and Cavanagh stated that “although snapshot estimates indicate that the majority of children live with both biological parents at any one time, life course estimates suggest that more than half will spend some time in another family arrangement or multiple arrangement” (2010, p. 597). Similarly, Amato (2010) also noted that there is a shift from a dominant pattern of lifelong marriage to multiple marriages and relationships. These researchers suggest a new research direction that emphasizes parents’ cumulative relationship experience and its impact on children. To fill the gap in the literature and respond to the challenge, this study examined how children’s exposure to parents’, in particular mother’s, multiple relationship transitions affected their own relationship involvement in adolescence and relationship frequency in young adulthood.

Focusing on adolescents’ romantic involvement is important because involvement in romantic relationships during adolescence could be problematic and could be associated with other aspects of adolescent maladjustment, such as delinquency (e.g., Cui, Ueno, Fincham, Donnellan, & Wickrama, 2012; Haynie, Giordano, Manning, & Longmore, 2005). Focusing on relationship frequency in young adulthood is also important because the formation and maintenance of romantic relationships are important tasks during this period (Cui, Fincham, & Durtschi, 2011). Specifically, this study focused on young adults’ number of relationships so that the direct intergenerational link of relationship frequency between mothers and young adult children could be examined. Another reason to focus on young adults’ number of relationships is that frequent relationships suggest relationship instability and could indicate the inability to maintain successful long-term committed relationships (see Bartell, 2006). It is true that during young adulthood, having a few relationships may be an indication of young people exploring their options in romance and gaining experiences (Arnett, 2004), and in certain situations ending a dangerous relationship (e.g., abusive relationships) is necessary and positive. Most research findings, however, suggested that young adults usually do not end one relationship and start another for the purpose of exploring further romantic options. Instead, frequent relationships often reflect problems with commitment, relationship efficacy, conflict management, communication, and other problem solving skills (see Rodrigues, Hall, & Fincham, 2006; Simpson, 1987). Indeed, several studies have shown that close, secure, and positive romantic relationships last longer than relationships that are characterized by conflict and low commitment (e.g., Shulman, Tuval-Mashiach, Levran, & Anbar, 2006). Finally, frequent relationships may also relate to instability in other aspects of life and have negative health consequences in later adulthood (Lichter & Qian, 2008; Ogletree, Dinger, & Vesely, 2001; Willits, Benzeval, & Stansfeld, 2004). Therefore, this study focused on the likelihood of adolescents’ romantic involvement (i.e., involvement vs. no involvement) and young adults’ relationship frequency (i.e., number of relationships).

Taken together, this study examined how children’s exposure to mother’s multiple relationship transitions affected their own romantic involvement in adolescence and relationship frequency in young adulthood. This study is among the first to focus on multiple family (e.g., parents’ relationship) transitions rather than on a snapshot of family structure.

Further, this study adds to the current literature on this topic (Cavanagh et al., 2008) in several important ways, including extending relationship outcome from adolescence to young adulthood and examining the potential mechanisms that could explain the association between parents' relationship transitions and young adult children's relationship outcome.

Theoretical Perspectives

From a life course perspective (Elder & Geile, 2009), individuals' life trajectories are influenced by their families of origin (e.g., parents). The concept of "linked lives" suggests that parents and children are connected, and that parents' experiences and behaviors influence children's development. Thus, parents' marriages and relationships affect various aspects of child adjustment, especially relationship outcomes. Further, the concept of "trajectory" in life course perspective emphasizes on the connectedness of transitions and events that define the age-graded pathways (Elder, 1985). Therefore, rather than one family event, it is the series of family events and transitions that affect child development in both short term and long term. Consistent with the concept of trajectory, children who go through more family transitions (e.g., parental divorce, cohabitation, remarriage, etc.) are expected to experience more adjustment problems than those who experience no transition or one transition (see Crosnoe & Cavanagh, 2010). Finally, the concept of cumulative disadvantage from the life course perspective also suggested that disadvantages in childhood and adolescence may influence individuals cumulatively throughout their life trajectories (DiPrete & Eirich, 2006; George, 2009). This indicates that the parents' influence has long lasting significance beyond the childhood and adolescent years. Therefore, parents' cumulative relationship history (e.g., frequent relationship formations and dissolutions) can affect children as they become young adults, especially regarding forming and maintaining their own romantic relationships.

Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) is also useful in explaining the intergenerational transmission of relationship instability. For example, adolescents who have witnessed their parents frequently entering and exiting relationships could form certain attitudes and beliefs relating to the permanence of marriages and relationships (e.g., marriage is not permanent) and learn such behavior (e.g., frequent breakups). Further, such parents' relationship instability could affect parent-adolescent closeness which may influence adolescent adjustment (e.g., Gerard, Krishnakumar, & Buehler, 2006).

Despite the theoretical predictions, there remains little empirical evidence, primarily because of the lack of longitudinal designs and detailed information on parents' relationship history. To this end, this study investigated the association between mothers' cumulative relationship history and their children's relationship experiences from adolescence to young adulthood. We chose to focus on mothers instead of both parents because we wanted to examine the experiences of being consistently exposed to primary caregivers' cumulative relationships rather than family structure at a certain time point. We argued that children are consistently exposed to mothers' relationship experiences since mothers have been suggested to be the primary caregiver of children in most families (McGue, Elkins, Walden, & Iacono, 2005). Based on the life course perspective and social learning theory, we proposed that mothers'

frequent relationship transitions would lead to a higher likelihood of romantic involvement in adolescence and frequent romantic relationships in young adulthood.

Mothers' Cumulative Relationship History and Adolescents' Romantic Involvement

From a social learning perspective, parents' frequent relationship transitions (e.g., divorce, single parent, dating, cohabiting, remarriage) may serve as a model for adolescents, such that adolescents are more likely to be exposed to such relationship instability and feel more comfortable with romantic involvement themselves (Manning, Cohen, & Smock, 2011). Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), Cavanagh and colleagues (2008) examined family structure history and adolescent romance. They found that the cumulative family structure instability was associated with a higher likelihood of romantic involvement among adolescent children. However, an overwhelming majority of parents who provided parent data in Add Health were mothers; therefore using "mothers' relationship history" seems to be more targeted and provides a better description of the measure than family structure history. Therefore, the first goal of this study is to also use Add Health to examine mothers' cumulative relationship history and its influence on the likelihood of adolescent romantic involvement. Focusing on mothers only allowed for more specific interpretation regarding parents' and youth's gender (i.e., mothers and sons vs. mothers and daughters; Cunningham & Thornton, 2006). We proposed that mothers' frequent relationship transitions would be positively associated with the likelihood of adolescents' romantic involvement. This first aim of the study then serves as a first step to testing the effect of mothers' cumulative relationship transitions beyond adolescent years, which we now turn to.

Mothers' Cumulative Relationship History and Relationship Frequency in Young Adulthood

From the social learning perspective, mothers' frequent relationships could serve as a model for young adult children to have more frequent relationships. From a life course perspective, such parental influences could lead to relationship problems among young adults, which may lead to more relationships overall. Though several studies have demonstrated intergenerational transmission of divorce or relationship instability (for a review, see Amato, 2000), as indicated earlier, these studies have focused on one single experience of divorce rather than the cumulative experience of multiple relationship transitions. Cavanagh and colleagues (2008) found that family structure history was associated with the number of romantic relationships adolescents reported. However, their study only examined adolescent relationships and did not extend it into young adulthood—when relationship formation and maintenance are a major developmental task. Using data from Add Health, Ryan, Franzetta, Schelar, and Manlove (2009) extended the relationship outcome from adolescence to young adulthood and found that the number of family structure transitions was associated with early cohabitation among young adults. Even though the focus of Ryan and colleagues' study was the timing of relationship formation in young adulthood, the findings provided some support for the intergenerational link between parents' relationship history and young

adults' relationship outcomes. Thus, based on these studies and the theoretical perspectives, in the second aim of this study, we proposed that mothers' frequent relationship transitions would be positively associated with young adults' relationship frequency.

Exploring the Mechanisms

Limited research has demonstrated the link between parental relationship history and young people's relationship experiences; however, no studies have examined the mechanisms explaining such a linkage (see Cavanagh et al., 2008). Extending the current literature, this study will further examine several potential mechanisms through which mothers' cumulative relationship history influences young adults' relationship frequency.

Parent-child relationship closeness.

According to Cavanagh and colleagues (2008), the frequent loss and addition of a parental figure in the home due to parents' relationship instability may undermine the children's sense of closeness to their parents. Adolescents who feel less close to their parents may seek emotional support from outside of families, thus more likely to form romantic relationships (Longmore, Manning, & Giordano, 2001). Further, lack of closeness to parents could reduce guidance from parents, which could lead adolescents to make poor judgments that lead to more relationship issues later on, such as short-term and frequent relationships (Seiffge-Krenke, Overbeek, & Vermulst, 2010). Based on such findings, we proposed that low mother-child closeness would mediate the association between mothers' cumulative relationship history and young adults' relationship frequency.

