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Intergenerational Continuity and Stability in Early Family Formation

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This study examines intergenerational continuity (mean level similarity) and stability (maintenance of rank ordering of individuals) in age and marital status at the time of becoming a young parent using prospective data from 3 generations of 585 families. G2 participants were recruited at the age of 5 years and followed until the age of 28, by which time 227 had become parents themselves. The findings suggest that despite dramatic intergenerational discontinuities with young adults, on average, now being more likely to be unmarried and older at the time of becoming parents than in previous generations, intergenerational stability in age and marital status at the time of becoming a young parent is still substantial. This intergenerational stability was, for the most part, not moderated by demographic, familial, or behavioral factors, suggesting that a developmental, multigenerational perspective is necessary to understand what has previously been considered a largely demographic issue.

Keywords: developmental continuity and stability, early family formation patterns, intergenerational, marital status, timing of parenthood

Demographic shifts in the United States with respect to cohabitation, marriage, and age at the time of becoming a parent have been well documented (Amato, Booth, Johnson, & Rogers, 2007; Copen, Daniels, & Mosher, 2013; Settersten & Ray, 2010; Ventura & Bachrach, 2000). Rates of cohabitation have increased dramatically in recent years, with the number of opposite sex cohabiting couples in the United States increasing by 24% from 2007 to 2016 (Stepler, 2017). Correspondingly, age of first marriage has also risen steadily (Goodwin, McGill, & Chandra, 2009). These changes have contributed to an increase in the proportion of children being born to unmarried parents; currently, 40% of births are to unmarried parents (Martin, Hamilton, Osterman, Driscoll, & Mathews, 2017). A complex array of societal-level factors such as economic recession and more relaxed social norms regarding the perceived acceptability of cohabitation and nonmarital childbearing has

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been argued to have affected these changes in cohabitation, marriage, and parenthood (Sassler, 2010).

This historical shift toward a larger proportion of births to unmarried parents suggests a necessary degree of discontinuity within families, such that a growing proportion of individuals born to married parents must themselves be increasingly likely to become unwed parents. Furthermore, the older average age at first becoming a parent suggests a further discontinuity in that offspring of young parents may themselves be waiting longer to become parents. However, mothers' age and marital status at the time of their first birth are strongly related to their offspring's age and marital status at the time they become parents (Högnäs & Carlson, 2012; Kim, 2014). In considering these seemingly incongruous findings, it is important to distinguish *continuity* and *stability* (see Bornstein, Putnick, & Esposito, 2017; Schulenberg, Maslowsky, & Jager, 2018) with regard to the intergenerational transmission of parental age and marital status at first birth. The terms continuity and stability have sometimes been used interchangeably in the literature, but developmental research has tried to distinguish these two concepts both conceptually and methodologically as they refer to different developmental processes. To give a simple hypothetical example, if individuals in families A, B, C, and D become parents at ages 18, 19, 20, and 21, respectively, and their children become parents at ages 28, 29, 30, and 31, respectively, then the sample displays both stability in age at time of first parenthood, as the rank order of age of first parenthood is maintained over time (e.g., individuals in family A give birth at the youngest age in both generations), and discontinuity in age at first parenthood, as the mean age is 19.5 in the first generation, whereas the mean age is 29.5 in the second generation. In the present study, continuity pertains to similarity in mean parental age or marital status at first birth across generations, with the current population trend showing discontinuity with age increasing and nonmarital births becoming more common. In contrast, stability pertains to rank ordering of individuals, such that a child being born to a parent who is *relatively* young for the given historical time corresponds with that child then becoming a parent at a relatively young age for the later given historical time. Similarly, stability would be established if offspring born to unwed parents would be more likely themselves to be unwed at their first birth.

The present study uses prospective data from three generations of a sample recruited when the original offspring were 5 years old (called the G2s, with their mothers called G1s to designate their generation with respect to one another) to assess intergenerational links in early family formation. The sample was followed for 23 years, with annual assessments to determine when the G2s themselves became parents of G3 offspring. This multigenerational longitudinal design enables us to examine correlates of age and marital status at the time G1s and G2s became parents, intergenerational continuity and stability in age and marital status at the time of becoming a young parent, and potential moderators of continuity and stability in age and marital status at the time of first becoming a parent. In doing so, we can begin to resolve how societal-level changes in family formation patterns are experienced within families over time, which is important for bringing a developmental perspective to what has been construed largely as a demographic issue.

We note at the outset that this is a study of young parents, as we have data on the G2 generation only through age 28. Therefore, individuals who became parents after the age of 28 (which is becoming increasingly normative) are excluded from the analyses.

