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Family structure homogamy: The effects of parental divorce on partner selection and marital stability[☆]

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Abstract

Although it is well established that the children of divorce are disproportionately likely to end their own marriages, relatively little is known about their marriage formation behavior. This paper uses data from the National Survey of Families and Households to examine the effects of parental family structure on spouse selection and marriage duration. People from divorced families often marry other children of divorce. This phenomenon, which I call *family structure homogamy*, persists across a variety of sociodemographic boundaries. In addition, I replicate earlier research by demonstrating that marriages between two children of divorce are especially likely to fail. These findings shed new light on the intergenerational transmission of divorce by showing that people from divorced families often marry under conditions that bode poorly for marital stability.

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1. Introduction

Many studies show that the children of divorce dissolve their own marriages with disproportionate frequency (Amato, 1996; Amato and DeBoer, 2001; Bumpass et al., 1991; Feng et al., 1999; Glenn and Kramer, 1987; McLanahan and Bumpass, 1988; Mueller and Pope, 1977; Pope and Mueller, 1976; Wolfinger, 1999, 2000). Much less is known about the kinds of people they marry. This article shows that the children of divorce often marry other children of divorce. Furthermore, marriages between people from divorced families are even more likely to fail than are unions in which only one spouse experienced parental divorce. These findings shed new light on the intergenerational transmission of divorce by demonstrating that people from divorced families often make marital choices that contribute to marital instability.

It is important to understand the causes of divorce transmission since approximately half of all new marriages will be dissolved (Bramlett and Mosher, 2001; Kreider and Fields, 2001). Divorce is often a deeply traumatic event for both parents and children (Stewart et al., 1997; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). It also has noteworthy economic consequences, frequently leaving women impoverished (Bianchi et al., 1999; Smock, 1993, 1994). Poverty in turn has numerous negative effects on children's development (McLoyd, 1998). Finally, divorce has been central to current policy debates on family well-being, particularly in light of covenant marriage laws recently enacted in Louisiana, Arizona, and Arkansas (Nock et al., 1999; Thompson and Wyatt, 1999).

1.1. Explaining the intergenerational transmission of divorce

Some of the negative effects of parental divorce, including emotional distress and difficulties in interpersonal relationships, can last into adulthood (Amato, 1991; Amato and Booth, 1991a, 1997; Cherlin et al., 1998; Glenn and Kramer, 1985; Ross and Mirowsky, 1999). Perhaps as a result, people from divorced families frequently report low levels of well-being in their own marriages (Acock and Kiecolt, 1989; Amato and Booth, 1991a, 1997; Ross and Mirowsky, 1999). Other studies that impaired interpersonal skills play a large part in explaining the intergenerational transmission of divorce (Amato, 1996; Amato and Rogers, 1997; Silvestri, 1992; Webster et al., 1995). One way poor interpersonal skills interfere with marital stability is by reducing commitment, so divorce may be used as a solution to marital difficulties (Amato and DeBoer, 2001; Glenn and Kramer, 1987).

Sociodemographic factors play a smaller role in explaining the intergenerational transmission of divorce. Some researchers (Amato, 1996; McLanahan and Bumpass, 1988; Mueller and Pope, 1977; but see Glenn and Kramer, 1987; Wolfinger, 1999) show that the relationship between parental

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