

Family Structure and Partner Choice

Background

Parental divorce has become a common event in the lives of American children today. Every year, more than one million children experience parents' divorce and nearly one half of the children born in recent cohorts will spend part of their childhood living in a single-parent family (Bumpass and Sweet 1989). The consequences of this experience on children's development and their transition to adulthood have been well documented: Children growing up with a single parent are more likely to drop out of high school, get pregnant as a teenager, be out of school and out of work, and have poor mental health than children who grow up with two biological parents (Amato and Keith 1991a, 1991b; McLanahan and Sandefur 1994; Cherlin, Chase-Lansdale, and McRae 1998). Yet our understanding of the long-term consequences remains limited.

According to Freud's psychoanalysis theory of mate selection (Epstein and Guttman 1984) and Daly and Wilson's template matching hypothesis (1990), people tend to use their opposite-sex parents as "templates" for choosing mates in adulthood. Because nonresident fathers' relationships with their children usually become estranged as a result of the divorce (Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991) and because stressed single mothers tend to exert disrupted parenting (Conger et al. 1992; Conger et al. 1993; McLoyd et al. 1994), adults from single-parent families may be more likely than adults from two-parent families to marry a partner who, like their parents, exhibits less involvement in their children's lives. Previous studies on mate selection focus mainly on the spouses' physical resemblance and personality trait similar to the respondents' parents (e.g., Jedlicka 1984; Wilson and Barrett 1987; Geher 2000). Relatively little direct evidence suggests that parenting style is an important dimension for mate selection, although there is some indirect evidence suggesting that men/women who have warm mothers/fathers tend to be involved with female/male partners who are low in anxiety and men/women who have cold or inconsistent mothers/fathers tend to be involved with anxious female/male partners (Collins and Read 1990). In this paper, I will examine whether respondents' family of origin predicts the parenting behavior of their partners, and whether partner's parenting style buffers the association between family structure and respondents' own parenting behaviors.

Data and Methods

The analysis consists of 1,720 respondents who are biological, adoptive, or step parents of the children in the PSID-CDS. They have at least one of their biological parents being in the household interviewed by the PSID and for whom their marital history before respondents reach age 19 is available. These respondents were no more than 18 years old in 1968 and were at least 18 in 1997 (i.e., born between 1950 and 1979). Of the 1,720 respondents, 1,109 are women and 611 are men. The number of female respondents is about twice the size of male respondents because most primary caregivers are women and response rates for other caregivers in the household and for nonresident fathers are lower than that for primary caregivers. Respondents' age ranges from 18 to 47, with a mean of 33 in 1997. The distributions for white, black, and other races are 53 percent, 45 percent, and 2 percent, respectively. The average amount of total family income while respondents were growing up is about \$26,000 per year (in 1982 dollars) and the variation in family income is about \$8,000. The average family size before respondents reach age 19 is about five. The mean number of years of education for respondents' birth mother is about 12 years. The average age for the children interviewed in the PSID-CDS is about 6.

Three aspects of respondents' early family experience will be examined: (1) the cumulative length of time lived in a single-parent family, (2) the number of parents' marital transitions, and (3) the age when the first transition occurred. Seven domains of partner's parenting behavior are measured in the PSID-CDS, including discipline, warmth, doing activities together, participation in school activities, time spent with children doing activities, time spend with children but not directly involved in activities, and shared parenting. OLS and logistic regression models will be conducted in the analysis with the following variables controlled: Respondents' age, race and ethnicity, mean (and standard deviation) of family income and family size when respondents grow up, biological mothers' educational attainment, and age of children of respondents.

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