THE INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF RELATIONSHIP INSTABILITY: A
FOCUS ON EMERGING ADULT CYCLICAL RELATIONSHIPS

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ABSTRACT

The current study aims to extend prior research on the intergenerational transmission of divorce and relationship instability by examining parental relationship instability as predictors of emerging adults’ own cycling behavior. Additionally, it aims to explore relationship uncertainty, divorce attitudes, and relationship effort beliefs as mediators of this relationship. Data were collected at a large mid-western university from 751 emerging adults (18-25 years old) currently in a romantic relationship. Logistic regression in an SEM framework was used to predict the likelihood that participants had ever cycled. Results show that parental cycling increased the likelihood of offspring cycling, and greater relationship uncertainty is a mechanism through which this transmission occurs. Findings from this study have implications for the literature about on-again/off-again relationships and for the educators and practitioners working with cyclical partners and/or emerging adults.

Keywords: cycling, on-again/off-again relationships, emerging adulthood, relationship uncertainty, intergenerational transmission of divorce
The Intergenerational Transmission of Relationship Instability: A Focus on Emerging Adult Cyclical Relationships

Cycling, or experiencing at least one break-up and renewal with the same romantic partner, is prevalent in emerging adult dating relationships. Around 61% of emerging adults have ever cycled in one of their relationships, and approximately 44% have cycled with their most recent partner (Dailey, Pfiester, Jin, Beck, & Clark, 2009; Halpern-Meekin, Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2013a). In the wider population, roughly 37% of cohabiting couples and 23% of married couples have cycled at some point with their current partner (Vennum Lindstrom, Monk, & Adams, 2014).

Compared to stable relationships, those characterized by cycling are at greater risk for poorer relationship quality, particularly decreased satisfaction, less commitment, and reduced passion between partners (e.g., Dailey et al., 2009). Partners in cyclical relationships tend to experience more conflict (Dailey et al., 2009), receive less validation from their partners (Halpern-Meekin et al., 2013a), engage in less constructive communication (Clifford, Vennum, Busk, & Fincham, 2017), and perform fewer relationship enhancing behaviors (Dailey, Hampel, & Roberts, 2010). Most concerning, cyclical relationships also have a higher likelihood of both verbal and physical violence/abuse than non-cyclical relationships (Halpern-Meekin, Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2013b; Monk, Ogolsky, & Oswald, 2018). Because cycling can have such detrimental effects on relationship quality and is fairly common during emerging adulthood, this study seeks to better understand the factors that promote cycling behaviors in emerging adults.
Cycling represents an understudied facet of relationship instability. Booth, Johnson, and Edwards (1983) conceptualize marital/relationship instability as the likelihood a couple will end their existing relationship, taking into account both the couple’s actions towards dissolution and their thoughts and feelings about the relationship itself. Because cyclical relationships are characterized by acts of dissolution and reconciliation and by feelings of uncertainty with the relationship (e.g., Dailey et al., 2009), they have a high probability for future termination. For instance, couples who broke up and renewed at least once while dating were more likely to experience subsequent cycling throughout their cohabitation or marriage, as compared to couples in steady dating relationships (Venuous & Johnson, 2014; Venuous et al., 2014). Married couples who previously cycled felt less confident in their decision to marry and experienced lower relationship satisfaction throughout their first 5 years of marriage than spouses who had noncyclical dating relationships (Venuous & Johnson, 2014). The presence of multiple dissolutions, feelings of uncertainty, and dissatisfaction within on-again/off-again relationships demonstrate that cycling is a contributing factor for relationship instability.

Investigating relationship instability within emerging adulthood is crucial. During this time, emerging adults are shifting their focus towards creating stable, long-term relationships and are beginning to demonstrate the relational behaviors they will utilize in their future relationships (Fincham, Stanley, & Rhodes, 2011; Venuous, Monk, Pasley, & Fincham, 2017). This makes it an ideal period to investigate and disrupt the development of potentially distressing relational patterns, such as cycling, before they become established behaviors and attitudes.
Efforts to examine and understand the predictors of relationship instability have shown that it is frequently transmitted across generations (e.g., Amato, 1996; Amato & DeBoer, 2001; Amato & Patterson, 2017). Although a substantial body of work has documented the effects of parental divorce on offspring’s marital outcomes, no studies have investigated how instability in parents’ romantic relationships can influence their offspring’s instability in the form of cycling behaviors. The presence of cycling behaviors in emerging adulthood could be evidence that parental relationship instability not only affects marital relationships, but also the non-marital and transitional relationships that characterize this developmental stage (Arnett, 2000). In this way, instability within dating relationships could serve as a link between childhood experiences with parental instability and later marital outcomes (Donnellen et al., 2005). Therefore, the primary aim of this study is to examine parental relationship instability as a predictor of emerging adults’ cycling behaviors.

