



Parents who exit and parents who enter. Family structure transitions, child psychological health, and early drinking

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to extend prior research by exploring whether family structure transition is associated with an increase in early alcohol consumption and whether this association is mediated by; children's socio-emotional problems, providing information on whether the effects of the transition; differ according to the number of changes, the family's initial status, or the time of exposure. The data have been drawn from the UK Millennium Cohort Study to explore associations framed with; a life-course approach. Our findings suggest that types of family transitions (such as distinguishing; parental exits from and parental entrances to the family) are more important than the number of; family changes during childhood. The results show that moving from a two-parent household to a single-parent household directly increased the probability of being a frequent alcohol consumer among early adolescent boys, whereas the indirect effect on girls was found via socio-emotional difficulties. Our findings also show an increase in socio-emotional and behavioural difficulties in boys due to the entrance of a step-parent only if the transition occurred in the earliest childhood. Indeed, a sensitivity analysis of the time to which the children were exposed to the transition to a new family structure showed stronger effects for those who experienced a family structure change in the early life course, consistent with the cumulative disadvantage process.

1. Introduction

Currently, we are witnessing a crucial decline in the traditional family structure – that is, a married couple and their co-resident children – because of an increase in the number of divorces, cohabitation, and single-parent households. According to [Panico et al. \(2010\)](#), approximately 20% of children born between 2000 and 2002, who were members of the UK Millennium Cohort Study, experienced at least one change in family structure by age five. Supplemental descriptive analyses conducted on the same sample have shown that these percentages were already relevant at three years old (15%) and remained almost constant after age seven (20–22%). These statistics are also consistent with those provided by [Harkness and Salgado \(2018\)](#) showing that not only in the UK, but also in the US and recently in Sweden, Denmark and Ireland, approximately 25% of all households with children are headed by a single parent.

This evidence suggests that the pattern of this generation's family life is certainly complex and more unstable than those of earlier generations, for whom experiencing a change in the family structure early

in life was a much less common event – involving only 10% of British Cohort Study children born in 1970 ([Kiernan, 2004](#)).

Much of the debate about this critical societal change has focused mainly on its potential consequences for children. The association between family instability and a declining wellbeing of the children is well documented, and most prior findings have consistently shown that children who grow up in stable two-parent families perform better in a number of outcomes and domains, including a lower propensity to drink alcohol at early ages (e.g., [Amato, 2001](#)).

Age at first use is a potentially powerful predictor of progression to alcohol consumption. Evidence suggests that the earlier the age at which adolescents begin to consume alcohol, the greater the risk of alcohol use and dependency, alcohol-related problems, and abuse of illicit drugs ([Guttmannova et al., 2011](#); [Komro et al., 2010](#); [Loeber et al., 2010](#)). However, even if nearly 14% of pre-teens in the UK have had at least some experience with alcohol ([Kelly et al., 2016](#)), most prior research has almost exclusively focused on later adolescents, which potentially underestimates the effect of family structure instability on early alcohol consumption. Moreover, the majority of those

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studies merely compared different family structures at a single point in time without framing them in a longitudinal pattern of exposure.

In this paper, we examine whether changes in the family structure are associated with increases in early alcohol consumption – measured at fourteen years of age – and whether this association is mediated by children's socio-emotional and behavioural difficulties, contributing to disentangle differences in the effects of the instability by the number of transitions, the family's initial structure, or the time of exposure. We seek to contribute to prior research by using data drawn from the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), a nationally representative cohort study of children born into 19,000 families between September 2000 and January 2002 in the UK. That database collected data on each child's household, providing detailed information on family structure, parenting, child behaviour, and cognitive development. The present study focuses on information collected when the child was one, three, five, eight, eleven, and fourteen years old.

Our results indicate that multiple family transitions between ages one and eight strongly increased the probability of reporting symptoms of high socio-emotional difficulties at age eleven among boys. At the same time, a positive association was found between single change in the family structure and socio-emotional difficulties among girls and between single transition in the family structure and boys' probability of becoming frequently alcohol consumers. Concerning types of transition, moving from a two-parent family to a single-parent family directly increased the probability of drinking alcohol among boys and indirectly increased it via high Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) symptoms among girls, whereas moving from a single to a re-constituted family was not significantly associated with alcohol consumption and higher psychological problems for either boys or girls. Finally, the child's age at the time of family transition showed the existence of a critical life stage of childhood – the first three years of life – for both boys and girls. The effect of a parental exit from the household was stronger when the transition occurred in earlier childhood than with later events. Moreover, results concerning parental entrance into the single-parent household showed an increase in socio-emotional and behavioural difficulties among boys if the transition occurred between ages one and three.

