

Repartnering following divorce: Implications for fathers' relations with their adult children after midlife.

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Introduction

The implications of parental divorce for mid- to late-life fathers' relations with their adult children are well documented. In general, divorce weakens ties between fathers and their adult children. For instance, there is widespread agreement that divorce reduces social contact between fathers and their adult children (see for example Aquilino, 1994a; Cooney & Uhlenberg, 1990; Lye, Klepinger, Hyle, & Nelson, 1995; Shapiro, 2003). In addition, there is some evidence that older divorced fathers are less likely than their continuously married counterparts to engage in intergenerational transfers of both time and money with their adult children (Furstenberg, Hoffman, & Shrestha, 1995b; Lin, 2008; Pezzin & Schone, 1999).

Largely overlooked in studies of older post-divorce parents' relations with their adult children is the role of fathers' new unions in shaping intergenerational ties with their adult children (Kalmijn, 2007). Yet, about 75% of individuals who experience a divorce go on to remarry (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991) and men remarry at higher rates than do women (South, 1991). Therefore, a notable proportion of children will have experienced a father's remarriage by the time they reach adulthood (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000). Moreover, divorced older adults are increasingly likely to cohabit as an alternative to marriage (Brown, Bulanda, & Lee, 2005; Brown, Lee, & Bulanda, 2006; King & Scott, 2005). Based on the 2000 Census, Brown and colleagues (2006) estimate that 71% of the approximately 1.1 million Americans aged 51 and older who lived together, unmarried in an intimate heterosexual relationship had experienced a prior divorce or separation. The numbers of later-life post-divorce cohabiting relationships and remarriages are likely to increase substantially in the next few years with the aging of the large baby boom generations, who experienced unprecedented levels of divorce (Brown, et al., 2005; Brown, et al., 2006; Coleman, et al., 2000).

By far, the bulk of research on the implications of repartnering for fathers' relations with their children is concentrated in the child development literature (Furstenberg, 1995a; Manning & Smock, 2000). This body of research suggests that fathers' new partnerships have negative implications for father-child relations, particularly when fathers go on to have new biological children (Manning & Smock, 2000). However, these findings may not directly apply to adult children of divorce for whom the legal restrictions of custody and visitations are lifted. This may be particularly

true in cases where custodial mothers interfered with contact and relations between their ex-husbands and their young children.

The small handful of studies that have investigated the implications of remarriage for older fathers' relations with their adult children (Aquilino, 1994b; Cooney & Uhlenberg, 1990; Furstenberg, et al., 1995b; Lye, et al., 1995) are limited in three important respects. First, in investigating the implication of new unions for fathers' intergenerational relations, some authors compare remarried parents with continuously married parents, generally reporting negative effects on parent-adult child relations (Furstenberg, et al., 1995b). Given this approach, it is not possible to isolate the net effect of remarriage since the effect of union termination (divorce or widowhood) has not been factored out (Kalmijn, 2007). In the only study to date to compare divorced fathers' relations with their adult children to remarried fathers' ties to their adult children, Cooney and Uhlenberg (1990) report that remarried fathers do not have less contact with their adult children than their divorced counterparts. Second, despite the rise in cohabitation amongst older adults, prior studies have focused exclusively on the effect of fathers' remarriage on their relations with their adult children. Finally, no existing study has investigated the role of new unions on mid- to late-life fathers' intergenerational relations in combination with the role of new (step)children (Kalmijn, 2007).

Study Aims

Using four waves (2000, 2002, 2004 and 2008) of nationally representative data from the Health and Retirement Study (HRS), this study extends the existing literature on post-divorced fathers' relations with their adult children. Specifically, the study contrasts late- to mid-life divorced fathers' relations with their adult children from a prior union to that of divorced fathers who went on to form a new union. Therefore, we are able to capture the net effect of divorced fathers' repartnering, above and beyond that of divorce. This study is unique in conducting the analysis of the consequences of divorced fathers' repartnering on their intergenerational relations from the perspective of their adult children born from a prior union.

The study focuses on two measures of father-adult child relations: social contact and fathers' financial assistance to their adult children. Contact may be initiated for reasons of companionship as well as for exchanges of support and information between generations (Mancini & Blieszner, 1989). There is some evidence that frequency of contact between parents and children constitutes a good indirect measure of intergenerational solidarity (Bengtson & Roberts, 1991; Kalmijn, 2006) as well as an overall measure of the strength of the parent-child relationship (Cooney & Uhlenberg, 1990; Lye, et al., 1995). Intergenerational financial transfers are particularly important as children often remain partially reliant on their parents' financial assistance well into adulthood. Moreover, because upwards financial transfers are "part of an ongoing relation that includes other dimensions of solidarity and exchange" (Kohli & Kunemund, 2003), they are a direct indication of what Rossi and Rossi (1990) refer to as kinship rules. Unlike bequests, which are typically divided equally between children, intergenerational transfers are more likely to be intentional, and are therefore a reasonably good indicator of differential intergenerational exchanges.