Theoretical Framework

Researchers have explored various pathways through which relationship instability transmits from parents to children, and the goal of this study is to build upon the established knowledge base. The current working theory suggests that children observe parents’ behavior in romantic relationships and use this behavior to inform their own actions in future relationships. According to social learning theory, children learn behaviors and attitudes through observing salient models in their environment (Bandura, 1977). Children more frequently attend to and imitate those they perceive to be similar to them and more experienced than them. As children observe others experiencing the consequences of a certain behavior, they are vicariously reinforced or deterred for that
behavior and their motivation to reproduce it is accordingly affected (Bandura, 1977). Based on these ideas, parents can be uniquely influential models for children’s current and future behavior. Children often have ample opportunity to observe their parents’ behaviors and subsequent consequences, and parents’ similarity and authority likely motivates children to imitate their behaviors (see Nowlis, 1952 and Walter & Gilmore, 1973 for early extensions of social learning theory to parent-child transmission of behavior). Applying social learning theory to the intergenerational transmission of relationship instability, interparental relationships are a child’s first exposure to romantic relationships, and they demonstrate the attitudes and behaviors that are acceptable within this context. Thus, children’s observations of their parents’ romantic relationships create a model that they can apply to their adult relationships. For example, Amato and Booth (2001) found that offspring’s memories of their parents’ discord mediated the transmission of marital discord between parents’ relationships and their offspring’s relationships, and the presence of negative behaviors in the parental relationship predicted discord in their offspring’s marriages. This suggests that the transmission relationship instability may be due to offspring’s observation, and subsequent imitation, of the negative behaviors and instability in their parents’ relationships.

Social learning theory helps explain how emerging adults may acquire their model of relationship instability, but it does not explain why cycling or other forms of instability are enacted by relationship partners. Relational turbulence theory can help bridge this gap, as it focuses on the internal processes that occur during relationship trouble (e.g., Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). Relational turbulence theory postulates that changes or transitions in a relationship create difficulties between partners (Solomon,
Because these challenging periods produce volatility and uncertainty, relationship partners are operating under an ‘information deficit’ and have trouble making sense of their circumstances, their partner, and their partner’s words or actions. This leads to a breakdown of communication behaviors and causes partners to have more extreme cognitive appraisals and emotions about the relationship (Solomon et al., 2016). In this way, uncertainty is central to relational turbulence because it disrupts the normal internal workings of the relationship. Therefore, instability may occur due to the partners not constructively coping with the transition, their uncertainty, or the change in their usual communication patterns. Partners may then enact cycling, dissolution, or discord to manage their dissatisfaction with their relationship, especially if parents modeled instability and turbulence in their own relationship. Relational turbulence not only negatively impacts the partners who experience it, but also the children who witnesses it. For example, Knobloch et al. (2017) found that greater relational turbulence between parents predicted their eldest child’s difficulty with their parent’s reintegration into the family after military deployment. In sum, the turbulence brought on by a change or transition may transmit instability between generations because it produces uncertainty and triggers offspring to perform the negative patterns learned through observation of their parents’ relationship.

**Intergenerational Transmission of Relationship Instability**

**Parental Divorce**

Many prior studies provide evidence for the existence of an intergenerational transmission of divorce, wherein those who experience a parental divorce are also more likely themselves to divorce in adulthood (e.g., Amato, 1996; Bumpass, Martin, & Sweet,
1991; Pope & Mueller, 1976). This transmission has also been investigated outside of the United States, with remarkably similar findings across a variety of European countries and Canada (e.g., Diekmann, & Schmidheiny, 2013; Dronkers, & Härkönen, 2008). In addition, children whose parents have divorced are more likely to have greater pro-divorce attitudes and report lower marital commitment (e.g., Amato, 1996; Cui, Fincham, & Durtschi, 2011; Miles & Servaty-Seib, 2010). Based on these findings, parental relationship outcomes have clear implications for the stability of their offspring’s relationships. Given that cycling is another form of relationship instability, its prevalence could be similarly affected by parental divorce. For unmarried offspring, the instability modeled by a parental divorce may manifest as cycling. Divorce may demonstrate to offspring that commitment to a relationship is contingent on the amount of satisfaction that one derives from it, and emerging adults may be endorsing this idea by separating and reconciling with their partner as their satisfaction fluctuates. This idea guides this study’s examination of how parental divorce contributes to the prevalence of cycling behaviors in emerging adults.

Cycling in the Parental Romantic Relationship

The transmission of cycling behaviors between generations may operate similarly to the intergenerational transmission of divorce. Parental cycling may increase the probability of their offspring cycling, in the same manner that parental divorce increases the odds of their offspring divorcing. No empirical work has specifically examined this phenomenon, but some studies have found that parents who engage in on-again/off-again relationships can negatively affect their family’s well-being. Partners who cycled before their mutual child was 5 years old had greater levels of parenting stress, as compared to
couples who were stably together or stably separated during that time (Halpern-Meekin & Turney, 2016). Unlike children of stably cohabiting parents, children whose parents cohabitated on and off were more likely to repeat a grade (Nepomnyaschy & Teitler, 2013), and adolescents who witnessed parental cycling exhibited more externalizing behaviors than adolescents who witnessed parental dissolution without repartnering (Turney & Halpern-Meekin, 2020). Based on the effects found in these studies, parental cycling can have lasting consequences for their offspring’s well-being. Therefore, parental cycling may also have an effect on how their offspring understand and enact relationships. Particularly, witnessing parental on-again/off-again relationship may serve as a model for offspring’s own cycling behaviors and transmit this form of relationship instability between family generations.