This paper is organised as follows. The next section provides an overview of the existing literature. Section 3 introduces the research design and the empirical model. Section 4 presents the data and the analytic techniques, Section 5 discusses the results, and the last section reports the conclusions and possible policy implications.

2. Background

2.1. Family structure transitions and early drinking

Family instability has been considered among the most relevant risk factors influencing child alcohol consumption during early and later adolescence. While some studies have focused mainly on the family composition itself, others have favoured the transition of the family from one structure to another, and still others have centred their attention on the family environment and family dynamics to assess alcohol predictors.

A stable family environment has long been considered a key element for successful transition through adolescence (Vanassche et al., 2014). Empirical research has found that adolescents in a single-parent family or in a step-family are more prone to engage in risky behaviour than adolescents from intact families (e.g., Amato, 2001).

However, while most studies have focused on the direct effects of family type, others have emphasized the role of the intermediating family dynamics. For instance, the assumption that living with both biological parents is better for a child's wellbeing (Amato and Cheadle, 2008) was explained by changes in the household assets and in life circumstances due to the dissolution of the union, which have negative consequences for adolescent behaviour (Vanassche et al., 2014).

Mediating family processes also include the quality of parent–child relationships (Ganong and Coleman, 2004), providing evidence that a supportive family environment is an essential part of the explanation why alcohol consumption, substance use, and antisocial behaviour vary across family types (Vanassche et al., 2014; Crawford and Novak, 2008).

However, family structure has also been linked with an adolescent's propensity to drink alcohol through specific dimensions of its environment. For example, it has been proven that family attributes can predict the child's drinking, as a result of the socialization process from child to adult. Indeed, parental characteristics and family environment can be considered as major sources of socialization and influence during childhood and early adolescence, and they represent important ways by which alcohol is introduced to offspring (Foxcroft and Lowe, 1991). Thus, higher parental alcohol consumption was related to higher adolescent consumption because children reproduce parents' drinking (Vanassche et al., 2014; Kelly et al., 2016). Adolescents' perceptions of family approval of alcohol use have been shown to be another predictor of the initiation of drinking (Donovan and Molina, 2011). Indeed, adolescents were more likely to start drinking if they had a greater perception of permissiveness by his or her mother and father (Brook et al., 1986). As parents' liberalness towards alcohol consumption increases, their adolescent children will be more likely to drink alcohol (Vanassche et al., 2014; Moore et al., 2010).

2.2. Family structure transitions, the child's socio-emotional difficulties and early drinking

A large body of evidence shows that children who have experienced divorce are twice as likely to experience socio-emotional and behavioural problems as children living in two-parent families are. Most of the related studies have shown that instability in family structure directly contributes in a negative way to the child's psychological well-being (Bachman et al., 1990; Cavanagh and Huston, 2008; Fomby and Cherlin, 2007; Perales et al., 2015; Pearce et al., 2014; Fomby and Cherlin, 2007, 2007), and the developmental psychopathology framework (Davies and Cicchetti, 2004) has often been used to explain why some children adapt better than others to adverse events, such as a parental divorce.

At the same time, differences in the psychological health of children who grow up in normative and in vulnerable families have been explained by additive factors, such as economic and time resources, maternal mental health, parenting quality, and parental relationship quality (McMunn et al., 2001; Lacey et al., 2013; McLanahan et al., 2013; Weaver and Schofield, 2015). However, many of these factors are highly interrelated with many possible interaction effects, which often makes the determination of a causal chain problematic (McMunn et al., 2001).

Many studies have also investigated the relationship between children's emotional and behavioural difficulties and alcohol use during adolescence, with most reporting a positive association (Goodwin et al., 2004; Marmorstein, 2010; McCarty et al., 2012; Needham, 2007; Crum et al., 2008; Kaplow et al., 2001; King et al., 2004), whereas other researchers have reported a negative association (Maggs et al., 2008; Edwards et al., 2015) or even no association (Englund et al., 2008).

Some differences in the effect of socio-emotional and behavioural difficulties on drinking have been found between internalizing and externalizing symptoms and between girls and boys. According to Hussong et al. (2011, 2017), evidence supporting the role of internalizing symptoms as precursors of substance use to reduce distress, anxiety and phobias (Hussong et al., 2011; Kassel et al., 2010), is weaker than evidence reported for externalizing symptoms, such as aggression, delinquency, and deviant behaviours (Hussong et al., 2011; Chassin et al., 2013).

Externalizing or deviance proneness pathways to alcohol use have indeed long been recognized and have been almost consistently

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