Intergenerational Stability in Age and Marital Status at Time of Becoming a Parent

Several theoretical models offer perspectives on why age and marital status at the time of becoming a parent may show stability from one generation to the next. First, according to a social learning perspective (Bandura, 2016), children's marital paradigms may be shaped by observations of their parents' experience of marriage or children's knowledge that their parents were not married at the time of becoming parents (Willoughby, Hall, & Luczak, 2015). It is also possible that parents who are young, unmarried, or both at the time they become parents convey to their children attitudes and beliefs about the acceptability of parenthood at a young age and while not married (Barber, 2001). These attitudes and beliefs are thought to be internalized, leading children to perceive this pattern as normative and increasing the likelihood that their own children in the next generation will also be young, unmarried, or both at the time they become parents.

A social control perspective similarly suggests intergenerational stability in age and marital status at the time of becoming a parent (e.g., Hogan & Kitagawa, 1985). Individuals who are younger or unmarried when they become parents may be less able to exert social control over the behavior of their offspring than individuals who are older or married when they become parents, which then leads to the offspring's earlier initiation of sexual intercourse and a higher likelihood of early and unmarried parenthood (Barber, 2001). Parents with more financial and educational resources have been found to be able to exert more control over their children's behavior than parents with fewer resources (Axinn & Thornton, 1992), suggesting an additional reason that younger and unmarried parents may be less able to control their children's behavior. Thus, it is possible that socioeconomic disadvantage accounts for intergenerational stability in age and marital status at the time of becoming a parent. Indeed, not only has low socioeconomic status been associated both with younger parenthood and with unmarried parenthood (e.g., Penman-Aguilar, Carter, Snead, & Kourtis, 2013), but socioeconomic status also shows stability across generations (Pettit, Yu, Dodge, & Bates, 2009). Nevertheless, socioeconomic status alone does not explain intergenerational stability, as having parents who were unmarried at the time of becoming parents has been found to increase the likelihood of offspring becoming unmarried parents, even when controlling for socioeconomic status (Högnäs & Carlson, 2012).

Moderators of Intergenerational Stability

Despite the propensity for intergenerational stability, however, several factors may moderate links between age and marital status at the time of becoming a parent from one generation to the next, leading to instability. With regard to potential moderators, we focused on theoretically guided factors encompassing demographic, familial, and behavioral variables early in G2s' lives that are most consistently cited as likely playing a role in the intergenerational stability of family formation patterns. In particular, we focused on early life factors to be able to capture moderators before G2s became parents.

These considerations led us to focus on G1 difficulties after G2's birth, stressful events early in G2's life, G1's use of corporal punishment, G1's proactive parenting, G1's parental warmth, G2's externalizing and internalizing behaviors during childhood, and G2's temperament traits (e.g., Woodward, Fergusson, & Horwood, 2001), in addition to the demographic moderators of gender, race/ethnicity, and educational attainment, which have been demonstrated to be robust predictors of family formation patterns. For example, women marry and bear children at younger ages than do men (Goodwin et al., 2009). African Americans are more likely than European Americans to marry at older ages and to have a child outside of marriage (Schoen, Landale, & Daniels, 2007; Schoen, Landale, Daniels, & Cheng, 2009). More highly educated men and women marry and bear children at older ages than do less educated men and women (Livingston & Cohn, 2010). Although researchers have identified sociodemographic predictors of marriage and parenthood (e.g., Amato et al., 2008; Macmillan & Copher, 2005; Maggs, Jager, Patrick, & Schulenberg, 2012; Oesterle, Hawkins, & Hill, 2011; Salmela-Aro, Kiuru, Nurmi, & Eerola, 2011), little research has situated these demographic correlates of age and marital status at the time of becoming a parent in a prospective, multigenerational design, so the relative normativeness of age and marital status at the time of becoming a parent within the same family across generations has not been taken into account.

These demographic correlates, however, may exert different effects within families. For example, because women more often take on parenting responsibilities in the case of nonmarital births (Huerta et al., 2013), intergenerational stability in young and unmarried childbearing may be stronger for women than men (Högnäs & Carlson, 2012). In contrast, because low educational attainment is a risk factor for young and unmarried parenthood, intergenerational stability may be disrupted for parents who are young or unmarried at the time of becoming a parent who are nevertheless able to finish their education or whose offspring are able to attain more education (Högnäs & Carlson, 2012). Beyond demographic indicators, social learning, social control, and psychobiological perspectives suggest that early experiences within the family environment may serve either to perpetuate or disrupt intergenerational stability. For example, stressful events early in a child's life, use of corporal punishment, and child behavior problems have all been found to be risk factors for early parenthood (e.g., Woodward et al., 2001). Likewise, personality traits have been found to be related to individuals' marital trajectories (e.g., Lundberg, 2010) and age at the time of becoming a parent (Harville, Madkour, & Xie, 2015). However, it is unclear whether these factors would moderate intergenerational stability in age and marital status at the time of becoming a parent. Within theories of life course development, the moderators we considered reflect how family background, childhood experiences, and interpersonal relationships shape individuals' development across the life course, consistent with frameworks encompassing developmental cascades (Masten & Cicchetti, 2010), developmental psychopathology (Dodge et al., 2009), and life course sociology (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003; Shanahan, 2000).