**Parental Union Transitions**

Other forms of parental relationship instability, such as parental union transitions, may also predict offspring cycling behaviors. Union transitions occur when biological parents separate and then enter relationships with other adults who are not biological related to the children in the household. Children may experience multiple union transitions as their parents enter and exit relationships with different partners. A few studies have investigated the impact of parental union transitions on their offspring’s relationship outcomes. Wolfinger (2000) found that adults who experienced multiple parental union transitions as children were more likely to divorce multiple times themselves. Similarly, the number of parental relationships that an offspring witnessed during childhood was positively associated with their number of partners in early adulthood (Amato & Patterson, 2017; Kamp Dush, Arocho, Mernitz, & Bartholomew,
Only two studies have used a comparable family of origin factor to investigate cycling behaviors. Halpern-Meekin, Manning, Giordano, and Longmore (2013a; 2013b) found that emerging adults who spent time outside of two parent households during childhood were more likely to cycle with their romantic partner than those who lived with both parents during childhood. Because these two studies indirectly measure family members transitioning out of the home, it lends credence to the idea that parental union transitions may predict emerging adults’ cycling behaviors. Consequently, this study will examine parental union transitions as a possible form of parental instability that could predict cycling behaviors.

**Mechanisms**

**Relationship Uncertainty**

Relationship uncertainty, or the amount of confidence that one has regarding the current status and future of a relationship, may help explain the association between parental relationship instability and emerging adults’ cycling behaviors (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). Relationship uncertainty is one possible source of relational uncertainty, which represents the amount of confidence an individual has in their interpretations and predictions about their interpersonal relationships (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999; Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). This study focuses specifically on relationship uncertainty because it deals most directly with the uncertainty that on-again/off-again partners are facing—ambiguity about whether their relationship will continue. For example, cohabiting and married partners with a history of cycling reported greater uncertainty regarding the future of their relationship (Venum et al., 2014), and cyclical relationships with more renewals experienced greater relationship uncertainty (Dailey et al., 2009). Additionally,
those in cyclical relationships were found to have the higher rates of uncertainty compared to noncyclical relationships (Dailey, Hampel, & Roberts, 2010; Dailey, Middleton, & Green, 2012), and cyclical partners cite uncertainty as a major stressor for their relationships (Dailey, Jin, Pfiester, & Beck, 2011). Therefore, consistent breakups and renewals may cause partners to be unsure about the future of their relationship, and this resulting uncertainty may motivate more cycling as their confidence in the relationship fluctuates. Dailey, Jin, Pfiester, and Beck (2011) found that as partners become more certain about their relationship, they were less likely to renew after a break-up, demonstrating that uncertainty can facilitate increased cycling.

Research also indicates that adults whose parents have divorced are less confident in their ability to maintain a long-term marriage (Franklin, Janoff-Bulman, & Roberts, 1990; Shurts & Myers, 2012; Whitton, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2008), and are more fearful that their relationship will be low quality and unhappy like their parents’ relationship (Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004). In addition, parental discord was found to be correlated with offspring’s feelings of relationship efficacy, in which experiencing parents’ negative interpersonal behaviors reduced offspring’s belief in their ability to effectively resolve conflict (Cui, Fincham, & Pasley, 2008). These findings demonstrate that offspring who experienced their parents’ relationship instability may view themselves as less capable to sustain a long-lasting relationship, which can lead to hesitation about the future of their current relationship. This greater uncertainty may contribute to more cycling behaviors, as they attempt to grapple with both their doubts about their abilities and the future of their relationship. Therefore, relationship uncertainty may be a mechanism that explains how parental relationship instability
contributes to increased cycling behaviors in offspring’s relationships. Based on these findings, this study will examine if relationship uncertainty mediates the association between parental relationship instability and emerging adults’ cycling behaviors.

**Divorce Attitudes**

Offspring’s divorce attitudes may be another mechanism through which parental instability affects their adult relationships. Children of divorce are more likely to have favorable attitudes toward divorce and are less likely to believe that marriage should be a lifelong commitment (e.g., Amato & Booth, 1991; Miles & Servaty-Seib, 2010). Specifically, Cui, Fincham, and Durtschi (2011) found that offspring’s pro-divorce attitudes mediated the association between parental divorce and their own relationship dissolution in adulthood. In addition, emerging adults’ negative attitudes toward marriage mediated the effect of parental divorce on their current relationship quality (Cui & Fincham, 2010). These findings suggest that the pro-divorce attitudes stem from offspring’s experiences with parental instability and can have long-term effects on their later romantic relationships.

When emerging adults’ relationships fluctuate in quality, pro-divorce attitudes may increase their likelihood of using cycling as a conflict resolution strategy. As children observe their parents’ divorce and acquire pro-divorce attitudes, they may begin to see relationship dissolution as the optimal solution for dissatisfaction and utilize it as a problem-solving tactic. Findings regarding cyclical partners’ rationale for breaking up and renewing their relationship can substantiate this idea. In one study, cyclical partners’ reasons for breaking up were due to decreases in satisfaction with the relationship or with their partner (Dailey, Rossetto, Pfiester, & Surra, 2009). Similarly, cyclical partners
attributed their renewals to more effective communication, changes in their partner’s characteristics, increased intimacy between partners, and more effort being put into the relationship (Dailey, Rossetto, Pfiester, & Surra, 2009). These findings imply that, in cyclical relationships, a break-up may not be viewed as a definite end to the relationship, but instead a means of improving their interactions and satisfaction with their partner. This use of dissolution as a problem-solving tactic may be motivated by a partner’s pro-divorce attitudes. Based on these ideas, this study will investigate if emerging adults’ attitudes toward divorce mediate the association between parental relationship instability and cycling.