Attitude towards marriage and relationships.

From a social learning perspective, young people form their attitude towards marriage and relationships from parental socialization and observing parental relationships. Such attitude, in turn, influence the way young adults form and maintain their own relationships (Manning et al., 2011). It is well established that parents' divorce and cohabitation are closely associated with young adults' expectations and behaviors in relationships (Cui, Fincham, & Pasley, 2008). For example, parental divorce was associated with adult children's pessimistic views about marriage, which in turn lead to higher rates of marital disruption among adult children (Amato & Booth, 1991). Specific to parents' relationship transitions, parents' frequent relationships likely send the message to children that marriage is not permanent, that cohabitation before marriage is common, and that when problems arise it is easier to leave an unsatisfying relationship than put forth the necessary effort to maintain it. Several studies have found a link between parents' entry into and exit from marriage and cohabitation and adult children's favorable attitude towards divorce (Cunningham & Thornton, 2006; Thornton & Camburn, 1987). Based on the findings, we proposed that young adults' permissive attitude towards marriage and relationships would mediate the association between mothers' cumulative relationship history and young adult's relationship frequency.

The Present Study and Specific Hypotheses

The purpose of this study is to examine the association between mothers' cumulative relationship history and young people's relationship experiences. Based on the life course perspective and social learning theory, we proposed that (a) mothers' relationship transitions were positively associated with children's likelihood of romantic involvement during adolescence (H1), (b) mothers' relationship transitions were positively associated with the number of relationships young adults had from adolescence to young adulthood (H2), and (c) the association between mothers' relationship transitions and young adults' relationship frequency was mediated by lower level of mother-adolescent closeness and young adults' permissive attitude towards marriage and relationships (H3). Using data from Add Health, the current study is among the first to examine mothers' cumulative relationship history and young adults' relationship frequency and the mediating mechanisms. In addition to the longitudinal design and the large nationally representative data, the current study also considered several important covariates.

Regarding gender, research findings suggested that family structure may influence adolescent girls' and boys' romantic experiences differently. However, the conclusions are not always consistent. Specifically, some studies suggested that adolescent boys may be more influenced by their parents' relationship transitions (Cavanagh et al., 2008), whereas some other studies have suggested that adolescent girls and young women were more affected by parental divorce and relationship unhappiness (Feng, Giarrusso, Bengston, & Frye, 1999; Jacquet & Surra, 2001). Most of the studies focused on divorce and did not examine parents' cumulative relationship history. Further, with the focus on mothers rather than both parents, it remains a question whether such gender difference exists. Cavanagh and colleagues (2008) suggested that mother-daughter closeness may play a role in young women's relationship experiences in that the mother-daughter bond may discourage adolescent girls from engaging in unhealthy relationships. Shulman, Zlotnik, Shachar-Shapira, Connolly, and Bohr (2012) also suggested that maternal relationship history influenced daughters' romantic involvement. Given the general lack of studies focusing on adolescent gender and mothers' cumulative relationship history, this study will explore the effect of youth gender and the interactions between youth gender and other variables of interests (e.g., mothers' relationship transitions, mother-adolescent closeness, etc.).

Another important covariate is family structure. Because most previous studies have focused on using family structure (e.g., divorce, stepfamily, single parent family) as a predictor of adolescent and young adult relationship outcomes, we will include current family structure in the analyses. We expected that the proposed association between mothers' cumulative relationship history and young people's relationship outcomes would exist beyond the influence of current family structure. In other words, we proposed that, despite the type of family structure these adolescents were in at the time of data collection, it is the cumulative experience (i.e., mothers' relationship history) that has the more salient impact. Finally, several covariates were included in the analyses because of their association with relationship outcome. These include adolescents' age (Cavanagh et al., 2008), race and ethnicity (Crissey, 2005), and mothers' education (Cui et al., 2012).

Method

Sample and Procedures

To evaluate the proposed hypotheses we used data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health). Add Health is a school-based longitudinal study of a nationally representative sample of adolescents in Grades 7 to 12 in the U.S. during the 1994–1995 school year. Detailed descriptions of the sample and procedures can be found from Harris and colleagues (2008) and at the website: <http://www.cpc.unc.edu/projects/addhealth/design>. Briefly, a sample of 132 high schools and middle schools from the U.S. was selected with unequal probability of selection with respect to region of country, urbanicity, school size, school type, and ethnicity to ensure that the sample is representative of the adolescents in U.S. schools.

