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Family Structure History and Adolescent Romance

This study examined the association between family structure history and adolescent romance. Using a national sample drawn from Add Health (N = 13,570), family structure at Wave I was associated with the likelihood that adolescents were involved in a romantic relationship at Wave II and, among those in a relationship, the number of relationships they had since Wave I. Cumulative family instability and its timing were also associated with these outcomes and largely drove the family structure effects. Gender and age interactions suggest that experiences of family instability were more consequential to the romantic lives of boys and younger teens.

Adolescent romance is an emerging area of social science inquiry for two important reasons. First, the formation of intimate heterosexual romantic relationships is a key developmental task in adolescence (Collins, 2003; Thornton, 1990). Nearly all adolescents express an interest in dating and, by late adolescence, most have experienced an

exclusive heterosexual romantic relationship (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003). These romantic relationships, in turn, help young people define who they are (Feiring, 1999) and serve as a source of social status during adolescence (Dunphy, 1963). At the same time, romantic relationships can be problematic. National estimates suggest that about a third of young people experience some type of victimization in romantic relationships (Halpern, Oslak, Young, Martin, & Kupper, 2001). Moreover, young people, girls especially, who become romantically involved experience increases in depression (Joyner & Udry, 2000). Second, these relationships not only help shape the adolescent experience, they can presage union formation in adulthood. For example, adolescents involved in adolescent relationships are more likely to cohabit or marry in early adulthood (Raley, Crissey, & Muller, 2007). Precursors of domestic violence in adult relationships have also been observed in adolescent dating relationships (Henton, Cate, Koval, Lloyd, & Christopher, 1983).

In this growing area of research, the antecedents of adolescent romance remain poorly understood. Like so many developmental phenomena in the early life course, adolescent romance, we argue, is rooted in the family context, specifically, in young people's family structure histories. The theoretical foundations for this research come from the intergenerational transmission of divorce literature (Bumpass, Martin, & Sweet, 1991, Mueller & Pope, 1977; Wolfinger, 2005), evidence that adolescent relationship violence is associated with family structure (Carr & VanDeusen, 2002; Malik, Sorenson, &

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Aneshensel, 1998), and findings from the family process paradigm (Crosnoe, Mistry, & Elder, 2002). Integrating insights from these literatures, we expect that family structure history is associated with the likelihood of romantic involvement and, among those involved in romantic relationships, the likelihood of involvement in an emotionally or physically dangerous relationship or both and the number of relationships they engaged in over the past 18 months.

These expectations are tested with data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), a nationally representative study of school-going adolescents. Using adolescent reports of their parents' marital and cohabitation histories and indicators that capture the presence, character, and stability of their own romantic relationships, we explore the links between family structure history and adolescent romance. In doing so, we pay special attention to variations by gender and age, recognizing that the consequences of family structure change (Amato, 2000) and the meanings and significance of romance differ in important ways for boys and girls (Giordano, Longmore, & Manning, 2006; Maccoby, 1998), and that the nature and importance of romantic relationships change as adolescents age (Shulman & Scharf, 2000).

Intergenerational Transmission of Intimate Relationships

Our expectation that family structure history is linked with adolescent romance is based, in part, on the rich literatures outlining the intergenerational transmission of marriage and divorce. We know, for instance, that parents' marital histories are closely linked with the union formation expectations and behaviors of their children (Amato, 1996; Bumpass et al., 1991; Wolfinger, 2005). Adult children of stably married parents experience lower rates of marital disruption, whereas children of divorce tend to be more pessimistic about the chances of life-long marriage and view divorce less negatively than others (Amato & Booth, 1991). Children of divorce also transition to first unions—marriage or cohabitation—sooner (Cherlin, Kiernan & Chase-Lansdale, 1995; Wolfinger). Although less is known about the adult relationship trajectories of children born outside of marriage, existing evidence suggests that the romantic trajectories of these young people are similar to those who experienced a parental divorce (Amato, 1991; McLanahan &

Sandefur, 1994). Lastly, residing in stepparent families further increases the likelihood of early marriage (Wolfinger). Diminished expectations about marriage and earlier union formation, in turn, increase the likelihood of instability in their own marital and romantic trajectory (Bumpass et al.).

In this study, we focus on three dimensions of adolescent romance. The first, the likelihood of a current romantic relationship at Wave II, provides a baseline measure of romantic involvement in adolescence. The next two dimensions are examined only among those currently involved in a relationship. To gauge the quality and character of these sometime problematic relationships, we consider whether the respondent is the victim of verbal or physical abuse in his or her current relationship (Halpern et al., 2001). Finally, as a proxy of romantic instability in adolescents' own romantic trajectories, we examine the number of romantic partners these young people had since Wave I. We argue that, together, these dimensions of adolescent romance represent precursors of young people's romantic trajectories in adulthood. And, by examining adolescent romantic experiences, we gain insights into the social processes that contribute to the intergenerational transmission of family instability.

These associations, however, are not entirely causal. Factors like parental education and poverty status both select young people into different family structure histories and contribute to the likelihood that they experience instability in their own relationships (Fomby & Cherlin, 2007; Hao & Xie, 2002). Yet research suggests that part of this intergenerational transmission is rooted in young people's experiences of parental divorce and repartnering (Amato & DeBoer, 2001; Wolfinger, 2005), experiences that may also shape their romantic lives in adolescence.

But what aspects of their parents' romantic histories are most salient for adolescents' romantic lives? This is an especially compelling question as the dramatic changes in union formation and dissolution over the past 50 years have translated into more dynamic relationship histories for adults and more complex living arrangements for their children. Thus, a nuanced view of family dynamics, one that moves beyond family structure at a point in time to one that incorporates the whole of children's family structure experiences, is required (Demo, Aquilino, & Fine, 2005; Teachman, 2003; Wu & Martinson, 1993). In this

study, we attempt to do so by focusing on two dimensions of family structure history. The first, *family structure*, represents a snapshot of the parents' relationship status in a young person's home during adolescence. The second dimension, *family instability*, involves changes in family structure across the early life course. We measure this with a count of family structure transitions from birth through adolescence. We also examine the timing of family instability, with a count of transitions during early childhood, middle childhood, and early adolescence.