**Relationship Effort Beliefs**

The last mechanism that may play a role in emerging adult cycling is an individual’s beliefs about effort in romantic relationships. Some individuals believe that love is easy and effortless, and that love is enough to sustain a romantic relationship long-term (Cobb, Larson, & Watson, 2003). Endorsement of these unrealistic beliefs about love and effort predicted greater disengagement and less commitment to a current relationship, greater consideration of alternative partners, and a lack of thoughtful solutions to relationship problems (Cobb et al., 2003; Fitzpatrick & Sollie, 1999; Larson & Holman, 1994). Based on these findings, an individual who endorses these beliefs may choose to enter and leave relationships as their love for their partner fluctuates, instead of engaging in effortful maintenance or repair of the relationship. Cycling may result if partners experience these fluctuations in love multiple times over the course of their relationship and do not put forth the necessary effort to sustain their relationship without breaking up. Thus, the inability to manage relationship issues leads to dissolution, and
partners who are able to manage their issues can increase the quality of their relationship enough to renew, continuing the cyclical nature of their relationship.

Furthermore, beliefs about relationship effort may be associated with parental relationship instability. Women with divorced parents held less idealistic beliefs about relationships than women from non-divorced families (Sprecher, Cate, & Levin, 1998). However, another study found that young adults from divorced and non-divorced families generally did not differ in their relationship beliefs (Sinclair & Nelson, 1998).

Unfortunately, the literature about relationship beliefs is dated, so the current study will seek to provide a more contemporary examination of these variables. This study will explore if unrealistic beliefs about the amount of effort needed to maintain a romantic relationship mediates the association between parental relationship instability and emerging adult’s cycling behaviors.

**Current Study**

The purpose of the current study is to examine the association between parental relationship instability and emerging adults’ cycling behaviors. The first hypothesis is that parental relationship instability will be positively associated with emerging adults’ cycling behaviors. The second hypothesis is that this association between parental relationship instability and emerging adults’ cycling behaviors will be mediated by emerging adults’ relationship uncertainty, their attitudes toward divorce, and their beliefs about relationship effort. Relationship uncertainty and pro-divorce attitudes are expected to be positively associated to both parental relationship instability and emerging adults’ cycling behaviors, while relationship effort beliefs are expected to be negatively related to parental relationship instability and positively related to emerging adult cycling.
Method

Procedures

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Missouri. A sample of convenience was used, as participants were recruited from six undergraduate classes in the Human Development and Family Science department at the University of Missouri, through inclusion on a university wide email that provides information about campus opportunities, and through social media posts. The invitations to participate were sent with a link to the online survey and consent form (see Appendix A). The survey was administered using Qualtrics, Inc., and took approximately 15-20 minutes to complete. Participation was voluntary and the responses were kept confidential. Participants were given the option to enter a random drawing to win one of six $50 Walmart gift cards as compensation.

Participants

The analytic sample of this study was 751 participants. See Tables 1 and 2 for demographic information. Participants include emerging adults between the ages of 18-25, who are currently in a relationship or have been in one within the last 3 years. This inclusion criterion was chosen in order to maximize the number of participants who could report on a cyclical relationship. Past and present cyclical relationships were included in the study to account for both the ‘on’ and ‘off’ stages found in these relationships. Past cyclical relationships may not be completely terminated, but rather in an ‘off’ stage and subject to be renewed again.

Measures

Perceptions of Parental Relationship Instability
Parental divorce, parental cycling, and parental union transitions were used as indicators of parental relationship instability. These indicators were measured using offspring’s recollections of their parent’s behaviors; therefore, they merely reflect offspring’s perceptions of their parents’ instability. However, the behaviors that offspring directly observe and reliably remember are the ones that they are most likely to reproduce for themselves (Bandura, 1977). Also, an individual’s perceptions may be more impactful for the processes and outcomes in their romantic relationships than the objective reality that occurred (see Ogolsky & Surra, 2014 for an example). Parental divorce was assessed by comparing the relationship status of the participants’ biological/adoptive parents at the time of their birth and at present, with 0 = never divorced and 1 = divorced. To assess parental cycling, participants were asked if they have ever witnessed their parents breaking up for a period of time before getting back together, and/or divorcing before remarrying each other. They were also asked if their parents have cycled in any relationships other than the one with their other biological parent. Parental cycling was coded as 0 = never cycled and 1 = ever cycled. Parental union transitions were assessed by asking participants to identify the number of serious romantic relationships they witnessed their mother and father engaging in during their childhood. This was a continuous variable that ranged from 1 – 18 relationships.

**Divorce Attitudes**

Divorce attitudes was measured using a latent variable with three items from the *Marital Permanence Scale* (Willoughby, Medaris, James, & Bartholomew, 2015). Participants were asked to rate their agreement with general statements about the acceptability of leaving a marriage due to dissatisfaction (e.g., “Marriage is for life, even
if the couple is unhappy”) on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Not true at all) to 6 (Very true). Higher scores indicate less accepting attitudes toward divorce. Cronbach’s alpha for the scale is .81.