At Wave I, in-home interviews ($N = 20,745$) were administered to students in Grades 7 to 12 in 1994–1995. The topics included respondents' social and demographic characteristics, family composition, risk behaviors, and formation of romantic partnerships. At Wave I, a parent (preferably the resident mother) of each adolescent respondent interviewed was also asked to complete a questionnaire including information on marriages, relationships and education. In 2001–2002, 15,197 respondents from the original sample were reinterviewed in Wave III.

The current study used adolescent variables from Wave I and young adult variables from Wave III, when young adults were 18 to 27 years old. To test H1 in Wave I, participants were included if they had valid sampling weights. This criterion resulted in a sample of 18,924 participants (Chantala, 2006). Further, we restricted the sample to include only those who were living with their mothers (e.g., biological mother, stepmother, adoptive mother, foster mother) and their mothers completed parent questionnaire. This resulted in a sample of 14,573 target adolescents and their mothers in Wave I. Among these participants, 13,050 had complete data. To test H2 and H3, participants were included if they had participated in both Wave I and Wave III, had valid sampling weights, reported at least one relationship, and provided complete data on both Wave I and Wave III. The reason to exclude young adults who reported no relationship between Wave I and Wave III was that these young adults may be characteristically different from those who reported one or more relationships; therefore including them may confound the intention to compare those with one or two long stable relationships and those with more frequent short-term relationships. Further, failing to report a relationship may also mean refusing to provide information that we could not differentiate from no relationship to report. This further reduced the sample to 8,373 young adults in Wave III. Attrition analyses suggested that in Wave III, males, minority youth, and those from non-two-biological parent families and had parents with lower education were more likely to have dropped out from the survey or have not provided information on romantic relationships at Wave III. With that in mind, the current study used the sample of 13,050 to test H1 and the sample of 8,373 to test H2 and H3.

Measures

Mothers' relationship transitions.—Mothers' relationship transitions was based on mothers' report in Wave I. Mothers were asked how many relationships they had in the last 18 years, and the years they started and ended (if applicable) up to three relationships (starting from the most current one and reporting back). First, we calculated the relationship duration for each of the three relationships by counting the years they reported in that relationship. Second, we subtract target adolescents' age from these relationship durations so that such relationship length was based on after the target adolescent was born (i.e., the relationships the target adolescent exposed to since birth, so that relationships before the adolescent was born were not counted). Finally, based on their reports of relationship numbers and durations, we calculated their number of relationship transitions (i.e., number of entries and exists). For example, if a mother reported she had only one relationship (e.g. married) and that relationship/marriage did not end (i.e., ongoing), then the number of transition was 0. If a mother reported she had one relationship but the relationship ended (e.g., divorce), then the number of transition was 1. Similarly, if a mother reported 3 relationships and the current one also ended then the number of transition was 5 (i.e., divorce, start a second marriage, another divorce, start a third cohabitation, then breakup). With three relationship durations reported, we could calculate up to 5 transitions. Together with the item on how many relationships the mother had during the past 18 years (ranged from 1 to 6 or more), the number of relationship transitions was coded as 0 (*no transitions*) to 5 (*5 transitions or more*).

Adolescents' romantic involvement.—At Wave I, target adolescents were asked “In the last 18 months, have you had a special romantic relationship with any one?” The item was coded as 0 = *no* and 1 = *yes*. In addition to including romantic relationships that respondents identified, we also included the “liked” relationships. The Add Health survey included an additional section administered to those respondents who did not report any romantic relationships in order to identify, by their behavior, those who are in fact in a romantic relationship (but did not report one). Following the convention of other Add Health researchers (see Cavanagh et al, 2008), we also included the “liked” relationships that involved hand holding, kissing, and telling the other that you like or love him/her.

Relationship frequency in young adulthood.—Number of romantic relationships was used to assess accumulation of romantic relationships. At Wave III, young adult respondents were asked to list all their romantic and sexual relationships they have had since Wave I. Number of romantic and sexual relationships they reported was then counted as the total number of relationships they had.

Mediators.—*Mother-adolescent closeness* was also assessed in Wave I by three items asking the adolescent if their mothers were warm and loving, if they were satisfied with the way their mothers and they communicate with each other, and if they were satisfied with their relationship with their mothers. Each item ranged from 1 = *strongly agree* to 5 = *strongly disagree*. After being recoded, the three items were summed together with a high score indicating a closer mother-adolescent relationship. *Young adults' attitude toward marriage and relationships* was assessed in Wave III by asking the target young adults how

much they agree or disagree with the statement “It is all right for an unmarried couple to live together even if they aren’t interested in considering marriage?” The item ranged from 1 = *strongly agree* to 5 = *strongly disagree*. The item was reverse coded so the higher the value the more liberal attitude toward marriage and relationships.