Linking Family Structure History and Adolescent Romance

The literature on the intergenerational transmission of divorce suggests that family environments influence adolescent romantic relationships. To understand *why* this link exists, we turn to the family process paradigm. Broadly, this paradigm posits that family roles, relationships, and functioning are key mechanisms that shape adolescent development (Crosnoe et al., 2002). Moreover, these aspects of the family context can vary by family structure or be altered by family transitions (Amato, 2000; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994).

Beginning with family structure, we expect links between family structure and adolescent romance to operate through *contemporaneous* levels of parental support, socialization, and social control. Research suggests that adolescent behaviors and attitudes, including those related to romance, are intimately related to their feelings of parental support (Longmore, Manning, & Giordano, 2001; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). Adolescents who lack sufficient support from their families may shift emotional dependencies to friends and romantic partners, forming closer, more intense relationships with peers to compensate for what their families do not provide (Aquilino, 1991; Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1998). Evidence suggests that adolescents in stepparent families, in particular, report less support (Goldscheider & Goldscheider; Sweeney, 2007) and, thus, may be more likely to be involved in romantic relationships.

Additionally, socialization processes may be important for linking family structure to the presence, character, and stability of adolescent romantic relationships. Single parents, regardless of gender, often engage in romantic relationships that may lead to remarriage or cohabitation and,

thus, actively model dating roles (Whitbeck, Simons, & Kao, 1994). Adolescents may become more interested in romantic relationships, or be more comfortable with romantic activity, having seen a parent's dating behavior. Alternatively, adolescents whose single parent is not romantically involved (or who has many short-term relationships) may have had less opportunity to observe and learn relationship skills like conflict resolution and compromise (Amato & DeBoer, 2001) and, therefore, may experience more instability and conflict in their own romantic relationships. Children in married stepparent families may also be cautious about romantic involvement but, we expect, less so than those in single-parent or cohabiting stepparent families because parental remarriage may reinforce messages about the value of committed relationships and provide more opportunity to observe healthy relationship skills. Together, we expect that adolescents in two-biological-parent families will be less likely to be romantically involved than adolescents in stepparent and, perhaps, also single-parent families. Furthermore, among those romantically involved, we expect that adolescents in two-biological-parent families will have more stable (i.e., fewer) romantic relationships than other youth.

In addition to parental support and socialization, differences in parental monitoring and control may contribute to the link between family structure history and adolescent romantic experiences. Compared to parents in two-biological-parent families, single-parent families, father-only families especially, are less able to monitor young people's relationships because fewer adults are present (Hogan & Kitagawa, 1985; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Thompson, McLanahan, & Curtin, 1992). Similarly, stepparent families, especially cohabiting stepparent families, may also be less effective in monitoring children's relationships, as stepparents may lack the legitimacy of biological parents or have less incentive to invest time in the children living in their homes or both (Thompson et al.). Lower levels of supervision, then, may leave young people with more opportunities to engage in—or, more importantly, to continue in—multiple relationships and relationships that pose them harm. For these reasons, young people in stepparent and single-parent families may be more likely than those in two-biological-parent families to experience verbal or even physical conflict in their relationships. They may also engage in more romantic relationships.

The second dimension of family structure history we consider is the level of instability and change in family structure (Demo et al., 2005; Wu & Martinson, 1993). Theory that supports this dimension is largely agnostic about particular family structures or types of transitions (Teachman, 2003; Wu & Martinson). Instead, it emphasizes the multiple sources of stress (emotional, financial, social, etc.) that children experience with each change in parents' romantic history. The loss or addition of a parental figure in the home may disrupt a child's sense of security and undermine her perception of, or experience with, parental support, closeness, and monitoring as well as her views about romantic relationships and the skills required to maintain them. These disruptions can be exacerbated by residential moves and the dramatic changes in family income and parents' employment patterns that often accompany family structure change (Amato, 2000; Cavanagh & Huston, 2006; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Teachman). Because family structure change is repeatable across an adolescent's life, this stress can accumulate over time.

In the case of adolescent romance, our hypothesis is straightforward. Because young people who experience more family instability are raised in family contexts that provide lower levels of parental support, we expect that more family instability is associated with a higher likelihood of romance and with having more romantic partners. Furthermore, because instability is associated with lower levels of parental control and supervision, we expect that young people in less stable families are more likely to be in relationships marked by verbal or physical conflict.

The effects of family instability may also vary by the timing of family transitions. Some researchers suggest that family structure change in early childhood is most salient to adolescent development, as disruption in this life stage undermines the quality of early parent-child relationships, relationships that serve as the foundation for subsequent development (McLanahan, 1985; Parson & Bales, 1955; Rutter & Quinton, 1984). Others point to the significance of parenting behaviors during middle childhood and adolescence for understanding adolescent adjustment (Liska & Reed, 1985; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Instability during adolescence might be especially problematic, as family rules and expectations designed to control and support adolescents as they navigate this life stage may be less well defined or enforced.

Of course, stress, conflict, and diminished parent-child relationships are not inherent attributes of a divorce or remarriage but derive from the context in which these family transitions occur (Wheaton, 1990). For some children, parental divorce, for instance, can have little negative effect or be beneficial for their adjustment when it represents an escape from a chronically stressful environment (Amato & DeBoer, 2001; Booth & Amato, 2001). Only a minority of divorces, however, appear to be preceded by a high level of chronic marital conflict (Amato & Booth, 1991). For this reason, divorce, and the family instability it sets into motion, is more often associated with negative outcomes for children (Amato, 2000).

Gender, Age, and Adolescent Romance

Thus far, our discussion about the association between family structure history and adolescent romance implies that these linkages operate similarly for all teens, regardless of gender and age. We know, however, that both factors play a role in the family context and adolescent romance.