Taken together, previous research suggests two alternate perspectives on intergenerational continuity and stability in parents' age and marital status at the time of becoming a parent. On the one hand, previous research suggests that offspring born to parents who are young, unmarried, or both are also likely to become parents when they are young, unmarried, or both (Högnäs & Carlson, 2012; Kim, 2014). On the other hand, Arocho and Kamp Dush (2017) suggest that instead of replicating their parents' behavior regarding family formation, young people may follow current social norms and delay parenthood and marriage. If younger adults are in fact more susceptible to societal-level trends than to within-family characteristics, we would expect less continuity in the most recent cohorts. More specifically, because of national demographic shifts to older ages at the time of first becoming a parent and an increased likelihood of being unmarried at the time of becoming a parent, these social norms for later and unmarried parenthood may disrupt intergenerational continuities in age and marital status at the time of becoming a parent. Given recent evidence indicating that delaying family formation may be adaptive for well-being later in adulthood (Johnson, Krahn, & Galambos, 2017; Williams, Sassler, Addo, & Frech, 2015), identifying which young adults are more likely to adhere to societal trends delaying these milestones rather than maintain within-family patterns of early initiation has potentially large consequences across the life span.

Research Questions

Using longitudinal data from three generations of families, we address two research questions. First, during this era of dramatic demographic shifts in more prevalent nonmarital childbearing and older average age at first parenthood, to what extent is there evidence for intergenerational continuity and stability in age and marital status at the time of first becoming a parent? Second, to what extent do demographic, familial, and behavioral factors from the G2's early childhood moderate intergenerational stability in age and marital status at the time of first becoming a parent?

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited when G2s entered kindergarten in 1987 or 1988 at three sites: Knoxville and Nashville, TN and Bloomington, IN (Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1990). G1 mothers were approached during kindergarten preregistration and asked if they would participate in a longitudinal study of child development. Approximately 75% agreed. About 15% of children at the targeted schools did not preregister. Late enrolling families were recruited on the first day of school or by subsequent contact. The sample consisted of 585 families at the first assessment. The sample reflected a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds, with G1 education levels ranging from less than high school to advanced degrees. Participants were assessed annually through G2 age 28. G1 mothers provided written informed consent each year for their own and their G2 child's participation, until G2 participants reached age 18, when they began providing their own written informed consent. Institutional Review Boards at the universities involved in this study approved the research protocols. Eighty-two percent of the original sample provided data at age 27 or 28, but the G2s did not have to provide data at these ages to be included in the analyses as many of the participants had become parents before this time. In preliminary analyses, we found that the orig-

inal participants who did not provide age 27 or 28 data had mothers with less education and were less likely to be female, but did not differ on ethnicity, G1's age at the time of becoming a mother, G1's marital status at the time of G2's birth, or any of the other demographic, familial, or behavioral indicators included in the analyses.

G1 mothers ranged in age from 13 to 48 at the time of their first birth. G2 parents ranged in age from 13 to 28 (the end of the study period) at the time of G3's birth. Because the G2 participants are not yet 48 years old, and data on G2 parents are only available through age 28, we limited the G1 sample to mothers who were ages 13–28 at the time of their first birth to be comparable with the G2 analysis sample. This resulted in a G1 sample size of 466 instead of 585 (82% European American, 18% African American; 50% G2 males). The substantive conclusions presented below did not differ when the full sample of 585 G1s was used instead of the sample restricted to G1s who became mothers by the age of 28.

Procedures and Measures

During the summer before G2 children started kindergarten or within the first weeks of school, in-depth interviews were conducted with G1 mothers in their homes. Data for the current analyses were drawn from these initial interviews when the G2 was age 5 as well as annual follow-up interviews when the G2 was 14 to 28 years old. Table 1 presents descriptive statistics.

During the Year 1 interview, G1 mothers completed a demographic history to report their age at the time they first became a parent, their marital status at the time of G2's birth (coded 0 = *not married*, 1 = *married*), their educational attainment (1 = *did not graduate from high school*, 2 = *high school graduate*, 3 = *some college*, 4 = *college graduate or higher*), G2's gender (coded 0 = *male*, 1 = *female*), and G2's ethnicity (coded 0 = *European American*, 1 = *African American*; other ethnic groups were not included in the analyses because the *n*s were too small). G1 mothers also completed interview and questionnaire measures to assess family experiences, parenting, and child adjustment.