Other variables.—All covariates were assessed at Wave I. *Youth gender* was (re) coded as 0 = *male* and 1 = *female*. *Family structure* was assessed by four dummy variables for two-biological parent families (reference category), stepfamilies, single-mother families, and other families. *Age* was assessed in years. *Race and ethnicity* were assessed by five dummy variables for Hispanic, White (reference category), African American, Asian, and others. Finally, *mothers’ education* was assessed by asking mothers their years of schooling. The responses were coded into four dummy variables: college education or more, some college education, high school graduation (reference category), or less than a high school education.

Analytic Strategy

For testing H1, logistic regression was used because the outcome (adolescents’ romantic involvement) was a dichotomous variable. For testing H2 and H3, negative binomial models were used because the outcome variable (i.e., number of relationships young adults had) was a count variable with highly skewed distribution (Cui et al., 2012). Negative binomial models are also easy to interpret (by exponentiating coefficients so that each unit increase in the independent variable translates into a percent increase or decrease in outcome). The stratified and clustered nature of the data design (e.g., students nested in schools) were adjusted in the analysis using Stata statistical software (Chantala & Tabor, 1999). Following convention, appropriate sampling weights were used to obtain unbiased estimates for this longitudinal analysis (Chantala, 2006). Stata’s “svy” estimation was used to specify the analytical subpopulation (mothers report only) and obtain unbiased variances and standard errors. Because traditional goodness-of-fit statistics such as chi-square and pseudo *r*-square were not appropriate for the svy estimation, *F* scores were reported instead (StataCorp, 2005).

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 provides descriptive information about the sample. During adolescence (Wave I), 68.0% of adolescents reported having had romantic involvement in the past 18 months. The average number of relationship young adults had between Wave I and Wave III was 3.48, ranging from 1 to 48. Regarding mothers’ relationship transitions, the average number of mothers’ relationship transitions was 0.90, with a standard deviation of 1.31 and a range of 0 to 5. Regarding proportions (not shown in table), 57.0% of mothers reported no transitions, 20.3% reported one transition, and the remaining reported two to five transitions. Finally, information on distribution of gender, family structure, age, race and ethnicity, and parents’ education were provided. With the descriptive information, we now turn to regression analyses.

Hypotheses Testing

To test H1, we used logistic regression to regress adolescent romantic involvement on mothers' relationship transitions and other covariates. The results were provided in Table 2. Mothers' relationship transitions were positively and significantly associated with the likelihood of adolescents' involvement in romantic relationships. An odds ratio of 1.140 ($p < .001$) suggested that for every relationship transition mothers reported, it increased the chance of adolescent children's romantic involvement by 14.0%. Adolescent gender was not significant. Regarding family structure, compared with two biological parent families (the reference group), adolescents from stepfamilies, single mother families, and other families were significantly more likely to report romantic involvement. However, the more important message is that mothers' relationship transitions were significantly associated with adolescents' romantic involvement even after controlling for family structure. No interactions between mothers' relationship transitions and other variables were significant.

To test H2, negative binomial regression was used to regress young adults' number of relationships on mothers' relationship transitions. The results were shown in Model 1 of Table 3. Mothers' relationship transitions were significantly associated with young adults' total number of relationships ($b = 0.029$, $\exp(b)$ or *Odds Ratio*, $OR = 1.029$, $p < .01$). Next, the two mediators were added to Model 1 separately. Results (not shown) indicated that, individually, mother-adolescent closeness ($b = -0.021$, $OR = 0.979$, $p < .001$) and attitude toward marriage and relationship ($b = 0.059$, $OR = 1.061$, $p < .001$) were significantly associated with number of relationships young adults reported in the expected direction. Finally, both mediating variables were added simultaneously, the results are shown in Model 2 in Table 3. In Model 2, closeness with mothers was negatively associated with number of relationships young adults had ($b = -0.021$, $OR = 0.979$, $p < .001$). Young adults' permissive attitude toward marriage and relationships was also positively associated with their number of ($b = 0.058$, $OR = 1.060$, $p < .001$). After adding these three variables, the original effect of mothers' relationship transitions was reduced to nonsignificance. Separate analyses showed that there were significant associations between mothers' relationship transitions and the two mediators ($b = -0.093$, $p < .01$ for mother-adolescent closeness; and $b = 0.066$, $p < .01$ for attitude toward marriage and relationships). Formal mediating tests suggested significant mediating effects (2.20, $p < .05$ for mother-adolescent closeness; 3.08, $p < .01$ for attitude toward marriage, see Kenny, Kashy, & Bolger, 1998). Taken together, these results demonstrate mediating effects by mother-adolescent closeness and young adults' attitudes toward marriage.