Beginning with gender, the processes that link family structure and the presence, character, and stability of adolescent romance may operate differently for boys and girls. To begin, girls are more likely to engage in romantic relationships and experience the emotional and social consequences of them more directly than boys (Carver et al., 2003; Joyner & Udry, 2000). Furthermore, young people often compensate for changes in parental relationships by drawing on peers. Whom they turn to, however, may differ by gender. Girls often have long histories of intimate friendships with peers and may be more inclined to turn to them for support (Giordano et al., 2006; Maccoby, 1998). Because boys have fewer intimate friendships, they may be more likely to compensate for diminished parental support and closeness through romantic relationships. Given this, the link between family structure history and our three dimensions of adolescent romance may be stronger for boys. Alternatively, compelling evidence suggests that girls may be more influenced by family structure history. Girls, compared to boys, are considered more "relationship oriented" and often take more responsibility for maintaining relationships, romantic or otherwise (Block, 1983; Wood, 2000). Consequently, girls' relationships skills, although honed through relationships with peers, teachers, and parents,

may be more affected by experiences in the family (Crockett & Randall, 2006). Thus, family structure history may be more salient for girls' relationships. For these reasons, we investigate whether the hypothesized linkages in this study differ by gender.

Turning to age, researchers suggest that romantic relationships increase in importance as teens move through adolescence (Carver et al., 2003; Shulman & Scharf, 2000). Rising social expectations for heterosexual dating combined with increased biological motivations, socioemotional intelligence, and cognitive maturity further encourage young people to engage in romance. Romantic relationships do, however, occur in early adolescence, although at lower rates and in qualitatively different ways. Romantic relationships among younger adolescents tend to operate more like friendships, are less emotionally intense, and are of shorter duration, whereas relationships among older teens tend to be more emotionally intense, with partners more enmeshed in each other's lives (Shulman & Scharf). Because of this, older teens are more likely to provide their partner support and comfort *and* engage in more physical or emotional conflict (Halpern et al., 2001; Shulman & Scharf). Thus, although romantic relationships, especially those marked by conflict, will be more common among older teens, we expect that family structure history will be more salient for younger adolescents, a group with less experience in intimate relationships upon which to draw.

Other Individual and Family Characteristics of Interest

Multiple aspects of family life and individual development are associated with both family structure history and adolescent romance. Consequently, the objectives of this study must be pursued while taking into account key child and family characteristics. This study, therefore, controls for adolescents' race/ethnicity to account for unmeasured characteristics of social location that affect family structure history as well as adolescent behavior (Hogan & Kitagawa, 1985). Parents' educational attainment is also controlled because it is associated with family structure history as well as parenting practices that may be linked to adolescent romance (Lareau, 2004; McLanahan, 2004). We also control for family structure at birth, a proxy for different socialization contexts into which a child is born and

unmeasured selection factors that contribute to the likelihood that they experience family instability. Lastly, we control for recent residential moves that often accompany changes in family structure and affect young people's opportunities and motivation for romance.

METHOD

Source of Data and Sample

The data for this research come from Add Health, a nationally representative study of adolescents in Grades 7 through 12 in the United States in 1995. Add Health used a multistage, stratified, school-based, cluster sampling design. For each study school, Add Health collected an in-school survey and, about 1 year later, selected a nationally representative sample from this pool of students to participate in an in-home interview. These interviews, conducted between April and December 1995, yielded the Wave I data. The Wave II in-home interview, nearly identical in content and form to Wave I and intended for all Wave I respondents but those who were in 12th grade at Wave I, was conducted between April and September 1996 (see Harris et al., 2003). Overall, about 14,700 adolescents completed both waves of the in-home interview. The analytic sample was limited to adolescents who participated in Waves I and II and had valid sampling weights that adjust for the differential likelihood that certain social groups were included (Chantala & Tabor, 1999). Like most data sets, Add Health contains some missing data. We used a multiple imputation package to minimize the bias that missing data can introduce (Raghunathan, Solenberger, & Van Hoewyk, 2002). Thus, the analytic sample used here includes 13,570 adolescents.

Measures

A dichotomous indicator of whether the respondent was in a recently formed heterosexual romantic relationship at the time of the Wave II interview was the first outcome considered. Following the convention set by other Add Health researchers, we included romantic relationships that respondents identified as being romantic as well as other relationships that included hand holding, kissing, and telling the other that you like or love them, even if they were not considered "romantic" by adolescents (Carver et al., 2003). Respondents were considered to be in

a recently formed romantic relationship if (a) their relationship was ongoing at the time of the Wave II interview and the relationship start date that was later than the date of the Wave I interview or (b) they were not in a romantic relationship at Wave I but reported being in one at Wave II and did not know the relationship start date.

The second measure was a dichotomous indicator of whether an adolescent was currently in a *romantic relationship marked by conflict*. This indicator is based on a short-form of the Conflict Tactics Scale (Strauss, Gelles, & Seimet, 1980) administered at Wave II. Adolescents were asked if their partner had ever done any of the following: “call you names, insult you, or treat you disrespectfully in front of others,” “swear at you,” “threaten you with violence,” “push or shove you,” and “throw something at you” (alpha = .70). Because few young people reported these types of behaviors in their current relationships, respondents who answered yes to any of these questions were coded as 1, all others as 0 (Halpern et al., 2001). As shown in Table 1, about 45% of adolescents had a recently formed romantic relationship. Of those in a relationship (n = 5,859), about 13% were in one marked by conflict.

A third measure of romance was a count of the number of romantic relationships the respondent had between Waves I and II. At Wave II, respondents were asked about up to three romantic relationships or three “other” relationships that included hand holding, kissing, and telling the other that you like or love them since Wave I. Because young people could report on only three relationships and were skipped out of the “other” relationship section if they reported at least one romantic relationship, this count likely underestimated the number of relationships since Wave II. Most (64%), however, had only one relationship, whereas fewer than 11% had three (or more), suggesting that we do not underestimate the relationship count for many respondents.