G1 mothers were asked how difficult it was to take care of G2 as a baby (1 = *easy* to 4 = *hard*), how the family functioned following G2's birth (1 = *smooth* to 3 = *disrupted*), and how difficult the birth of G2 was for the family (1 = *easy* to 4 = *hard*). These questions were integrated in a more comprehensive and detailed interview about how the family functioned after G2's birth, following which the interviewer paused to rate privately the family's adjustment to the birth (1 = *easy adjustment* to 5 = *disrupted*). These four items were standardized and averaged to create a scale reflecting difficulty adjusting to G2's birth (α = .78).

G1 mothers also were asked whether they had experienced each of 15 stressful life events (e.g., death of a family member, divorce) during the child's first year of life. An index of stressful life events was created by summing responses to these questions (each rated 0 = *had not occurred*, 1 = *had occurred*; see Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1994).

Mothers' use of corporal punishment was measured using three assessment methods when the child was age 5: a semistructured interview followed by an interviewer rating, hypothetical vignettes from the Concerns and Constraints Questionnaire (Pettit, Bates, & Dodge, 1997), and the aggression subscale of the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, 1979). First, trained researchers conducted in-depth interviews with mothers in their homes asking questions regarding how the child was disciplined, whether the child was ever physically punished, and, if so, how physical punishment was delivered (e.g., spanking with hand or with object). Following these questions, interviewers privately rated the discipline received by the child on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*nonrestrictive, mostly positive guidance; the mother reports no physical punishment; the*

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlations

Variable	G1 age at first birth	G1 marital status at G2's birth	G2 age at G3's birth	G2 marital status at G3's birth	*M* (*SD*)
G1 age at first birth[a]	—	.34***	.38***	.23**	21.79 (3.81)
G1 marital status at G2's birth	.34***	—	.32***	.27***	77% married
G2 age at G3's birth[a]	.38***	.31***	—	.49***	21.51 (3.71)
G2 marital status at G3's birth	.23**	.24**	.49***	—	35% married
G1 educational attainment	.47***	.35***	.41***	.30***	2.55 (.95)
G2 educational attainment	.34***	.32***	.56***	.40***	2.88 (1.04)
G2 gender (male = 0, female = 1)	−.02	.06	−.26***	−.03	48% female
G2 ethnicity (EA = 0, AA = 1)	−.31***	−.47***	−.28***	−.36***	82% EA, 18% AA
G1 difficulty after G2's birth	−.01	.02	−.03	.01	−.04 (.82)
G1 stressful events in G2's life	−.02	.03	−.20*	−.06	2.53 (1.92)
G1 use of corporal punishment	−.11*	−.09	−.19**	−.12	.00 (1.97)
G1 proactive parenting	.04	.06	.03	−.10	4.29 (1.09)
G1 warmth	.15**	.22***	.18*	.15	.81 (.22)
G2 externalizing behavior	−.01	−.06	−.18**	.02	11.51 (7.02)
G2 internalizing behavior	.06	.02	−.02	.03	6.52 (4.93)
G2 resistance to control	.03	.01	−.03	−.01	3.61 (1.14)
G2 unadaptability	−.04	.05	−.03	−.08	3.01 (1.08)
G2 difficult temperament	.06	.01	.04	.06	3.32 (.96)

Note. EA = European American; AA = African American.
[a] Numbers reflect 466 G1s and 227 G2s who became parents by age 28. Eighty percent of the G1s had become parents by age 28, but only 43% of G2s for whom we had sufficient data to determine parenthood status had become parents by age 28.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

majority of misbehavior is controlled with reasoning or appropriate use of other nonphysical punishments, or the mother monitors the child to avoid trouble) to 5 (*strict, often physical; the mother reports numerous restrictive and physical means of discipline and uses physical discipline for much misbehavior*). The interviews of 56 randomly selected mothers were either attended in person or listened to on tape by a second rater; interrater reliability was good (r = .80). Second, mothers were presented with five vignettes depicting hypothetical situations involving child misbehavior on the Concerns and Constraints Questionnaire (Pettit et al., 1997). Mothers were asked how they would respond, and their responses were coded as either involving corporal punishment or not. Third, mothers completed the aggression subscale of the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, 1979), which reflected how often mothers used different forms of corporal punishment in the child's first 5 years of life. Deater-Deckard, Dodge, Bates, and Pettit (1996) provide a detailed description of the construction of the corporal punishment composite measure.

Mothers' responses on the Concerns and Constraints Questionnaire about what they could do to prevent the misbehavior from occurring again in the future were also coded for proactive parenting (see Pettit et al., 1997). Responses reflected either proactive responses (e.g., offering explanations regarding why the child should not behave that way; coded as 1) or nonproactive responses (e.g., doing nothing, using corporal punishment; coded as 0). Responses to the five vignettes were summed to create a scale reflecting proactive parenting (α = .62).