**Relationship Uncertainty**

Relationship uncertainty was measured using a latent variable with twelve items from the *Relationship Uncertainty Scale* (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). The 4-item *Mutuality Subscale* asked participants if both partners reciprocate their feelings for one another (e.g., “How certain are you about whether or not you and your partner feel the same way about each other?”, \( \alpha = .91 \)). The 4-item *Definition Subscale* asked participants if both partners agree on the nature of the relationship (e.g., “How certain are you about how you and your partner would describe this relationship?”, \( \alpha = .91 \)). The 4-item *Future Subscale* asked participants if both partners agree on the long-term outcome of the relationship (e.g., “How certain are you about the future of the relationship?”, \( \alpha = .92 \)). Participants were asked to rate their certainty on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Completely or almost completely uncertain) to 6 (Completely or almost completely certain). Items were reworded to be past tense for participants who were reporting on a past cyclical relationship. All items are reverse scored so that higher scores indicate more uncertainty about the relationship (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). Cronbach’s alpha for the total scale is .90.

**Relationship Effort Beliefs**

Beliefs about relationship effort was measured using a latent variable with four items from *Attitudes about Romance and Mate Selection Scale* (Cobb, Larson, & Watson, 2003). Participants rated statements regarding their beliefs about the amount of effort
needed for relationships in general. Participants were not asked to report about the effort needed to maintain their current relationship. The statements (e.g., “In the end, my partner and I’s feelings of love for each other should be enough to sustain a happy, committed relationship”) were rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree). Higher scores indicate more unrealistic beliefs about the effort needed to sustain a relationship. Cronbach’s alpha for the subscale is .82.

**Offspring Cycling Behaviors**

To assess if participants have experienced a cyclical relationship, they were asked if they have ever broken-up and then gotten back together with a romantic partner at least once during their relationship, with 0 = never cycled and 1 = ever cycled. They were also asked whether this cycling occurred in a current or past relationship.

**Covariates**

Several demographic characteristics were accounted for as covariates, including age in years, gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, year in school, and employment status.

**Data Analysis**

The data was analyzed using the Lavaan package (Rosseel, 2012) in R 4.0. First, descriptive statistics, bivariate correlations, normality, and reliability of scales were calculated (see Tables 1, 2, & 3). Then, structural equation modeling was used to test the hypotheses, with three indicators of parental relationship instability as independent variables and offspring relationship cycling as the dependent variable. The model tested direct effects and indirect effects through the latent mediators- divorce attitudes, relationship uncertainty, and relationship effort beliefs. Full information maximum
likelihood was used to handle missing data. Fit statistics used to ascertain model fit included a non-significant Chi-squared test, RMSEA less than 0.05, CFI greater than .95, and SRMR less than 0.10 (Kline, 2011). However, Chi-squared tests are greatly affected by sample size and tend to show significance for even small differences at large samples sizes (Bearden, Sharma, & Teel, 1982). Pseudo $R^2$s and odds ratios were also calculated for the final model.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

The majority of participants (65.4%) reported some kind of parental relationship instability. As shown in Table 1, roughly a quarter (24.0%) of the sample had parents who divorced, 47.3% witnessed parental cycling, 37.4% witnessed one or more maternal union transition in their lifetime, and 38.1% witnessed one or more paternal union transition in their lifetime. Additionally, 58.9% of the emerging adults in this study had cycled with a romantic partner within the last three years. As shown in Table 2, the sample was fairly accepting of divorce ($M = 2.36, SD = 1.15$), fairly certain about the future of their relationships, ($M = 2.45, SD = 1.33$), and mostly unrealistic about the amount of effort needed for a relationship ($M = 4.67, SD = 1.35$). As compared to those who had never cycled, participants who had experienced cycling were more likely to report parental cycling, experienced greater relationship uncertainty, and had more realistic beliefs about relationship effort.

Measurement Model

First, confirmatory factor analysis was used to examine the measurement model, including the latent variables of divorce attitudes, relationship uncertainty, and
relationship effort beliefs. The hypothesized measurement model was a good fit to the data, as evidenced by a CFI value of .96, a RMSEA value of .06, and a SRMR value of .04 (see Figure 1). All the path coefficients were statistically significant ($p < .001$). The Chi-squared test was significant, $\chi^2 (146, N = 751) = 608.73, p < .001$, likely due to the large sample size.

**Structural Model**

Next, structural equation modeling was used to test the hypothesized model. The hypothesized model was a good fit to the data, as evidenced by a CFI value of .96, a RMSEA value of .04, and a SRMR value of .05 (see Table 5). The Chi-squared test for this model was significant, $\chi^2 (441, N = 741) = 899.32, p < .001$. Two Pseudo $R^2$s were calculated to compare the full structural model and the intercept-only model. Results indicated that the full model improved in fit as compared to the intercept-only model (Nagelkerke’s = .58, Cox & Snell = .58). Only parental cycling was a significant predictor of emerging adults’ cycling, as those whose parents had ever cycled were more likely to cycle themselves [$b = .09, SE = .03, p = .004, OR = 2.15, 95\% CI (1.59, 2.89)$]. Parental divorce, maternal union transitions, and paternal union transitions were unrelated to emerging adults’ cycling ($p > .05$, see Table 5).