Family structure history was indexed with a set of measures that reflected family structure at Wave I, the number of parental divorces, remarriages, or cohabitations that adolescents experienced from birth through early adolescence, and the timing of these changes. Three sources of data from the Wave I in-home interviews were used to construct these measures: youth reports of current household composition

Table 1. Analysis Variables (Weighted)

	Percent	M	SE
<i>Outcomes</i>			
Current romantic relationship	44.51	—	—
Among those in current relationships:			
Romance marked by conflict	13.30	—	—
Relationships since Wave I			
1 relationship	64.3	—	—
2 relationships	25.1	—	—
3 or more relationships	10.6	—	—
<i>Family Structure History</i>			
Family structure at Wave I			
Two-biological-parent family	55.43	—	—
Married-stepparent family	13.44	—	—
Cohabiting-stepparent family	2.65	—	—
Single-mother family	20.74	—	—
Single-father family	3.01	—	—
Other family form	4.73	—	—
Family instability			
Cumulative family instability	—	0.69	(0.02)
Instability ages 0 – 5	—	0.18	(0.01)
Instability ages 6 – 11	—	0.26	(0.01)
Instability ages 12+	—	0.22	(0.01)
Single parent family at birth	17.85	—	—
<i>Child characteristics</i>			
Female	49.75		
Age	—	15.47	(0.11)
Race and ethnicity			
White (reference)	68.21	—	—
African American	15.44	—	—
Latino/a	12.21	—	—
Asian American	4.14	—	—
<i>Family characteristics</i>			
Parents' educational attainment			
Less than high school graduate	14.90	—	—
High school graduate (reference)	29.86	—	—
Some college education	19.68	—	—
College graduate or more	35.53	—	—
Any recent move	47.26	—	—

(including resident parents, stepparent, and parent’s partner), the duration of life spent with current household members, and reports of whether and for how long they lived with a non-resident biological parent. These data were combined to create indicators of resident parent composition for each year in an adolescent’s life from birth through Wave I (Heard & Harris, 2001).

For each year, family structure was operationalized into eight mutually exclusive categories:

(1) two biological parents, (2) biological mother and stepfather, (3) biological father and stepmother, (4) two adoptive parents, (5) surrogate parents (foster, relative, other parent type), (6) single-mother family, (7) single-father family, and (8) no parent or person acting in the parental role. From this array, we created three indicators of family structure history.

The first measure, family structure at Wave I, was based on a set of six binary variables that include two-biological- or adoptive-parent families ($n = 7,326$), married stepparent families ($n = 1,867$), cohabiting stepparent families ($n = 334$), single-mother families ($n = 2,911$), single-father families ($n = 403$), and other families ($n = 679$). The "other" family category includes young people who lived without a biological parent. This could include a surrogate parent, such as a grandmother, aunt, or foster parent, or with no parent or parent-like figure, such as an older sister. Overall, these adolescents were more likely to be born in single-parent families and to experience more family instability than all others.

The second measure, cumulative family instability, was a count that increased by one for each transition from one family structure to another from birth to Wave I. For example, an adolescent born into a two-biological-parent family who then resided with her single mother at age 5 and then lived with her single father from age 8 through Wave I has a family instability score of 2. Likewise, an adolescent who resided in a mother-only family or a two-biological-parent family up through Wave I has an instability score of 0. The final measure divided up the number of cumulative family transitions into three development stages: early childhood or the number of changes from birth through age 5, middle childhood or the number of changes from age 6 through 11, and early adolescence or the number of changes from age 12 through Wave I (Cavanagh, in press).

These family structure measures have a few caveats. No distinction between formal (marriage) and informal (cohabitation) unions was made in the family instability measures. Consequently, a transition from cohabitation to marriage for a given couple (biological parent or not) was not included in the count of family instability. Recall, however, that distinctions in family structure status between cohabiting and married stepparent families at Wave I are noted—we have this information for current status but not retro-

spectively. Moreover, if sample members lived in multiple family structures in a given year, only one transition is reflected in these measures. Finally, transitions that a child experienced that are separate from her resident parent's transitions (e.g., a child of divorced parents may have lived for a period with her aunt and experienced her divorce and remarriage but, at the time of Wave I, was living with her biological mother) were not included. These limitations *underestimate* the level of family instability and the time spent in cohabiting families for this sample.

Three child characteristics, self-reported *age*, *race and ethnicity* (dummy variables for African American, Hispanic, White, and Asian), and *gender*, were included in all analyses. Three family characteristics, *parents' educational attainment*, *family structure at birth*, and *residential mobility*, were also included. Parents' educational attainment was based on adolescent reports of the highest number of years of schooling completed by her or his parents. Responses were coded into four dummy variables: college education or more, some college education, high school graduation or GED (reference category), or less than a high school education. Family structure at birth was captured with a single indicator that reflected whether the adolescent resided with a single parent or two biological or adoptive parents in the first year of life. Finally, a proxy for residential instability was also included. At Wave I, adolescents were asked if they had moved in the past 5 years (0/1), capturing any move between approximately 1990 and 1995.

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for all study variables.

Analytic Techniques

This study explored the association between family structure history and three dimensions of adolescent romantic relationships. We began with descriptive analyses of our measures of adolescent romance and family structure history for all young people and then examined differences by gender and age. Next, we explored the linkages between family structure history and adolescent romance. With the full analytic sample and using logistic regression techniques, the first set of models regressed the indicator of any current romance on each measure of family structure history. The remaining models were estimated only for young people in a current romantic

relationship ($n = 5,958$). Beginning with relationships marked by conflict, we estimated a set of logistic regression models in which this outcome was regressed on each dimension of family structure history. Finally, using Poisson regression, we estimated the link between family structure history and a count of romantic relationships in the past 18 months. For each outcome, we also explored gender and age by family structure history interactions.

Given the large number of models estimated for each outcome, we present all main effect models but only interaction models with significant interaction terms ($p < .05$). We present odds ratios and adjusted standard errors for logistic regression results and unstandardized coefficients and adjusted standard error for Poisson regression results. All multivariate models were estimated using IVEware, a multiple imputation program, in SAS (Raghunathan et al., 2002). In all analyses, we used sampling weights to adjust for Add Health's complex sampling design and a robust cluster estimator to adjust standard errors given the clustered nature of the sample.

RESULTS

Romance in Adolescence

Table 2 presents descriptive information on adolescent romantic experiences and family structure history by gender and age. Not surprisingly, aspects of adolescents' romantic lives varied by gender and age. Specifically, girls (relative to boys) and older teens (relative to younger) were more likely to be in romantic relationships. Among those in relationships, girls were also more likely to be in relationships marked by conflict and older teens reported more relationships since Wave I.

Before turning to gender and age differences in family structure history, we provide an overview of family structure history for all youth. Most spent their first year of life in two-parent families (82%), but by adolescence, more diversity in family structure was evident. Two-biological-parent families remained the modal family type (56%), but about a quarter of the sample resided in single-parent families (21% with mother, 3% with father), another 16% resided in stepparent families (about 13% with a parent and their married partner, 3% with a parent and their cohabiting partner), and 5% resided in "other" families.