Finally, given the importance of youth gender and family structure, interactions of mothers' relationship transitions, the mediators, and youth gender and family structure were tested. One interaction was significant: the interaction between gender and mother-adolescent closeness on young adults' number of relationships ($b = -0.027$, $p = .01$). In general, closer mother-adolescent relationship was associated with fewer relationships in young adulthood. However, such protective effect of close relationship with mother was especially salient for daughters as compared to sons.

Discussion

Based on the life course perspective (Elder & Geile, 2009) and social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), we hypothesized that mothers' cumulative relationship history would be positively associated with the likelihood of romantic involvement in adolescence and relationship frequency in young adulthood; and that the association between mothers' cumulative relationship history and young adults' relationship frequency would be mediated through low mother-adolescent closeness and young adult children's permissive attitude toward marriage and relationships. Using the large nationally representative and longitudinal data from Add Health, results from logistic regression and negative binomial regression supported the proposed hypotheses.

First, we found a significant association between mothers' cumulative relationship history and adolescents' likelihood of romantic involvement. This finding is consistent with the life course perspective and social learning theory suggesting that parents' relationship history influences adolescent children's life experience, especially relationship development. Such finding was also consistent with that from other studies (e.g., Cavanaugh et al., 2008). Indeed, when adolescents were exposed to their mothers' frequent relationships, they could become more interested and feel more comfortable with romantic involvement. They could also learn their mothers' behavior and experiment with engaging in romantic relationships. During adolescence, identity development is a major developmental task (Erikson, 1959). Adolescents may not be prepared for intimacy because their identities are not yet fully formed; therefore, romantic involvement could be overwhelming for adolescents which may bring negative consequences. As a result, exposure to mothers' frequent relationship transitions could lead to a higher likelihood of adolescent romantic involvement that could be off timing (e.g., early involvement; Elder & Geile, 2009). Consistent with the life course cumulative disadvantage principle, such early exposure and romantic involvement could bring successively contingent negative consequences in adolescence, such as externalizing problems and internalizing problems (O'Rand & Hamil-Lucker, 2005).

In addition to the concurrent effect during adolescence, exposure to mothers' cumulative relationship history could have a persistent impact beyond the adolescent years. The second finding from this study suggested that mothers' frequent relationship transitions were positively associated with young adult children's relationship frequency. During young adulthood, forming and maintaining romantic relationships are critical developmental tasks (Conger, Cui, Bryant, & Elder, 2000) and have important consequences on young adults' well-being and behavioral adjustment (e.g., Ogletree et al., 2001; Willits et al., 2004). Earlier studies have suggested the consequences of parental divorce on young adults' relationship attitude (Jacquet & Surra, 2001), behavioral interaction (Cui et al., 2008), and relationship dissolution (Bartell, 2006). However, little attention has been paid to the effect of cumulative history of parents' relationships (Ryan et al., 2009). The findings from this study suggested that, after taking consideration of current family structure, mothers' cumulative relationship history has a persistent impact on young adult children's relationship experiences. Specifically, mothers' frequent relationships were associated with more relationships in young adults.

In addition to establishing the association between mothers' relationship history and young adults' relationship frequency, this study also elucidated several important mediating mechanisms. First, mothers' frequent change in relationships could undermine mother-child relationship closeness (Cavanagh et al., 2008). Such decrease in mother-child closeness could lead adolescent children to seek emotional support outside of the family, therefore engaging in romantic involvement (Longmore et al., 2001). In addition, mothers' frequent relationships could instill in children the attitude that relationships are short lived and that frequent relationships are quite common (Manning et al., 2011).

Regarding youth gender, the findings from this study did not support gender difference in the likelihood of romantic involvement in adolescence nor relationship frequency in young adulthood. In addition, interaction between mothers' relationship transitions and youth gender was not significant, suggesting that there was no gender difference in the effect of mothers' relationship experiences on adolescent romantic involvement or young adults' relationship frequency. There was, however, a significant interaction between youth gender and mother-adolescent closeness on young adults' relationship frequency, suggesting that closer relationship with mother during adolescence was more beneficial for daughters than for sons regarding their own relationship experiences in young adulthood (i.e., fewer relationships). Such finding is consistent with some previous studies suggesting that maternal romantic history is particularly influential on their daughters' romantic involvement (e.g., Shulman et al., 2012). However, given that only one out of many interactions was significant, this may have occurred by chance, therefore caution is necessary when interpreting the results.