Two trained interviewers visited the families' homes when the child was age 5 (see Pettit et al., 2009). After the home visit, each of the two home visitors completed a postvisit inventory in which they assessed the warmth of the mothers' behavior toward the child by noting the occurrence (0 = *did not occur*, 1 = *occurred*) of each of four behavioral events: "mother speaks to child with a positive tone," "mother expresses a positive attitude when speaking of child," "mother initiates positive physical contact with child," and "mother accepts positive physical contact from child." If an item could not be coded because of insufficient information (e.g., if the child did not initiate any positive contact), it was coded as 0. The two visitors' agreement on the sum of the ratings was substantial (r = .58), so the eight items (four from each of the two visitors) were averaged to create a score for mothers' observed warmth to the child (α = .61).

G1 mothers reported on G2's externalizing and internalizing behavior using the Achenbach Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001). When the child was age 5, mothers were asked whether a series of 33 items on the externalizing behavior subscale (e.g., gets in many fights) and 31 items on the internalizing behavior subscale (e.g., feels sad) described their child in the past 6 months on a 3-point scale anchored 0 = *not true* to 2 = *very true or often true*. Items were averaged to create separate scales reflecting G2's externalizing (α = .88) and internalizing (α = .80) behaviors. G1 mothers also reported on three aspects of the G2's temperament using the Retrospective Infant Characteristics Questionnaire (Bates, Freeland, & Lounsbury, 1979; Bates, Pettit, Dodge, & Ridge, 1998). Items were averaged to create temperament subscales reflecting *resistance to control* (3 items, α = .83), *unadaptability* (4 items, α = .72), and *difficult temperament* (9 items, α = .86).

Annually from age 14 to 28, G2 participants were asked whether they had any children. Using these responses, we constructed an index of the age at which the G2 participant first became a parent. Fifty-seven percent of the G2 participants had not yet become a parent by the age of 28. The first child the G2 reported giving birth to or fathering was designated as the G3 participant. G2 participants reported their marital status at the time of G3's birth (coded 0 = *not married*, 1 = *married*). We used G2 participants' annual reports of school enrollment and degrees obtained to determine G2's educational attainment (1 = *did not graduate from high school*, 2 = *high school graduate*, 3 = *some college*, 4 = *college graduate or higher*).

Analysis Plan

To address our first research question regarding to what extent there is evidence for intergenerational continuity and stability in age and marital status at the time of first becoming a parent, we present descriptive information regarding correlates of age and marital status at the time of becoming a parent for both G1s and G2s.

To address our second research question regarding whether demographic, familial, or behavioral factors from the G2's early childhood moderate intergenerational stability in age and marital status at the time of first becoming a parent, we conduct a series of regressions to examine potential moderators of the intergenerational stability in age (linear regressions) and marital status (logistic regressions) at the time of becoming a parent. By necessity, these regressions were restricted to G2s who had become parents by the end of the study period (age 28). Each regression included the main effect of the G1 predictor (age at time of becoming a parent in regressions predicting G2's age at time of becoming a parent; marital status at the time of G2's birth in regressions predicting G2's marital status at the time of G3's birth), the main effect of the potential moderator, and the interaction between the G1 predictor and the potential moderator. The variables were centered before creating the interaction terms, and centered versions of all variables were used in the regressions.

Results

Correlates of Age and Marital Status at Time of Becoming a Parent

To consider our first research question, we examined cross-generation bivariate relations (shown in Table 1). We found evidence for both discontinuity and stability in G1's and G2's age at first parenthood. Reflecting discontinuity, 27% of G1s became mothers as teenagers, whereas only 14% of G2s became parents as teenagers (note that the mean age at first birth is not directly comparable in the two generations because G2s only provided data through age 28 meaning that many G2s who would eventually have children had not yet by the end of the study period). However, reflecting considerable intergenerational stability in maternal age of first birth, the maternal age for first birth across the generations was positively and significantly correlated (.38). Looking prospectively, 27% of G1s who were teenagers at the time of G2s birth had G2s who become parents as teenagers. Looking

retrospectively, 48% of G2s who became parents as teenagers had a G1 mother who was a teen at the time of G2's birth.

With regard to G1's and G2's marital status at G2's and G3's births, respectively, we also found evidence of both discontinuity and stability. Specifically, 77% of the G1 mothers who had their first child at age 13–28 were married at the time of G2's birth compared with 35% of the G2 parents at the time of G3's birth, reflecting extensive intergenerational discontinuity. In contrast, reflecting stability, G2s whose mothers had been married at the time of their birth were significantly more likely to be married at the time of the G3's birth than were G2s whose mothers had not been married at the time of their birth, $\chi^2(1) = 10.29$, $p < .01$. Forty-three percent of G2s whose mothers were married at the time of their birth were married at the time of G3's birth compared with 18% of G2s whose mothers were not married at the time of their birth.