Another way to capture these changes in family structure is through indicators of family instability. Overall, adolescents experienced about 0.69 family transitions by Wave I, with about 40% of the sample experiencing at least one exit or entry of a parent or a parent's romantic partner. Family instability occurred throughout the early life course, with about 14% of young people experiencing at least one transition during early childhood, about 19% experiencing at least one family transition between ages 6 and 11, and about 16% experiencing at least one transition during adolescence.

Modest gender differences were detected in family structure history. Girls, for example, were more likely to reside in mother-only families and less likely to reside in father-only families. They also reported less instability in adolescence (age 12+) compared with boys. Aspects of family structure history also varied by adolescent age. Not surprisingly, older youth, those with a greater "opportunity" to experience family change, were less likely to reside in two-biological-parent families. They were also more likely to reside in father-only and nonparent households at Wave I and reported higher levels of instability and more family instability during adolescence than younger teens. Interestingly, older youth were also more likely to spend the first year of life in a single-parent family.

Family Structure and Current Romantic Relationships

Our multivariate analyses began with models that estimated the association between family structure history and current romantic relationships (see Table 3). Model 1, the baseline model, included the full set of control variables. Consistent with the descriptive statistics above, girls and older teens were significantly more likely to be in current romantic relationships, net of other factors. Across race-ethnic groups, young people of color were significantly less likely to be in a romantic relationship compared to White youth. Turning to family characteristics, residing in a single-parent family in the first year of life was associated with the likelihood of a current relationship, but residential mobility was only marginally linked with this outcome. Finally, adolescents whose parent(s) had less than a high school degree were less likely to date.

Family structure at Wave I was included in Model 2. Overall, young people in married

Table 2. Key Analysis Variables by Gender and Age

	Gender		Age		
	Male	Female	Ages 15 and less	Ages 15 – 16.5	Ages 16.5 and older
	(n = 6,612)	(n = 6,958)	(n = 4,318)	(n = 4,267)	(n = 4,985)
<i>Outcomes</i>					
Current romantic relationship	42.01	46.91***	38.59	48.62	48.02**
Among those in current relationships:					
Romance marked by conflict	5.41	7.93***	4.28	4.53	4.56
Number of relationships since Wave I	1.46	1.48	1.39	1.50	1.52***
<i>Family Structure History</i>					
Family structure at Wave I					
Two-biological-parent family	55.54	54.86	58.12	54.76	51.83**
Married-stepparent family	13.85	13.02	12.97	14.15	13.36
Cohabiting-stepparent family	2.70	2.60	2.84	2.99	2.06
Single-mother family	19.49	22.01**	21.11	20.21	20.77
Single-father family	3.68	2.34***	2.33	3.27	3.66***
Other family form	4.57	4.89	2.45	4.36	8.08***
Family instability					
Cumulative family instability	0.69	0.68	0.62	0.71	0.75**
Instability ages 0 – 5	0.17	0.19	0.19	0.19	0.16
Instability ages 6 – 11	0.26	0.25	0.27	0.27	0.23*
Instability ages 12+	0.24	0.21*	0.14	0.23	0.33***
Single-parent family at birth	17.64	18.03	15.74	18.78	19.71*

Note: Significance determined with a continuous measure of adolescent age.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

stepparent, mother-only, and father-only families were more likely to be in a current relationship than were those in two-biological-parent families. For instance, residing in a married stepparent family was associated with about a 26% increase in the odds of a current romance ($OR = 1.26$). Residing in a father-only family was associated with a 57% increase in the odds ($OR = 1.57$). No significant gender or age by family structure interactions was identified.

The measure of cumulative family instability was added to Models 3a and 3b. Each transition was associated with a 13% increase in the odds of romance (Model 3a). Given that the average adolescent who reported any instability experienced just under two transitions (mean = 1.74), this effect translates into about a 23% increase in the odds of being in a current relationship ($OR = .13 * 1.74$). Model 3b included a significant gender by instability interaction term. This interaction suggests that as the number of family structure transitions increases beyond one, girls' romantic "advantage" over boys' is reduced, with both boys and girls equally likely to engage in romantic relationships. Thus, experiences of

family instability provided a greater boost to boys' romantic lives than girls' romantic lives. The age by family instability interaction term did not reach conventional levels of statistical significance.

Models 4a and 4b included measures that captured the timing of family instability. Results from Model 4a suggest that higher levels of instability in both middle childhood and early adolescence were associated with increases in the likelihood of a current romance; instability in early childhood, on the other hand, was not. Are these associations consistent across gender and age? Consistent with Model 3b, family instability in middle childhood and early adolescence was linked more to boys' romantic behavior than girls' romantic behavior, but this gender interaction was not statistically significant (findings not shown). A significant age interaction term was identified, however. Here, younger teens who experienced more recent family instability (since age 12) experienced a greater increase in the likelihood of a current romance than did older youth.

The final model in Table 3 included dimensions of both family structure and family instability.