Taken together, this study addresses an important topic regarding the influence of mothers' relationship history on young people's relationship experiences. The findings fill an important gap in the literature. Specifically, most studies to date have been focusing on a relatively static nature of family structure that does not capture the changing nature of American families today (Cherlin, 2009). By looking at mothers' cumulative relationship history since the adolescents' birth, this study extended current literature by investigating the cumulative influence of mothers' relationship transitions. Particularly, by enumerating mothers' relationship transitions within a defined period (after the adolescents' birth), we eliminated mothers' relationships transitions before the adolescent was born (therefore were not exposed to). Such findings remained significant even after controlling for current family structure, which provided stronger support for the conclusion. In addition to addressing this important topic, this study is also advantageous in its methodological design, such as a longitudinal design from adolescence to young adulthood over a 12-year period, a large nationally representative sample, and the multiple informant method (Bank, Dishion, Skinner, & Patterson, 1990).

The findings should, however, be viewed in the light of several limitations. First, despite the strength of focusing on mothers' cumulative relationship history (i.e., relationship transitions), the measure simply documented the number of relationship transitions and did not differentiate among the type of transitions. For example, a single divorce and cohabitation would each count as one transition, but their effects could be different. Future studies might examine if different types of transitions would have different consequences. In

addition, such measure of transitions only allowed reports of up to five transitions. This is due to the limitation of the mothers' report in Add Health. Even though the descriptive statistics suggested that most mothers experience fewer than five transitions, it is likely that some mothers have experienced more than five transitions and such variation may be truncated. Further, mothers were asked to report at Wave I, therefore more transitions may happen between Waves I and III which may affect the findings on its effect on young adult outcomes at Wave III (especially for those younger adolescents at Wave I). Therefore, future studies need measures that allow reports of more transitions and cover a longer period of time. However, the fact that associations were found suggested that such effect were significant even with conservative estimations.

Second, regarding young adults' number of relationships, each relationship reported was counted as one relationship regardless of its importance, timing, and duration. However, a not very serious and short relation may be different from a very serious and long relationship. Future studies need to look into these factors beyond the number of relationships. In addition, the number of relationship young adults reported at Wave III included romantic and sexual relationships they had. Because the way the question was worded, there may be sexual relationships counted that were not romantic relationship in nature, therefore inflating the estimation of the number of romantic relationships. Further, those who did not report any relationships were excluded from the current study due to the concern that they may be distinctly different from those who reported at least one relationship therefore confound the interpretation. We do not know whether those who did not provide information in fact did not have a relationship or had relationships but simply refused to answer. Future studies may take a closer look at young adults who do not have a romantic relationship.

Third, due to data limitation, the current study only examined two mediating mechanisms. Particularly, attitude toward marriage and relationships was assessed at Wave III. It would be better to test such mediator at Wave I (Cole & Maxwell, 2003). Such attitude may begin to form during adolescence but steadily evolve over time. In addition to these factors examined, there are several other factors that could potentially also explain such an association. For example, one factor is problem solving skill. It is possible that when mothers experience multiple relationships, young people do not get the opportunity to learn the problem solving skills from their parents (e.g., communication skills; Amato & DeBoer, 2001), and therefore lack such skills to maintain their own relationships (Shulman et al., 2012). In addition, young people could learn conflict behavior from observing their parents' relationship trouble, and such conflict behavior could lead to relationship dissolution (Cui et al., 2011). Future studies could further look into these mechanisms. Fourth, this study focused on mothers' relationship experiences and excluded fathers'. The advantages were to have a clear interpretation on mothers' effect and examine mother-son and mother-daughter differences. However, excluding fathers' relationship history could limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research needs to examine father data. Finally, participants who did not provide complete data were excluded from the current study (i.e., listwise deletion) due to the complexity of imputing data on clustered and longitudinal data with sampling weights. Future studies may find better ways to handle missing data and retain the statistical power.

Despite these limitations, the study provided important evidence on the importance of the cumulative influence of mothers' relationship history on young people's relationship outcomes. The findings suggested that mothers' frequent relationship transitions were associated with young people's romantic involvement and frequent relationships. The findings send a message to parents that their own behaviors in relationships and their decision to form and terminate romantic relationships not only affect themselves, but also affect their children, both in short term and in long term. Further, the findings also suggest to parents that their relationship transitions could affect their children's relationship outcomes through reduced parent-child closeness and attention. One preventative measure that may be employed by mothers is to be attentive to their children and maintain a close relationship with them, especially during relationship transitions. Finally, relationship education could be useful for both generations (Fincham, Stanley, & Rhoades, 2011).