This study examines the following three questions:

- (1) Does repartnering alter divorced late- to mid-life fathers' contact with and financial transfers to adult children from a prior union?
- (2) Does the effect of divorced fathers' remarriage on their relations with their adult children from a prior union differ from that of divorced fathers' cohabitation?
- (3) To what extent does divorced fathers' acquisition of new (step)children following remarriage and cohabitation provide an explanation for the effect of repartnering on father-adult child relations?

Background

Two differing views of marriage shed light on the possible implications of repartnering for divorced fathers' ties with their adult children. On the one hand, marriage has been portrayed as a key lynchpin for social ties, by providing resources and opportunities for relationships with the wider community and with kin (Fischer, Sollie, Sorell, & Green, 1989; Putnam, 2000). The literature on fathers' intergenerational relations echoes this view of marriage. Because women are kinkeepers, marriage has been shown to improve fathers' ties with their adult children (Cooney & Uhlenberg, 1990; Kalmijn, 2007). Mothers often arrange family visits to which fathers also participate. Adult children may interact with their aging father to please their mother, thereby allowing fathers to benefit from intergenerational interactions without having initiated the contact. For fathers, the breakdown of a marriage through divorce not only removes a spouse, but also removes a kinkeeper (Cooney & Uhlenberg, 1990; Kalmijn, 2007). There is little direct empirical evidence on women's kin-keeping roles vis-à-vis their step-children. However, because ties to step-relatives are generally weaker than ties to own relatives (Rossi & Rossi, 1990), a divorced father's new partner is likely to be focused more strongly on her own kin than on maintaining contact with her husband's children from a prior union. This in turn would result in diverting repartnered fathers' attention away from their adult children born from a prior union and towards new (step)children.

On the other hand, scholars of family and kinship have argued that modern marriage competes with relations in the wider community. For example, Goodwin (1997) argues that imposition of limits on marital relationships is required to insure continuing member involvement. Further, because the modern marital unit is expected to rely on itself, ties to members of married partners' families of origin are weakened (Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2008). The acquisition of a new spouse or partner may provide divorced fathers with an alternative source of support, thereby reducing opportunities for interactions with adult children from an earlier marriage. It is also possible that time constraints imposed by a new relationship curtail the amount of time devoted to maintaining other ties such as those with adult children (Seltzer, Schaeffer, & Charng, 1989). Alternatively, the emotional needs formerly fulfilled by intergenerational contact might be transferred to a new spouse or partner (Stephens, 1996) as new relationships crowd old ones out. Children may opt to reduce contact after a father's repartnering out of loyalty to the other parent (Seltzer, et al., 1989). Finally, the lack of institutional guidelines and norms for family interaction in repartnered families implies that relations between adult children from an earlier union and their father may become more difficult after repartnering.

Although marriage and cohabitation both entail the acquisition of a new partner, their implications for older divorced fathers' intergenerational ties are likely to differ. Indeed, because cohabitation entails a lower degree of interpersonal commitment and weaker emotional intra-couple ties than marriage (Nock, 1995; Rindfuss & VandenHeuvel, 1990), I expect that fathers who go on to cohabit following a divorce will maintain stronger ties to adult children from a previous partner than fathers who remarry (Cooksey & Craig, 1998).

Beyond the acquisition of a new spouse or partner, repartnering can also entail new parenting duties, either toward stepchildren or toward new biological offspring. Similarly to a new spouse, new children can represent an alternative source of instrumental or emotional support and crowd out existing relations. Therefore, we expect that when repartnered divorced fathers have (step-)children with a new partner, their relationship with children from a previous union will be weakened. This study will examine the extent to which such changes in divorced fathers' family structure account for the effect of repartnering on their ties with adult children from earlier unions. In addition, this study tests two refinements to the argument that divorced fathers' new children crowd out their relationship with adult children from an earlier partner. First, because divorced fathers' ties to new biological children are likely to be stronger than their ties to new step-children (Rossi & Rossi, 1990), I examine whether additional biological children affect repartnered fathers' relations with adult children from a prior union to a different extent than new step-children. Second, I propose a test of the argument of "serial parenting" or "family swapping" proposed in the child development literature to describe fathers' social and economic investments in their children as they take on new parenting roles (Furstenberg, 1995a; Manning & Smock, 2000). The hypothesis suggests that repartnered fathers switch their allegiances from children born from an earlier union to children born from a current union. When analyzed from the perspective of children from an earlier partner, the argument of serial parenting implies that the reducing effect of fathers' additional new (step-)children on intergenerational ties be greater than that of fathers' additional children from a prior union. In other words, 'family swapping' implies that new (step)children 'weigh heavier' on repartnered divorced fathers' relations with children from a prior union than do those adult children's full siblings who were born within the same union.

