How your behaviour in childhood signals romantic partnering success in adulthood

A 30-year prospective study

Francis Vergunst

Postdoctoral Fellow, University of Montreal &
Ste-Justine University Hospital

Background – partnership

- Biological, psychosocial, cultural pressures
- Source of emotional, social and practical support
- Associated with long-term health and wellbeing
- Predicted by personality e.g., emotional stability, conscientiousness
- What about childhood traits?

Background – childhood behaviour

- Behavioural problems
  - Externalising and internalising
  - Highly prevalent e.g., ADHD, CD and ODD
  - Frequently co-occur
  - Large costs to individuals and society
    - Education, employment, health, crime, welfare
- Behavioural disorders and partnership
  - Conflict, violence, lower relationship satisfaction

Research questions

Are behaviours in childhood associated with distinct patterns of adult life partnering in population-based samples?

Aims

(1) To describe patterns of partnering from age 18-35 years in a large population-based sample

(2) To examine the association between childhood behaviour and adult partnering patterns

Methods

- Sample
  - Quebec Longitudinal Study of Kindergarten Children (n=3017)
- Outcomes
  - Partnership = marriage/cohabitation (age 19-35 years)
  - Earnings, welfare receipt
- Predictors
  - Teacher-rated behaviors (age 10-12 years)
    inattention, hyperactivity, opposition-aggression, anxiety, prosociality
- Control
  - Family adversity, sex
- Analyses
  - Group based trajectory modelling
  - Linear and multinomial regression

Methods – study design

Behaviour
- Inattention
- Hyperactivity
- Aggression-Opposition
- Anxiety
- Prosociality

Age 10-12 years ……………………………. **19 years**……………………………………………………**…35 years**

Social Behaviour Questionnaire

- **Inattention** (4 items)
  - Inattentive
  - Incapable of concentrating for more than a few moments
  - Easily distracted, difficulty pursuing any activity
  - "head in the clouds"

- **Hyperactivity** (2 items)
  - Agitated or fidgety
  - Moves constantly

- **Opposition** (5 items)
  - Disobeys
  - Doesn't share materials
  - Blames others
  - Inconsiderate
  - Irritable

- **Physical aggression** (3 items)
  - Fights with other children
  - Bullies or intimidates other children
  - Kicks/bites

- **Anxiety** (3 items)
  - Fearful/afraid of new situations
  - Worries about many things
  - Cries easily

- **Prosociality** (10 items)
  - Tries to stop quarrels or disputes
  - Will invite bystanders to join in a game
  - Will try to help someone who has been hurt
  - Comforts child who is upset, etc...

Scoring: never/not true = 0, sometimes/somewhat true = 1, often/very true = 2

Assessing conjugal relationships

- "A conjugal relationship is one of some permanence, when individuals are interdependent – financially, socially, emotionally and physically – when they share household and related responsibilities, and when they have made a serious commitment to one another."

- "Conjugal does not mean "sexual relations" alone. It indicates that there is a significant degree of attachment between two partners."