Acknowledgments

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was supported by a grant (1R03HD064836) from the Eunice Kenney Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. This study uses data from Add Health, a program project directed by Kathleen Mullan Harris and designed by J. Richard Udry, Peter, S. Bearman, and Kathleen Mullan Harris at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and funded by a grant P01-HD31921 from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, with cooperative funding from 23 other federal agencies and foundations. Special acknowledgement is due Ronald R. Rindfuss and Barbara Entwisle for assistance in the original design. Information on how to obtain the Add Health data files is available on the Add Health website (<http://www.cpc.unc.edu/addhealth>). No direct support was received from grant P01-HD31921 for this analysis.

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Table 1.Descriptive Information on Study Variables (weighted) ($N = 8,358$).

Variables	<i>M</i> or %	<i>SD</i>	Range
Mothers' relationship transitions	0.90	1.31	0–5
Adolescent romantic involvement	68.0%		
Young adult relationship frequency	3.48	3.01	1–48
Mediators			
Mother-adolescent closeness	12.78	2.26	3–15
Attitude toward marriage	3.53	1.27	1–5
Age	15.84	1.73	11.6–21.3
Gender			
Female	51.2%		
Male (reference)	48.8%		
Race and ethnicity			
White (reference)	71.9%		
Hispanic	10.8%		
African American	13.4%		
Asian	2.7%		
Other races and ethnicities	1.2%		
Mothers' education			
College or more	23.4%		
Some college	29.2%		
High school graduation (reference)	32.5%		
Less than a high school education	14.9%		
Family structure			
Two-biological parents (reference)	60.6%		
Stepfamilies	17.1%		
Single-mother families	19.5%		
Other families	2.8%		

Table 2.

Logistic Regression of Adolescent Romantic Involvement on Mothers' Relationship Transitions at Wave I ($N = 13,050$).

Variables	OR	SE	95% CI	
Mothers' relationship transitions	1.140***	.030	1.083	1.201
Age	1.410***	.037	1.338	1.486
Gender	1.090	.062	0.975	1.219
Race and ethnicity				
Hispanic	0.874	.080	0.730	1.047
African American	0.837**	.063	0.722	0.972
Asian	0.499***	.097	0.340	0.732
Other races and ethnicities	0.895	.287	0.474	1.688
Mothers' education				
College or more	0.980	.082	0.830	1.157
Some college	1.082	.062	0.965	1.212
Less than a high school education	0.860	.079	0.717	1.032
Family structure				
Stepfamilies	1.276**	.120	1.058	1.537
Single-mother families	1.239**	.111	1.039	1.479
Other families	1.668***	.263	1.221	2.279
$F(13, 118) = 23.58, p < .000$				

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

Table 3.

Negative Binomial Regression of Young Adult Relationship Frequency on Mothers' Relationship Transitions ($N = 8,373$).

Variables	Model 1			Model 2		
	b	SE	OR	b	SE	OR
Mothers' relationship transitions	0.029**	.014	1.029	.023	.014	1.023
Mother-adolescent closeness				-0.021***	.005	0.979
Attitude toward marriage				0.058***	.010	1.060
Age	-0.011	.008	0.989	-0.013	.007	0.987
Gender	-0.005	.026	0.995	-0.001	.025	0.999
Race and ethnicity						
Hispanic	-0.140*	.063	0.869	-0.144*	.062	0.866
African American	-0.112*	.043	0.894	-0.076	.043	0.927
Asian	-0.221*	.086	0.802	-0.208*	.085	0.812
Other races and ethnicities	-0.007	.212	0.993	0.001	.204	1.001
Mothers' education						
College or more	0.136**	.040	1.146	0.133**	.040	1.142
Some college	0.076*	.033	1.079	0.076*	.033	1.079
Less than a high school education	-0.108*	.044	0.898	-0.105*	.044	0.900
Family structure						
Stepfamilies	0.012	.048	1.012	0.002	.047	1.002
Single-mother families	0.021	.035	1.021	0.007	.034	1.007
Other families	-0.006	.076	0.994	-0.025	.076	0.975
Constant	1.380***	.127		1.468***	.150	
	$F(13, 118) = 5.48$ ***			$F(15, 116) = 9.62$ ***		

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.