Methods

Data and Study sample

The Health and Retirement Study (HRS) is an ongoing biennial panel study that began in 1992 and is nationally representative of the non-institutionalized population (Juster & Suzman, 1995). The HRS is designed to examine the health and retirement decisions of older Americans and to investigate aging families' responses to health declines occurring in mid-to-late life. The original HRS sample comprised 12,652 respondents who were members of the 1931-1941 birth cohorts and their spouses or partners (regardless of age). Additional birth cohorts were added in 1998, thereby creating data representative of the population born in 1947 or before (and their spouse/partner). In 2004, sample eligibility was further extended to the 1948-1953 birth cohorts. The stratified multistage area probability design included oversampling of African Americans, Hispanics, and Floridians.

One unique feature of the HRS is its rich family data concerning both intra-familial relations and intergenerational transfers. The study collects information about each of a respondent's (step-)children, including each (step-)child's relationship status to the respondent's current spouse. It is therefore possible to identify both a respondent's adult children from a prior union and adult (step)children from a current union. In addition, the study asks about social contact between respondents and each one of their children as well as about transfers of money from the respondent to each of their children. Therefore, it is possible to examine the patterns of contact and financial transfers between the HRS respondent and each one of their children.

This study relies on data from the 2000, 2002, 2004 and 2008 HRS waves. Although the 1998 HRS is often used by researchers because it is nationally representative of Americans aged 50 and above, the question on intergenerational contact was not asked at this wave. Similarly, in 2006, information on respondents' social contact with their adult children was collected only from the limited sub-sample of new respondents.

The analytical sample for this study is restricted to men who had ever experienced a divorce (but no widowhood) at the time of the 2000 interview and had at least one living biological child aged 18 or more who was born from an earlier union. The final sample consists of N=1,418 ever divorced fathers and their N=7,168 children born of a prior relationship.

Dependent variables

The study examines two outcome variables. Frequency of social contact refers to the number of times in the past 12 months that a respondent (and his wife/partner) have had contact either in person, by phone, or by mail, with each of the father's children. Financial transfers from parents to their children was measured as a gift totaling \$500 or more, including help with education, but not shared housing or shared food. Although detailed contact frequencies as well as the amount of financial support to each child were collected, the analysis relies on categorical measures because the distribution of these variables was very skewed, thereby violating the multivariate model's assumption of normality (Lin, 2008). The ordinal-level measure of social contact used in the analyses considered three categories: 1=less than weekly, 2=less than daily but at least once a week and 3=daily contact. Co-resident children were assigned to the highest category. The response categories for the measure of parents' financial transfer are: received a financial transfer (coded 1) versus did not receive any financial transfer (coded 0).

Explanatory variables

The key explanatory variables are measures of ever-divorced fathers' partnership status: (1) unpartnered (reference), (2) remarried and (3) cohabiting. Additional variables of central interest to this study describe each sampled child's family structure: number of siblings from a father's past union, number of half-siblings from a father's current union and number of step-siblings from a father's current union. In addition, the models control for a number of characteristics at both the father and the adult-child level previously identified as important determinants of parent's relations with their adult children.

Analytic strategy

The study uses latent growth curve models to examine the effect of divorced fathers' repartnering on their relations with their adult children from a prior union. This analytical strategy has the advantage of allowing for an investigation of the determinants of variability in both the initial status of father-adult child relations and in the trajectory of change over time in father-adult child ties.

Preliminary Results

Preliminary results from the analyses suggest that:

- (a) Divorced mid- to late-life fathers who repartner have notably less contact with and are less likely to transfer money to their adult children from a prior union than divorced fathers who remain unpartnered;
- (b) Cohabitation has similarly negative implications for divorced fathers' relations with their adult children as does remarriage;
- (c) Although new (step)children reduce contact with and financial transfers to children from a prior union, changes in remarried and cohabiting divorced fathers' family structure do not account for the effect of repartnering;
- (d) There is some suggestive evidence that new step-children have a smaller negative effect on ever divorced fathers' ties with their adult children from an earlier partner than new biological children.
- (e) The hypothesis of 'family swapping' is not supported as findings indicate that new (step)children reduce fathers' relations with adult child from prior union to a lesser or a similar extent as do additional children from a prior union.

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