-- Government of Canada

Group-based trajectory modelling

- Identifies clusters of individuals following similar trajectories over time
- Modelled as a binary function = probability of partnership over time
- Model selection is based on empirical and theoretical considerations
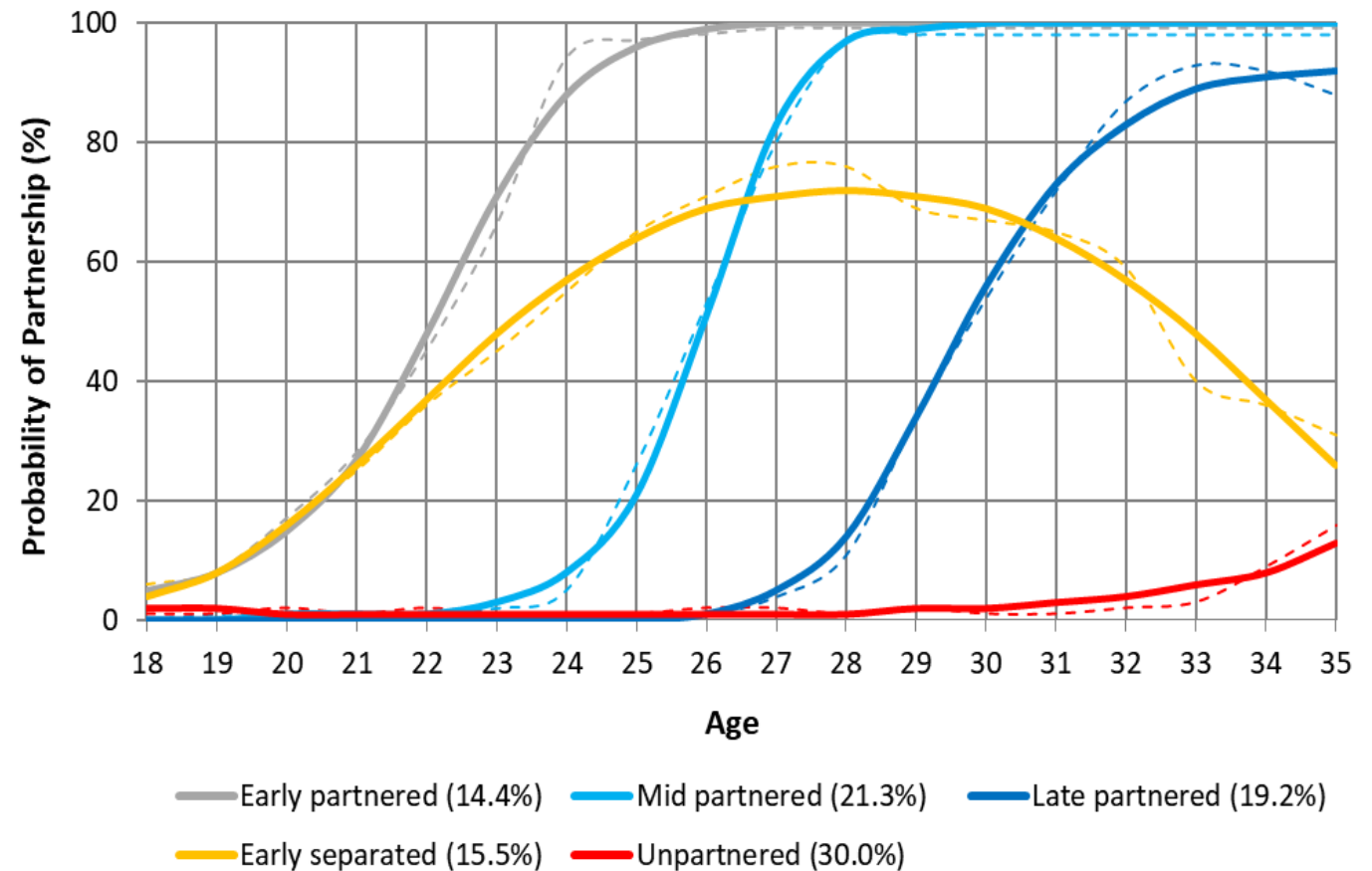
Results

- Five profiles
  - Early-partnered (**14.4%**)
  - Mid-partnered (**21.3%**)
  - Late-partnered (**19.2%**)
  - Early-separated (**15.5%**)
  - Unpartnered (**30.0%**).

- Economic outcomes
  - Early-separated and delayed-or-unpartnered
    - No high school diploma, lower earnings, higher welfare receipt

Vergunst et al. 2020, JCPP
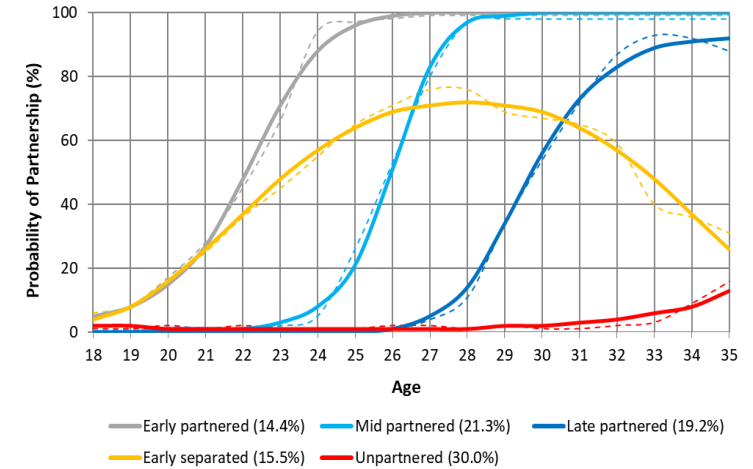
Results – multivariable models

- Behaviours
  - Agg-Opp → early separation
  - Anxiety → unpartnered
  - Inattention → uniformly 'bad' (separation or unpartnered)
  - Prosociality → uniformly 'good' (earlier more sustained partnership)
- Males → later partnership
- Family adversity → earlier partnership
- No moderating effect of sex

Vergunst et al. 2020, JCPP

Discussion – context

- Results concur with survey and psychiatric literature
- Specific behaviours linked to specific partnering patterns
- Partnership and income are linked (bi-directional?)

Discussion – mechanisms

- Lost human capital

- Direct effects

- Indirect effects
  - Education attainment, high school graduation
  - Substance abuse
  - Delinquency, criminal convictions
  - Employment and earnings
  - Psychopathology

- Additive, interactive and cumulative

Limitations

- Association, not causation
- Changes in partners not measured
- Quebec marriage equality act (2002)
- Focus on formal partnership
- Not a normative argument for partnership

Conclusions

- Childhood behaviours signal future partnering patterns
- Costs to children, families and society
- Lost social and emotional support
- Less wealth and worse health (causal)
- Early monitoring and support is key
  - Reduce behavioural problems, promote prosocial traits
  - Large social and economic returns
  - Promotes fairness and justice

Thanks

- Colleagues
- GRIP, CHUSJ
- CIHR, FRQS
- Statistics Canada, QCISS