Table 3. Logistic Regression Estimates Predicting Any Current Romantic Relationship (n = 13,570)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3a	Model 3b	Model 4a	Model 4b	Model 5
	<i>b</i>						
	<i>e</i>						
<i>Family Structure History</i>							
Family structure at Wave I							
Married-stepparent family		1.26** (0.09)					1.01 (0.11)
Cohabiting-stepparent family		1.11 (0.14)					1.16 (0.16)
Single-mother family		1.21* (0.08)					0.96 (0.09)
Single-father family		1.57*** (0.14)					0.76† (0.15)
Other family form		1.01 (0.12)					1.17 (0.13)
Family instability							
Cumulative family instability			1.13*** (0.02)	1.19*** (0.03)			1.14*** (0.03)
Instability ages 0–5					1.07 (0.05)	1.38 (0.51)	
Instability ages 6–11					1.14** (0.04)	0.74 (0.39)	
Instability ages 12+					1.16** (0.04)	3.67** (0.41)	
Interactions							
Gender * Cumulative Instability				0.90* (0.04)			
Age * Instability ages 0–5						0.98 (0.03)	
Age * Instability ages 6–11						1.03 (0.03)	
Age * Instability ages 12+						0.93** (0.03)	
<i>Child Characteristics</i>							
Gender (female)	1.25** (0.05)	1.26** (0.05)	1.25** (0.05)	1.34** (0.06)	1.25** (0.05)	1.26** (0.05)	1.25** (0.05)
Age at Wave I	1.12*** (0.02)	1.14*** (0.02)	1.14*** (0.02)	1.11*** (0.02)	1.11*** (0.02)	1.13*** (0.02)	1.12*** (0.02)
Race/ethnicity							
African American	0.73*** (0.07)	0.73*** (0.07)	0.75*** (0.07)	0.73*** (0.07)	0.73*** (0.07)	0.73*** (0.07)	0.74*** (0.07)
Latino/a American	0.83* (0.08)	0.84* (0.08)	0.84* (0.08)	0.84* (0.08)	0.84* (0.08)	0.84* (0.08)	0.84* (0.08)
Asian American	0.53*** (0.10)	0.53*** (0.10)	0.55*** (0.10)	0.55*** (0.10)	0.55***	0.55*** (0.10)	0.54*** (0.10)
<i>Family Characteristics</i>							
Single-parent family at birth	1.13* (0.06)	1.01 (0.08)	1.07 (0.06)	1.07 (0.06)	1.06 (0.06)	1.06 (0.06)	1.05 (0.08)
Residential moves	1.04† (0.04)	1.03 (0.04)	1.01 (0.04)	1.01 (0.04)	1.01 (0.04)	1.01 (0.04)	1.01 (0.04)
Parents' education							
Less than high school	0.83** (0.08)	0.79** (0.08)	0.80** (0.08)	0.80** (0.08)	0.80** (0.08)	0.79** (0.08)	0.79** (0.08)
Some college	0.96 (0.06)	0.97 (0.06)	0.96 (0.06)	0.96 (0.06)	0.96 (0.06)	0.96 (0.06)	0.96 (0.06)
College graduate plus	1.00 (0.06)	1.02 (0.06)	1.02 (0.05)	1.02 (0.06)	1.02 (0.06)	1.02 (0.06)	1.03 (0.06)
Intercept	1.15 (0.26)	1.14 (0.25)	1.15 (0.26)	1.15 (0.26)	1.16 (0.26)	1.13 (0.29)	1.09 (0.25)

†p < .10. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Once cumulative family instability was taken into account, the coefficients associated with each family structure status during adolescence were reduced dramatically and were no longer statistically significant. Nearly all of the association between adolescent romance and living in a married stepparent, mother-only, or father-only family was explained by the instability that preceded it. The coefficient associated with cumulative family instability, on the other hand, was largely unchanged once family structure was taken into account. Models that also included age and gender interactions were also estimated but not presented. The family instability by age and gender patterns remained once family structure was taken into account (findings available upon request).

Family Structure and Romantic Relationships Marked by Conflict

Next, we considered the nature of young people's current relationship with an indicator of whether the current relationship was marked by conflict (see Table 4). Recall, these models were estimated only for young people in a romantic relationship at Wave II ($n = 5,958$). Overall, the association between family structure history and relationship conflict was quite modest.

Findings from Model 1, the baseline model, indicate that girls and those who resided in a single-parent family in the first year of life were more likely to be in these relationships. Models 2a and 2b included family structure at Wave I. Among those in romantic relationships, young people in father-only and "other" families were more likely to be involved in relationships marked by physical or emotional conflict. Model 2b included gender by family structure interaction terms. These findings indicate that residing in a mother-only family increased the likelihood that boys were in relationships marked by physical or emotional conflict but were protective for girls. Models 3 and 4 included the indicators of family instability. Neither cumulative family instability nor its timing was associated with this outcome. Interestingly, family structure at birth was associated with this outcome in both models, net of instability. These associations suggest that young people in stable single-parent families were more likely to engage in physically or emotionally conflicted romantic relationships compared to others. No significant interactions between gender and age and these indicators of

instability were identified. For comparability purposes, the final model, Model 5, included indicators of family structure at Wave I and cumulative instability. Not surprisingly, associations between aspects of family structure history and romance marked by conflict changed little.

Family Structure and Romantic Relationship Instability

Finally, we considered the stability of young people's own relationships (see Table 5). Again, these models were estimated only for adolescents in a current romantic relationship at Wave II ($n = 5,958$). Results from these analyses suggest that family structure history does matter for this dimension of adolescent romance.

Model 1 included the full set of controls. Among those in current relationships, older teens reported significantly more relationships and African American adolescents reported fewer relationships compared to Whites. Models 2a and 2b included family structure at Wave I. Among those in a current relationship, those in stepparent families (married stepparent families especially) and father-only families report more relationships over the past 18 months than did those in two-biological-parent families. Gender, but not age, moderated these associations. Specifically, boys in father-only families and girls in cohabiting stepparent families appear to drive these associations.

Model 3 included the measure of cumulative family instability. Among those in current relationships, those who lived through more instability in their parents' relationship histories were more likely to engage in multiple romantic relationships themselves. The timing of instability was explored in Model 4. Again, instability experienced in middle childhood and early adolescence was most salient to young people's romantic lives. Among those in current relationships, those who experienced more recent family instability engaged in more relationships than did others. Neither age nor gender moderated family instability, measured cumulatively or by its timing. Model 5 included indicators of family structure at Wave I and cumulative family instability. Once cumulative family instability was taken into account, the stepparent effect was attenuated and no longer statistically significant, but the father-only effect remained. Again, the coefficient associated with cumulative family instability was largely unchanged once family structure was taken into account.