One indirect effect was identified, wherein the association between parental cycling and emerging adult cycling was mediated by relationship uncertainty. As Table 4 illustrates, the regression coefficient between parental cycling and relationship uncertainty was statistically significant [$b = .16, SE = .10, p < .001$], as was the regression coefficient between relationship uncertainty and emerging adult cycling [$b = .53, SE = .02, p < .001$]. This indirect effect was significant [$b = .08, SE = .02, p < .001$].
Emerging adults’ divorce attitudes and relationship effort beliefs did not mediate any associations between parental relationship instability and cycling behaviors ($p > .05$, see Table 4). However, there was a direct effect for parental divorce and emerging adults’ divorce attitudes [$b = -0.23$, $SE = .08$, $p < .01$], and emerging adults’ beliefs about relationship effort and their cycling behaviors [$b = -0.04$, $SE = .02$, $p < .05$] (see Figure 2).

**Discussion**

The current study assessed how various indicators of parental relationship instability predict emerging adults’ cycling behaviors. This study also examined relationship uncertainty, divorce attitudes, and relationship effort beliefs as potential mediators of these associations. The findings demonstrated an association between parental cycling and emerging adult cycling, such that parental cycling increased the likelihood that emerging adults would cycle within their own relationships. This indicates a possible transmission of cycling behaviors between family generations and that parental cycling can be influential for the well-being of emerging adult relationships.

Not all indicators of parental relationship instability were found to be similarly impactful. Neither parental divorce nor parental union transitions were associated with emerging adult cycling behaviors. This unexpected finding may be understood using social learning theory. As this theory suggests, children reproduce the behaviors that they witness from salient models in their environment (Bandura, 1977). While divorce, cycling, and union transitions are all indicators of relationship instability, they are distinct behaviors that would be experienced and encoded differently by offspring. This means that observing one indicator of relationship instability may not necessarily generalize to the others, but instead strengthen the probability of that specific behavior. Consequently,
if someone witnessed parental cycling, they are reinforced for enacting cycling themselves. If they experienced parental divorce, they are specifically reinforced for replicating divorce, not cycling. Therefore, the same type of instability that offspring observed in their parents’ relationships is likely to be reproduced in their own. Additionally, the relevance of the parental behavior to the emerging adults’ current relationship is another important consideration. Given that the majority of the sample was not married, divorce may not be salient for emerging adults generally and not consequential for their behavior within their non-marital relationships. Similarly, parental union transitions may not have been relevant for offspring cycling, given that union transitions consist of entering relationships with different partners, whereas cycling is re-entering a relationship with the same partner. These ideas may help explain why parental cycling was the only indicator of parental relationship instability that was significantly related to emerging adult cycling, as emerging adults may be directly replicating the most relevant behavior that they observed from their parents’ relationships.

Another important finding was the indirect effect of relationship uncertainty on parental cycling and emerging adult cycling. As hypothesized, emerging adults who experienced parental cycling reported greater relationship uncertainty and had a higher probability of engaging in cycling. This finding is unsurprising, as uncertainty has been well documented as an important factor within cyclical relationships (e.g., Dailey, Rossetto, Pfiester, & Surra, 2009). Particularly, couples who cycle exhibit greater relationship uncertainty than those in stable, non-cyclical relationships (Dailey et al., 2009; Dailey, Hampel, & Roberts, 2010). Parental cycling may be associated with offspring relationship uncertainty in two ways: (a) cycling may cause uncertainty within
the parents’ relationship which offspring then observe and reproduce in their own relationships, or (b) witnessing parents’ repeated attempts to maintain their relationship through cycling makes offspring feel unsure about their own ability to sustain a relationship (e.g., Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004; Whitton, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2008). Thus, offspring’s lack of confidence and uncertainty motivates the frequent breakups and renewals that characterize on-again/off-again relationships.

Finally, divorce attitudes and relationship effort beliefs did not mediate the associations between parental relationship instability and emerging adult cycling. This was not consistent with the hypotheses of this study. It is possible that the association between cycling behaviors and relationship uncertainty was stronger than the associations between cycling and the other two mediators. Similar to parental divorce, divorce attitudes also may not be particularly relevant for those in dating relationships, which comprised the majority of this sample. Divorce attitudes may be more strongly related to cycling behaviors for couples where marital dissolution is more salient, such as in cohabitating, engaged, or married couples. Using an older and more committed sample may provide clarity about how divorce attitudes is related to parental relationship instability and cycling behaviors. Relationship effort beliefs also may not have been a significant mediator, because these beliefs are not germane for on-again/off-again couples. Dailey et al. (2020) found that cyclical and non-cyclical partners did not have significantly different implicit beliefs about romantic relationships, and some of their results even suggested that relationship beliefs were not as strong predictors for cyclical couples. Similarly, the current study found that relationship effort beliefs were significantly related to emerging adult cycling behaviors, but that it was non-cyclical
emerging adults who had more unrealistic beliefs about the effort needed to sustain a relationship. Perhaps experiencing the highs and lows of a cyclical relationship allows partners to realize that romantic relationships require considerable effort to maintain. For instance, Dailey, Jin, Pfiester, & Beck (2011) found that a benefit of cycling for on-again/off-again partners was that it gave them an opportunity to make improvements to their relationship, which may demonstrate that on-again/off-again partners have to engage in considerable effort to renew their relationship. Because on-again/off-again couples must navigate the tumultuous nature of their relationship, they may have more realistic beliefs about relationship effort, and thus these beliefs do not contribute to increased cycling.