Moderators of Intergenerational Stability in Age and Marital Status at Time of Becoming a Parent

To address the second research question, we next turned to regressions examining potential moderators of the intergenerational stability in age (linear regressions) and marital status (logistic regressions) at the time of becoming a parent. We found statistically significant ($p < .001$) main effects of G1's age at the time of becoming a parent predicting G2's age at the time of G3's birth and G1's marital status at the time of G2's birth predicting G2's marital status at the time of G3's birth. These findings held regardless of which moderators and interaction terms were included in the analyses, and the main effects remained significant after controlling for G2's educational attainment. Therefore, these main effects are not depicted in Table 2. Instead, in Table 2 we present estimates of the main effects of the moderators and the G1 age and G1 marital status interactions with the moderators. In the prediction of G2's age at the time of becoming a parent, we found statistically significant main effects of G1's marital status at the time of becoming a mother, G1's educational attainment, G2's educational attainment, gender, ethnicity, and stressful events early in G2's life (all net of G1's age at time of becoming a mother). In the prediction of G2's marital status at the time of becoming a parent, we found significant main effects of G1's educational attainment, G2's educational attainment, and ethnicity (all net of G1's marital status at the time of G2's birth).

We found two statistically significant interactions (i.e., $p < .05$). First, G1's marital status at the time of G2's birth interacted with G2's childhood externalizing behavior in the prediction of G2's marital status at the time of G3's birth. G2s who had more externalizing problems during childhood were less likely to be married at the time of G3's birth than G2s who had fewer externalizing problems; however, the relation was stronger for G2s whose mothers were married at the time of their birth (slope = −.152, $p < .001$) than for G2s whose mothers were not married at the time of their birth (slope = −.025, $p < .001$). Second, G1's age at the time of becoming a mother interacted with observed warmth from G1 to G2 in predicting G2's age at the time of G3's birth (slope 1 *SD* above the warmth $M = .166$, $p = .117$; slope 1 *SD* below the warmth $M = .528$, $p < .001$). That is, for G1 mothers who were above the mean in warmth toward G2 during early childhood, the G1's age at the time of becoming a mother was unrelated to the G2's age at the time of becoming a parent. However, for G1 mothers who were below the mean in warmth toward G2 during early childhood, the G1's age at the time of becoming a mother was positively related to the G2's age at the time of becoming a parent. We caution that only 2 of the 30 interactions tested were statistically significant (i.e., $p < .05$), about what would be expected by chance; therefore, we do not further interpret these interactions, which await replication.

Table 2
Regressions Testing Moderation of Intergenerational Stability in Age and Marital Status at Time of Becoming a Parent

	Predicting G2 age at birth of G3			Predicting G2 marital status at birth of G3		
Moderators	Main effect of moderator β	G1 Age × Moderator β	$F(R^2)$	Main effect of moderator Wald	G1 Marital Status × Moderator Wald	χ^2 (R^2)
G1 age at first birth	—	—	—	3.22	.82	15.50** (.12)
G1 marital status at G2's birth	.32**	.17	12.90*** (.18)	—	—	—
G1 educational attainment	.31***	.01	17.52*** (.22)	7.78**	.74	19.97*** (.15)
G2 educational attainment	.49***	.04	32.67*** (.35)	15.02***	.08	27.58*** (.20)
G2 gender (male = 0, female = 1)	−.23***	−.02	15.34*** (.20)	.19	.99	12.29** (.09)
G2 ethnicity (EA = 0, AA = 1)	−.12**	−.04	12.38*** (.17)	7.17**	.07	26.11*** (.19)
G1 difficulty after G2's birth	−.06	.09	9.71*** (.14)	.43	.88	12.37** (.09)
G1 stressful events early in G2's life	−.32*	−.19	6.15** (.19)	.88	.85	7.30* (.13)
G1 use of corporal punishment	−.04	.15	12.44*** (.17)	.58	.03	11.70*** (.09)
G1 proactive parenting	.01	−.03	9.68*** (.14)	1.03	.60	11.95** (.09)
G1 warmth	−.05	−.22*	12.73*** (.17)	1.47	.01	12.25** (.09)
G2 externalizing behavior	−.12	.02	11.22*** (.16)	1.17	4.15*	17.17** (.13)
G2 internalizing behavior	.02	.04	9.84*** (.14)	.55	.00	12.14** (.09)
G2 resistance to control	−.10	−.14	10.81*** (.16)	.07	.78	12.42** (.10)
G2 unadaptability	−.01	.05	10.08*** (.15)	.88	.02	12.57** (.10)
G2 difficult temperament	−.03	−.08	10.16*** (.15)	.69	.53	12.85** (.10)