Table 4. Logistic Regression Estimates Predicting a Romantic Relationship Marked by Conflict (n = 5,958)

	Model 1		Model 2a		Model 2b		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5	
	<i>e^b</i>		<i>e^b</i>		<i>e^b</i>		<i>e^b</i>		<i>e^b</i>		<i>e^b</i>	
<i>Family Structure History</i>												
Family structure at Wave I												
Married-stepparent family			1.11	(0.18)	1.17	(0.26)					1.01	(0.25)
Cohabiting-stepparent family			1.08	(0.32)	0.42	(0.65)					0.98	(0.32)
Single-mother family			1.20	(0.13)	1.65*	(0.21)					1.13	(0.16)
Single-father family			1.63*	(0.25)	1.09	(0.48)					1.51	(0.31)
Other family form			1.65*	(0.22)	2.05*	(0.3)					1.55	(0.24)
Family instability												
Cumulative family instability							1.07	(0.06)			1.05	(0.08)
Instability ages 0 – 5									1.07	(0.10)		
Instability ages 6 – 11									0.98	(0.10)		
Instability ages 12+									1.15	(0.09)		
<i>Interactions</i>												
Female * Married-stepparent family					0.89	(0.32)						
Female * Cohabiting-stepparent family					4.06†	(0.75)						
Female * Single-mother family					0.58*	(0.28)						
Female * Single-father family					2.34	(0.58)						
Female * Other family form					0.58	(0.45)						
<i>Child Characteristics</i>												
Gender (female)	1.39***	(0.10)	1.39***	(0.11)	1.55***	(0.15)	1.40***	(0.10)	1.40***	(0.10)	1.40***	(0.11)
Age at Wave I	1.05	(0.04)	1.04	(0.03)	1.05	(0.03)	1.05	(0.03)	1.04*	(0.03)	1.04	(0.03)
<i>Race/ethnicity</i>												
African American	0.99	(0.12)	0.94	(0.12)	0.94	(0.13)	0.99	(0.12)	1.00	(0.12)	0.95	(0.12)
Latino/a American	1.07	(0.16)	1.08	(0.16)	1.21	(0.16)	1.08	(0.16)	1.09	(0.16)	1.09	(0.16)
Asian American	0.54	(0.43)	0.54	(0.43)	0.54	(0.43)	0.55	(0.43)	0.54	(0.42)	0.55	(0.44)
<i>Family Characteristics</i>												
Single-parent family at birth	1.31*	(0.13)	1.17	(0.15)	1.19	(0.15)	1.27†	(0.14)	1.25*	(0.14)	1.19	(0.15)
Residential moves	0.97	(0.08)	0.92	(0.08)	0.96	(0.08)	0.93	(0.07)	0.92	(0.08)	0.91	(0.09)
<i>Parents' education</i>												
Less than high school	0.99	(0.17)	0.95	(0.17)	0.96	(0.17)	0.98	(0.17)	0.98	(0.17)	0.95	(0.17)
Some college	1.15	(0.16)	1.13	(0.16)	1.14	(0.16)	1.11	(0.16)	1.15	(0.16)	1.13	(0.12)
College graduate plus	0.83	(0.15)	0.82	(0.14)	0.84†	(0.11)	0.84	(0.15)	0.83*	(0.13)	1.22	(0.11)
Intercept	0.06	(0.52)	0.06	(0.52)	0.06	(0.54)	0.06	(0.54)	0.06	(0.54)	0.17	(0.85)

†*p* < .10. **p* < .05. ****p* < .001.

DISCUSSION

In this study, we sought to extend our understanding of adolescent romance by exploring the role of family structure history in the romantic lives of young people. Moreover, we hoped to clarify the way gender and age moderated these associations. Although the scientific attention given to these relationships has increased over the past decade, the antecedents of adolescent romance and the role of individual characteristics, gender especially, remain somewhat ambiguous. We drew upon the intergenerational transmission of

marriage and divorce framework to motivate this study. In our analysis, three themes emerged.

The first relates to the role of parents' marital and romantic histories in the romantic lives of their children during adolescence. Despite the fact that (heterosexual) romantic involvement is likely valued and encouraged by most parents, family structure history was associated with the likelihood that young people were in a current relationship and, among those in a relationship, the stability of their relationships. Although these indicators provide a fairly crude description of adolescents' romantic lives, they do tell us

Table 5. Poisson Regression Estimates Predicting the Number of Adolescent Romances Since Wave 1 (n = 5,958)

	Model 1	Model 2a	Model 2b	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
	b	b	b	b	b	b
<i>Family Structure History</i>						
Family structure at Wave 1						
Married-stepparent family		0.08*** (0.03)	0.07† (0.04)			0.03 (0.03)
Cohabiting-stepparent family		0.11† (0.06)	0.00 (0.06)			0.06 (0.06)
Single-mother family		0.01 (0.03)	0.03 (0.04)			-0.02 (0.03)
Single-father family		0.15*** (0.04)	0.16*** (0.06)			0.1* (0.05)
Other family form		0.00 (0.03)	-0.06 (0.06)			0.03 (0.03)
Family instability						
Cumulative family instability				0.03 (0.01)***		0.03*** (0.01)
Instability ages 0 – 5					0.03† (0.02)	
Instability ages 6 – 11					0.04*** (0.01)	
Instability ages 12 +					0.03* (0.02)	
<i>Interactions</i>						
Female * Married-stepparent family			0.02 (0.05)			
Female * Cohabiting-stepparent family			0.21* (0.09)			
Female * Single-mother family			-0.03 (0.05)			
Female * Single-father family			-0.05 (0.07)			
Female * Other family form			0.11 (0.07)			
<i>Child Characteristics</i>						
Gender (female)	0.02 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)
Age at Wave 1	0.02*** (0.01)	0.02*** (0.01)	0.02*** (0.01)	0.02*** (0.01)	0.02*** (0.01)	0.02*** (0.01)
<i>Race/ethnicity</i>						
African American	-0.06*** (0.02)	-0.05* (0.02)	-0.05* (0.02)	-0.06** (0.02)	-0.06** (0.02)	-0.05* (0.02)
Latino/a American	-0.02 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.03)
Asian American	0.01 (0.04)	0.02 (0.04)	0.02 (0.04)	0.02 (0.04)	0.02 (0.04)	0.02 (0.04)
<i>Family Characteristics</i>						
Single parent family at birth	0.04 (0.02)	0.01 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)	0.02 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)	0.01 (0.03)
Residential moves	0.00 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)
Parents' education						
Less than high school	-0.04 (0.03)	-0.04 (0.03)	-0.04 (0.02)	-0.04 (0.03)	-0.04 (0.03)	-0.04 (0.04)
Some college	0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	0.00 (0.02)	0.00 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)
College graduate plus	0.03† (0.02)	0.04† (0.02)	0.04† (0.02)	0.03† (0.02)	0.03† (0.02)	0.04† (0.02)
Intercept	-0.01 (0.08)	-0.03 (0.08)	-0.03 (0.08)	-0.01 (0.08)	-0.01 (0.09)	-0.02 (0.08)

†p < .10. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

something about the ways family structure history informs aspects of young people's romantic relationships. At the same time, family structure history was not strongly associated with relationships marked by conflict. In fact, other than gender, few factors predicted relationships where a young person's partner was verbally or physically abusive. This absence of effect may be because of statistical power; fewer than 15% of adolescents in current relationships reported being in this type of relationship. Additional research is needed to understand the roots of these problematic relationships.