**Implications**

The largest implication for this study is that it is the first to establish a link between parental instability and offspring’s cycling behaviors. Previous research about on-again/off-again relationships has paid little attention to how cycling may be influenced by familial factors, such as parental romantic relationships, and has not investigated possible mediators between relationship partners’ previous life experiences and their current cyclical behaviors. This study also begins to address the calls for a greater focus on the factors that promote or predispose individuals to cycling, as much of the research in this area focuses on the outcomes of on-again/off-again relationships (see Dailey, 2016 and Monk, Ogolsky, & Oswald, 2018). In sum, this study adds to the burgeoning field about on-again/off-again relationships and provides another lens through which to understand cycling, particularly cycling performed by young adults.
This study also has implications for the literature on the intergenerational transmission of divorce. The finding that parental cycling is related to emerging adults’ cycling extends the ideas found in the transmission of divorce literature to another form of parental relationship instability. Relationship instability may be transmitted between generations in other ways beyond divorce, including cycling and possibly a host of other behaviors or attitudes. These findings show that not only do the outcomes of parents’ romantic relationships (i.e., divorce) matter, but that emerging adults’ relationships are also affected by the processes within their parents’ relationships (i.e., cycling).

Additionally, because most participants were reporting on a dating relationship, this study demonstrates that certain kinds of parental relationship instability can impact offspring’s non-marital relationships. The previous literature on the intergenerational transmission of divorce focused mostly on married couples and their outcomes, but this study found that parental instability can also impact the transient and usually less committed relationships of early adulthood.

Furthermore, this study has practical implications for the educators and practitioners working with cyclical partners. Family history and the relationship behaviors modeled by parents during childhood may be a fruitful area for educators and practitioners to explore when working with these couples. These areas may help explain why some partners engage in cycling and could be used to inform and guide discussions with cyclical couples. Practitioners may also want to address the uncertainty present in cyclical relationships to help relational partners gain understanding about the status of their relationship and to determine their future commitment. Educators who work with emerging adults or college students may want to incorporate information about on-
again/off-again relationships into healthy relationship curriculums, as this study found that many in these populations have experience with cycling.

**Limitations**

As with any study, these findings need to be interpreted in the context of several limitations. First, the sample of this study may prevent generalization to other populations. While this study was not exclusively limited to college students, the participants were mostly undergraduate students from a large land-grant university. Therefore, these findings may not apply to emerging adults who did not pursue higher education, who are currently in the workforce, or who attend smaller or non-traditional schools. In addition, the participants were mostly female, White, and heterosexual, so it is important to replicate this study with more representation from marginalized groups.

Second, this examination of how parental instability affects offspring’s cycling was cross-sectional, not longitudinal. This means that no claims of causality can be made about this association and we cannot be sure that parental instability has a direct temporal link to emerging adult cycling. This is further compounded by the fact that participants were able to report on their most recent cyclical relationship, whether it was their current relationship or a past one. The inclusion of past cyclical relationships means that the results may not fully address the factors that influence current cyclical processes.

Finally, our measurement of parental instability was based on offspring’s reports of their parent’s past behavior. Participants may have inaccurate, incomplete, or biased memories of their parents’ relationships and behaviors. Specifically, this study was asking participants to recall events that may have occurred a decade ago, making them subject to general memory decay. Additionally, all of the measures in this study were
self-report and could have been biased by similar recall issues or social desirability. Another related consideration is that because emerging adults were reporting on their parents’ behaviors, emerging adults likely experienced and remembered only the most extreme points of instability in their parents’ relationships. For example, offspring were more likely to be directly impacted by a time when their parents separated for a month, rather than an argument that resulted in their parents being in an ‘off’ stage for a few hours. Therefore, our findings may reflect the significant impact that only the most extreme cases of parental cycling can have on their offspring’s relational stability.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

More research in this area is recommended to learn more about on-again/off-again relationships in general and to rectify the limitations presented above. First, future studies should more directly measure parents’ relationship behavior and outcomes. Engaging parents in the data collection or using observational methods may help circumvent offspring’s inaccurate or incomplete memories. Comparing both parents’ and offspring’s accounts of parental relationship instability can help both corroborate offspring’s experiences and determine which experiences are the most impactful for their future cycling behaviors. Additionally, this study should be replicated with longitudinal data to establish a temporal link between parental cycling and offspring’s cyclical relationships. Last, future research should investigate how parental relationship instability affects couples who currently or previously cycled and are in married or cohabiting relationships. Recollections of parental relationship instability may differentially affect cyclical couples in these higher commitment situations. Similarly, the transmission of parental cycling should be examined in an older population, to determine if this
association continues into middle and late adulthood. All in all, the impact of parental relationship instability on on-again/off-again relationships in emerging adulthood is an important and abundant area for future research.
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England: Cambridge University Press.

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Relationship churning in emerging adulthood: On/off relationships and sex with
an ex. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 28*(2), 166-188.


