Turbulence During Childhood

Researchers have regularly found that turbulence is related to poorer development among children. For example, repeated changes in child care arrangements, family structure, income, residence and schooling have all been linked to poorer outcomes for children. This paper will examine measures of turbulence in children's lives through age 12 in schooling, residence, and parental marriage from Round 1 of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997 cohort. In addition, traumatic events, such as seeing a shooting, being bullied repeatedly, or experiencing a break-in, will be examined, along with social and demographic control variables, to assess the importance of turbulence over and above background factors and life stressors. Implications for behavior problems and delinquency will be examined. Analyses will assess whether turbulence matters, net of control variables, whether types of turbulence are cumulative or redundant, and whether some types of turbulence are more critical than others.

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Researchers working within narrow disciplinary perspectives, with rather little interaction, have nevertheless developed a set of common and compelling findings with regard to the implications of change and disruption in the lives of children. For example, researchers find that children who change schools repeatedly have poorer academic performance and behavior problems in school (see Lippman, Burns, & MacArthur, 1996, for a review). Studies of child care have produced parallel findings, in that repeated changes in child care providers or having a larger number of providers is related to less optimal social development among young children (Howes & Hamilton, 1993).

Demographers, for their part, have found that changes in family structure are associated with poorer child outcomes. For example, (Moore, Morrison, & Glei, 1995) found that adolescents whose biological parents had divorced or separated had an elevated hazard of initiating voluntary sexual intercourse, net of numerous social and demographic controls measured at the family and at the zip code level. Similarly, Wu and Martinson (1993) found that repeated family changes elevate the probability of negative outcomes for children. Analyses by Teachman (2003) indicate that any change in family composition, more than a specific change, may negatively affect children; and Seltzer (2000) notes that the life experiences of children with cohabiting parents may be particularly turbulent. For example, children with cohabitating parents are more likely to experience the break-up of their parents' relationship and to experience a step-family. Similarly, Moore (2003) notes that single parents living alone may actually be dating and may have had multiple dating partners consecutively or simultaneously, and Mott (1990) notes that fathers may leave and re-enter the lives of children repeatedly over the years.

Employment, income and public transfers represent another potential form of turbulence in the lives of children that has received some recent attention. For example, Wu (1996) has found that unstable income is associated with nonmarital births. Moore, Glei, Driscoll, Zaslow and Redd (2002) have found that stable low-income situations were not related to children's outcomes, net of controls, while children in families that experienced declining or fluctuating financial circumstances had worse scores in reading and poorer behavior compared with children who had never been poor.

Residential mobility represents another aspect of turbulence. Scanlon and Devine (2001), reviewing multiple studies, find that moving is associated with poorer academic performance, dropout, and grade retention.

Because these studies are generally conducted within disciplinary boundaries, important questions about the cumulative implications of varied forms of turbulence have not been addressed empirically. For example, many types of turbulence are inter-related. A marital breakup, for instance, may lead to not only a change in household composition, but a change in residence and in the school attended by the child and perhaps in family income and parental employment as well. It is not known whether the implications of multiple changes such as these are cumulative or redundant. Also, it is possible that we are simply measuring the same change in multiple disciplines. Is one type of change more crucial for children's development? That is, is it change in family structure that matters for children's development, or is it really a change in income or school that matters most?

In addition, many studies have included incomplete sets of controls, so it will be important to examine the implications of each type of change over and above the background factors that may be associated with such changes. For instance, is school change important for children when parent education and other background factors are controlled? Finally, what is the shape of the association between turbulence and child outcomes (if any, net of controls)? Is the association, if any, linear or is there a threshold above which turbulence becomes problematic?

To address these questions, we propose the following hypotheses.

1. From a child's perspective, we hypothesize that change, in general, is not a good thing, and that more changes are worse than just one or two changes. Accordingly, we hypothesize that a higher incidence of turbulence will be associated with poorer outcomes for children in early adolescence.
2. We hypothesize that the negative implications of greater turbulence for children will be diminished in multivariate models that control for social, demographic and economic status; but will remain significant and important.
3. We hypothesize that the association between the number of turbulent experiences and children's negative outcomes will be fairly linear. That is, child outcomes will be worse for children experiencing some turbulence compared with none, and for children experiencing substantial turbulence compared with just some turbulence.
4. We hypothesize that different types of turbulence are not redundant but are uniquely important. Thus, outcomes for children are anticipated to be worse for children who experience both a divorce and a change in schools than for children who only experience a divorce.

Child Trends served (and serves) on the design team for the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997 cohort, and helped to design the retrospective history of children's experiences. This history provides the information needed to construct measures of turbulence in the lives of children, and represents the database for our analysis.

Information on schooling (e.g., how many times the adolescent changed his or her school during a school year) is available from 1980 to the current round. In addition, the residential history provides information on the total number of different places youth

lived.

For parents, retrospective data are available on employment, marriage histories and histories of participation in government programs. These were collected at round 1. Because the data on employment reports "employment spells," which is defined as "three or more months of employment without a break of six or more months regardless of employer," it seems more appropriate to assess income fluctuations by measuring transitions onto welfare. For marriage, information on the month and year of each of the responding parent's marriages and any changes in the marital status during each marriage is available. Information on foster care placements is also available. Again, this is from the retrospective data at round 1.

Given our goals, it is very helpful that there is also information about traumatic events. This set of questions asks about traumatic events that the child may have experienced before turning 12 years old. The questions include whether a respondent's house or apartment was broken into, whether he or she was bullied repeatedly; and whether he or she saw someone get shot or shot at with a gun, and what their relationship was to the victim. The presence of these questions allows us to examine whether turbulence matters for children over and above the experience of stressful experiences.

To examine our hypotheses, we plan to develop five measures of turbulence (family structure, school, residence, welfare and a summary index of turbulence) for children through age 12 and examine the association between each type of turbulence, as well as the summary index, and children's outcomes in early adolescence. We will also estimate multivariate models on children's behavior problems, substance use and delinquency during early adolescence for each of the four measures of turbulence in separate models and in the same model and also for the cumulative turbulence index comprised of all four forms of turbulence. We will examine whether each form of turbulence is associated with children's outcomes and which of the associations remain significant when other forms of turbulence are added to the model. We will also estimate models with categorical variables to examine whether the association between turbulence and children's outcomes reaches a threshold or whether the hypothesized association is linear.

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