Note. EA = European American; AA = African American. $n = 227$ (G2s who became a parent by age 28, the end of the study period). Main effects of G1 age at first birth and G1 marital status at G2's birth were statistically significant in all analyses (see text for details).
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Discussion

This study examined intergenerational continuity and stability in age and marital status at the time of becoming a parent using prospective data from three generations. Consistent with national data showing an increase in the proportion of births to unmarried parents (Martin et al., 2017), we found that compared with the G1 generation who had become mothers by the age of 28, in which three fourths (77%) of the mothers were married at the time of G2's birth, only one third of the G2 generation (35%) was married at the time of G3's birth reflecting intergenerational discontinuity. In part these differences in marital status at the time of the birth may reflect greater likelihood of getting married in the case of an unplanned pregnancy in the G1 generation than in the G2 generation. In addition, only 18% of G2s whose parents had been unmarried at the time of their birth were married at the time of G3's birth, compared with 43% of G2s whose parents had been married at the time of their birth. Nevertheless, both age and marital status at the time of becoming a parent also showed stability from the G1s to the G2s.

Taken together, our findings suggest the importance of distinguishing intergenerational continuity from intergenerational stability (see Bornstein et al., 2017, and Schulenberg et al., 2018, for considerations of continuity vs. stability in developmental studies). We did not find evidence for intergenerational continuity; instead, we observed intergenerational discontinuity in that the age of becoming a parent is changing or discontinuous across G1 and G2 and the likelihood of being married when one enters into parenthood is changing or discontinuous across G1 and G2. These findings are consistent with existing research that shows robust generational shifts in family formation (i.e., these generational shifts represent discontinuity across the generations; Amato et al., 2007; Copen et al., 2013; Settersten & Ray, 2010; Ventura & Bachrach, 2000). However, in addition to demonstrating intergenerational discontinuity, we also demonstrated intergenerational stability. That is, although family formation patterns were different (discontinuous) for G2 than they were for G1 (e.g., 77% of G1 mothers were married at the time of G2's birth whereas only 35% of G2 parents were married at the time of G3's birth), there is also evidence of stability in family formation patterns across G1 and G2 because G1 mothers who were not married at the time of G2's birth were more likely to have G2 children who themselves were not married at the time of G3's birth. Distinguishing between discontinuity and instability helps explain how across generations family formation patterns are changing (discontinuous) yet staying the same (stable).

The Robustness of Intergenerational Family Formation Patterns

Intergenerational stability in age and marital status at the time of becoming a parent was robust, as it was moderated by only 2 of the 30 moderators tested: G2s' externalizing behaviors and G1's observed warmth toward the G2 during childhood. Intergenerational stability was not moderated by the remaining demographic, familial, or behavioral factors. Because the developmental story was primarily one of stability rather than moderation, we do not focus here on the two statistically significant moderation findings but instead on the findings regarding the robustness of the intergenerational family formation patterns. The findings suggest that despite dramatic intergenerational discontinuities with adults in the United States, on average, being more likely to be unmarried and older at the time of becoming parents than in previous generations (Martin et al., 2017), intergenerational stability in age and marital status at the time of becoming a parent is still substantial and, for the most part, not moderated by demographic, familial, or behavioral factors. Put another way, although today's generation is more likely to be both older and unmarried at the time of becoming a parent when compared with their own parents, among today's generation, individuals who were born to relatively younger parents and/or unmarried parents are still more likely than others from their own generation to be relatively younger parents and/or unmarried parents.

The present study focused on intergenerational continuity and stability in age and marital status at the time of becoming a parent, but other research has focused on intergenerational continuity and stability in parents' behavior toward their children and parent–child relationships (see Conger, Belsky, & Capaldi, 2009, for an overview of a Special Section on this topic; Lomanowska, Boivin, Hertzman, & Fleming, 2017). Perhaps explaining part of the intergenerational stability in the demographics of becoming a parent, there is evidence for intergenerational links in both harsh parenting (e.g., Conger, Schofield, & Neppl, 2012) and adaptive parenting (e.g., monitoring; Bailey, Hill, Oesterle, & Hawkins, 2009). To understand for whom these cross-generation links are most marked, Conger et al. (2009) called for attention to moderators of intergenerational stability in parenting. The present study suggests that these pathways are surprisingly uniform, as we found little evidence that key demographic, familial, and behavioral factors from early in the G2's life moderated intergenerational stability, despite their main effects on age and marital status at the time of becoming a parent. However, previous research suggests that supportive relationships with romantic partners may disrupt intergenerational cycles of harsh parenting (Conger, Schofield, Neppl, & Merrick, 2013). Considering the demographic, familial, and behavioral history of both partners in a relationship also offers promise for understanding for which partners intergenerational patterns in age and marital status at the time of becoming a parent are maintained versus disrupted.