Table 1

Participant characteristics

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*Bivariate correlations for the main study variables*

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* indicates $p < .05$

** indicates $p < .01$
### Table 4

*Indirect effect results*

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<td>Parental Cycling- Uncertainty</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Cycling- Divorce Attitudes</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Cycling- Relationship Effort Beliefs</td>
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<td>0.01</td>
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<td>0.00</td>
<td>-0.00</td>
<td>.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal Union Transitions- Relationship Effort Beliefs</td>
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<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Indirect Effect</td>
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<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.13</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
### Table 5

*Results for Final Model*

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>$b$</th>
<th>$SE_b$</th>
<th>$\beta$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Parental Divorce</td>
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<td>-0.02</td>
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</tr>
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<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>.00</td>
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<td>Maternal Union Transitions</td>
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<td>-0.03</td>
<td>.38</td>
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<td>Paternal Union Transitions</td>
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<td>-0.03</td>
<td>.40</td>
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<td>Relationship Uncertainty</td>
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<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorce Attitudes</td>
<td>-0.00</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.00</td>
<td>.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Effort Beliefs</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Covariates**

**Age**

| Age | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | .98 |

**Gender**

| Female | 0.03 | 0.04 | 0.03 | .45 |
| Transgender | -0.01 | 0.15 | -0.00 | .95 |

**Race/Ethnicity**

| Non-White | 0.02 | 0.04 | 0.01 | .68 |

**Sexual Orientation**

| Gay/Lesbian | 0.08 | 0.10 | 0.03 | .44 |
| Bisexual   | -0.07 | 0.05 | -0.05 | .15 |
| Asexual    | -0.03 | 0.17 | -0.01 | .85 |

**Year in College**

| Upperclassman | 0.03 | 0.04 | 0.03 | .40 |
| Graduate/Professional | -0.00 | 0.05 | -0.00 | .99 |
| Non-degree | -0.14 | 0.09 | -0.06 | .12 |

**Employment Status**

| Part-time | -0.05 | 0.05 | -0.05 | .36 |
| Temporary/Seasonal | -0.04 | 0.06 | -0.04 | .49 |
| Not Employed | 0.02 | 0.06 | 0.01 | .77 |

**Log Likelihood**

-26704.86

**AIC**

53553.72

**BIC**

53885.50

**CFI**

.96

**RMSEA**

.04

**SRMR**

.05
Figure 1. Path Analysis for Confirmatory Factor Analysis Model

Divorce Attitudes

Item 1
1.00 (0.71)***

Item 2
1.51 (0.81)***

Item 3
1.50 (0.79)***

Relationship Efforts Beliefs

Item 1
1.00 (0.78)***

Item 2
1.24 (0.87)***

Item 3
0.95 (0.72)***

Item 4
0.82 (0.55)***

Mutuality Subscale

Item 1
1.00 (0.90)***

Item 2
1.01 (0.93)***

Item 3
1.01 (0.86)***

Item 4
0.86 (0.75)***

Definition Subscale

Item 5
1.00 (0.91)***

Item 6
1.04 (0.93)***

Item 7
1.00 (0.88)***

Item 8
0.63 (0.69)***

Future Subscale

Item 9
1.00 (0.91)***

Item 10
1.07 (0.95)***

Item 11
0.89 (0.74)***

Item 12
0.99 (0.89)***

Relationship Uncertainty

0.99 (0.91)***

0.93 (0.82)***
Figure 2. Significant Paths for Final Model

Note: Covariates were included in the final model, Unstandardized coefficients (standardized coefficients), Analyses used listwise deletion
*p-value < .05, **p-value < .01, ***p-value < .001
Appendix A

Canvas Announcement

Hello (insert name of class here) students!

My name is Emily Charvat and I am a graduate student in the Human Development and Family Science department here at Mizzou. I am conducting a research project about romantic relationships during early adulthood to complete my Master’s thesis. If you are between the ages of 18-25 and have been in a relationship within the last three years, I would love to hear about your unique experiences in romantic relationships through this quick survey!

This survey is expected to take 10-15 minutes. Participation in this research survey is voluntary, and your responses will be confidential. Below is a link that will connect you to the consent form, which will then lead you to the survey.

(Insert link here)

After completing the survey, you will have the option to enter a drawing to win one of six $50 Walmart gift cards! Thank you so much for taking the time to participate in my study. Please don’t hesitate to reach out to me at eckm5@mail.missouri.edu or 216-337-5415 if you have any questions about the survey.

Thanks,

Emily Charvat

MU Info/ Social Media Post

Help us learn more about romantic relationship experiences during early adulthood!

Researchers in the Department of Human Development and Family Science invites
anyone between the ages of 18-25 and have been in a romantic relationship within the last three years to complete a brief (10-15 minute) and confidential online survey. Participants are eligible to win one of six $50 gift cards. Click here for more information and to participate (Insert link here). Please contact Emily Charvat (eckm5@mail.missouri.edu) with any questions or concerns.

**In-Class Recruitment Script**

Hello everybody!

I’m Emily Charvat and I am a graduate student in the Human Development and Family Science department. Thanks for letting me talk to you today. I am conducting a research project on romantic relationships during early adulthood for my Master’s thesis. If you have had a romantic relationship within the last three years and are between the ages of 18-25, I would love to hear about it! To participate, all you have to do is fill out a quick 10-15 minute survey. Participation in this research is voluntary and your responses will be confidential. And to thank you for your time, you can enter a drawing to win one of six $50 Walmart gift cards! (Insert name of instructor here) will send out a link to the survey through Canvas today for anyone who wants to participate, so be sure to look out for it. Please don’t hesitate to reach out to me if you have any questions about the survey, my contact info will be in the email. Thanks again!