Looking across dimensions of romance for all youth, interesting associations between family structure history and romance emerged. Beginning with family structure at Wave I, young people in married stepparent families were more likely to be in a current relationship and, among those romantically involved, reported more relationship instability compared to those in two-biological-parent families. Residing in a cohabiting-stepparent family was associated with more romantic relationships for girls. Young people in mother-only families were more likely to be involved in a current romantic relationship, but residing in single-father families was associated with all dimensions of adolescent romance. That is, young people in this family structure were more likely to be in a current relationship and, among those in a relationship, in one marked by conflict. These young people also reported more relationships since Wave I.

The more compelling dimension of family structure history was family instability. Increases in cumulative family instability were associated with a greater likelihood of romance and, among those romantically involved, more romantic relationships. Importantly, these associations remained largely unchanged once family structure at Wave I was controlled. This suggests that family structure change and the concomitant changes in family life that are introduced by it play a key role in shaping the romantic lives of young people. The timing of family instability also mattered. Specifically, family instability in middle childhood and early adolescence was most consequential for both the likelihood of romance and, among those romantically involved, the number of recent romantic relationships. These developmental stages are typically periods in which young people gain more independence from parents and engage in more youth-focused and -directed activities, including dating. Thus, family

instability during these stages seems to provide young people greater "opportunity" to engage in relationships. At the same time, romantic relationships may provide young people solace from or space to sort out the changes at home.

A second theme relates to the interplay between family structure history, adolescent characteristics, and romance. Until recently, the general understanding among scholars (on the basis of modest empirical evidence) was that boys and girls had very different ideas about, expectations of, and experiences with romance during adolescence (Anderson, 1989; Maccoby, 1998; Martin, 1996). Recent work by Giordano and colleagues (2006), however, suggests that girls and boys may be more similar than different. Through structured interviews, they found that boys were as engaged in romantic relationships as girls but that they often approached and navigated these relationships less confidently than girls. Our findings support this general perspective on boys and romance. That is, we found that boys' romantic lives were not driven simply by heteronormative scripts about male dominance or the search for sex but, more so than girls' romantic lives, by experiences in the home. For instance, in the case of relationships marked by conflict, we found that for girls, residing with mother was protective, but for boys, it was problematic. Although gender effects in the family structure literature, on a whole, are generally modest, our findings are consistent (Amato, 2000). That is, girls often do better (or less poorly) than boys in single-mother families, in part, because of the closer relationships they share with their mothers. And these closer bonds might keep these girls from engaging (or remaining) in unhealthy relationships. Conversely, boys' weaker relationships with mother might fail to keep them out of unhealthy relationships or, possibly, affect the way they interact with the opposite sex, including romantic partners and mothers.

Additionally, the observed gender by cumulative instability effect on the likelihood of romance was stronger for boys than girls, suggesting that the uncertainty and stress associated with family change was more consequential for boys. Whether this pattern holds across other dimensions of adolescent adjustment is an open question, but, in the case of romance, boys do appear more affected than girls. Adolescent age also interacted with family instability in interesting ways. Specifically, we found that younger

teens, especially those who experienced more recent family instability, were more affected by family instability than were older teens. This age effect, combined with the gender effects, suggests that family instability is more important for the romantic lives of young people who, on average, may have less refined interpersonal skills.

What remains unanswered is why these linkages exist. That is, what processes explain the association between family instability and adolescent romance? In our conceptual framework, we emphasized a set of parenting practices that might explain the linkage. Add Health includes limited indicators of parental support and social control (but not socialization). We explored the degree to which these factors explained the observed family structure history effects and found no evidence of mediation (findings available upon request). Yet untangling the instability effect remains an essential task. Longitudinal measures of marital and postmarital conflict, household organization, parental depression, and income instability are some of the unmeasured factors that might explain this link. Prospective studies like the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development or The Fragile Families Study (assuming children are followed into adolescence), which include longitudinal measures of these processes, are promising data sources to explore these mechanisms.

The third theme relates to the role of the adolescent experience in the intergenerational transmission of marriage and divorce. Most research that explores this transmission focuses on the link between parents' marital and romantic histories and the attitudes and behaviors related to union formation and dissolution in the child generation *during* adulthood. The findings from this study suggest that adolescent romantic experiences may be potentially meaningful factors in this process also. A next, important step is to incorporate the third wave of Add Health data in our framework and examine the intersections between family structure history, adolescent romance, and young people's union formation attitudes and behaviors as they transition into adulthood. Such research can identify the contribution of a host of family and individual factors responsible for the reproduction of family instability across generations. Moreover, it can inform the new generation of family policies designed to encourage marriage. For instance, if romantic experiences in adolescence are the stronger predictors of union formation in young

adulthood, programs that target teens in unstable families might offer greater leverage in reducing future family instability. Similarly, if experiences of family structure history remain the stronger predictor of union formation expectations and behavior, marriage promotion programs among adults may be the best strategy for reducing family instability in the long term.

In sum, the findings from this study not only tell us something about the significance of family structure history on adolescents' romantic lives and the intersections between family structure history, individual characteristics, and romance, they also inform us about the ways that family instability might be transmitted across generations. We recognize that family structure history is only one factor shaping adolescent romance. We do not examine, for instance, the broader forces that might influence adolescent romance such as the high school social environment or individual personality characteristics. Moreover, because of data limitations, we are unable to identify an explanation for the association between family structure history and adolescent romance. Despite these weaknesses, this study makes a useful contribution to the literature by exploring the connections between family structure history and the presence, character, and stability of adolescent romantic relationships.

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