Strengths and Limitations

This study had several notable strengths, particularly the prospective, intergenerational data following G2 participants from age 5 to 28 with attention to their G1 mothers and G3 offspring. We also note several limitations. First, we acknowledge that it would have been possible to test a number of potential moderators from childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood that were not included in our analyses. Previous research has suggested that factors such as religiosity (Vasilenko, Duntzee, Zheng, & Lefkowitz, 2013), multiple family transitions (Arocho & Kamp Dush, 2017), and unpredictable environments during childhood (Szepsenwol, Simpson, Griskevicius, & Raby, 2015) are related to adolescents' sexual behavior and, therefore, might be important in understanding intergenerational stability in age and marital status at the time of becoming a parent. These factors, as well as the moderators we did examine, may operate in complex ways. For example, although highly religious teens are less likely to have sexual intercourse

(Vasilenko et al., 2013), higher teen birth rates are found in more religious states, even controlling for abortion rates, perhaps because religious teens are less likely to use contraception (Strayhorn & Strayhorn, 2009). Because it was not feasible for us to include an exhaustive set of all possible moderators, we focused on examining theoretically guided factors that encompassed key early childhood demographic, familial, and behavioral variables. An important direction for future research will be to test complex developmental pathways and mechanisms that may link these factors with later family formation patterns.

Second, we acknowledge that psychobiological factors also might contribute to intergenerational stability in age and marital status at the time of becoming a parent. For example, early father absence predicts girls' earlier puberty and sexual activity, which in turn is a risk factor for early and unmarried parenthood (Ellis et al., 2003). Likewise, behavior genetic designs point to both genetic and environmental factors as being important risks for offspring of teenage mothers (Harden et al., 2007).

Third, family formation patterns have become increasingly diverse. For example, cohabitation rather than marriage was the first union for 82% of men and 74% of women between 2006 and 2010 (Manning, Brown, & Payne, 2014), a dramatic increase from prior generations. Marriage and cohabitation are associated with different demographic factors; more highly educated mothers are more likely to be married than cohabiting at the time of giving birth, whereas less educated mothers are more likely to be cohabiting or unpartnered (Gibson-Davis & Rackin, 2014). Examining intergenerational stability in cohabitation may be less feasible than examining intergenerational stability in marriage because of low cohabitation rates in the G1 generation; nevertheless future research would benefit from incorporating cohabitation in investigations of family formation patterns over time. In addition, we assessed G1 mothers' marital status at the time of the G2's birth rather than G1 mothers' marital status at the time they first gave birth. Although assessing G1 mothers' marital status at the time they first gave birth would have been more directly comparable with the assessment of G2s' marital status at the time of first becoming a parent, we believe using G1s' marital status at the time of G2s' birth is still appropriate because G2s would not have direct experience of their mothers' marital status(es) before their own birth.

Fourth, we had data on whether G2s became parents by the age of 28, but given the demographic shift to later ages at the time of first parenthood, the focus in this study was on individuals who became parents at a relatively young age. More than half of the G2s had not yet become parents by the end of the study period. Thus, we caution that different patterns of moderation effects may be found in links between G1's and G2's age and marital status at the time of becoming a parent if we assessed G2s farther into adulthood to capture those who became parents at later ages.

Finally, males are more likely to underreport early parenthood than are females, which could have weakened the patterns of intergenerational stability we found. In a comparison of men's reports of fertility in national surveys with fertility data from Vital Statistics and the U.S. Census Bureau, Joyner et al. (2012) found that 80–90% of births documented in Vital Statistics and by the Census Bureau also were self-reported by men. Our study is closer in design (longitudinal, extending beyond the teenage years) to the design of the national surveys with 90% of births documented. In addition, Joyner et al. found nonmarital births to be reported more accurately by males in their teens and early 20s, which also bolsters confidence in reporting by our G2 males through age 28.

Conclusions

Prospective data from three generations of each family, anchored by G2 participants followed from age 5 to 28, suggested that despite dramatic demographic shifts in more prevalent nonmarital childbearing and older average age at first parenthood, there is still substantial intergenerational stability in age and marital status at the time of first becoming a parent. Intergenerational stability in early family formation was for the most part not moderated by demographic, familial, or behavioral factors from the G2's childhood. Taken together, the findings suggest that despite societal-level demographic shifts, intergenerational stability persists in age and marital status at the time of becoming a parent. Thus, the lifelong consequences of both age and marital status at the time of parenthood may extend beyond one's own lifetime to affect later generations, potentially widening disparities between families in the years to come.

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