

The Implications of Remarriage and Stepfamilies for Health and Well-Being

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Demographic facts: remarriage

- Estimates from mid-1990s suggest:
 - After divorce -- roughly 2/3 of women and 3/4 of men remarry
 - After widowhood -- 5% of women and 12% of men remarry
- Changing landscape of “re-partnership”:
 - Remarriage increasingly occurring after divorce rather than widowhood.
 - Much re-partnership experience in the contemporary U.S. occurs through cohabitation rather than remarriage.

Remarriage and adult health

- A large body of work documents health benefits associated with marriage. Considerably less work focuses specifically on remarriage.
- Some recent evidence suggests that remarriage tends to be associated with an improvement in physical health (Dupre & Meadows, 2007).
- The nature of this association varies over the life course, less evidence of positive effects among older adults (Williams & Umberson, 2004). Findings regarding potential gender differences vary across studies.

Remarriage as strategic area for research on families & health

- The study of remarriage, and understanding how remarriage differs both from first marriage & alternate forms of post-marital unions (e.g. cohabitation, “living apart together” relationships), can provide important insight into the institution of marriage.

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 - Is first marriage becoming “deinstitutionalized,” and thus more like remarriage, as suggested by Cherlin (1978, 2004)?
 - (How) do benefits of marriage tend to change over the life course?
 - **What causal mechanisms & selective processes produce well-being differences between those in remarried families vs. other family types?**

Demographic facts: stepfamilies

- 7.2% of youth under age 18 (or 5.3 million children) in the U.S. are living with a married or cohabiting stepparent.
- Almost 1 in 5 of these youth live with a biological father and stepmother.
- 11.7% of youth under 18 live with at least one half-sibling.
- 1.7% of youth under 18 live with at least one step-sibling.
- Estimates suggest that just over 25% of female same-sex households and 8% of male same-sex households include minor children.

Two points to keep in mind about **stepfamilies**:

- 1) Considerable heterogeneity exists in stepfamily structures, such as whether stepfamilies are formed:
 - through marriage or cohabitation
 - after widowhood, divorce, or a non-marital birth
 - through the union of same-sex or different-sex adults

- 2) Not all children in stepfamilies live with a stepparent.
 - Children do not always share a household with a re-partnered biological parent
 - Children may live with two biological parents and a half-sibling
 - Children may spend time in multiple households

How do stepfamilies affect the health and well-being of youth?

- Note that this question is not well defined!
- Stepfamilies can involve a number of different family structures and have more than one possible counterfactual comparison group (e.g. single-parent families, two-biological parent families).

Stepfamilies and offspring health

- Scholars increasingly account for diverse stepfamily forms – with particular interest in non-marital cohabitation.
- Yet vast majority of existing work emphasizes comparisons between youth living with a stepparent and those living with two biological parents – tends to find disadvantage associated with stepfamilies (e.g. Ganong & Coleman, 2004).
- Less work compares youth living with a stepparent to those living with a single parent, or considers how child well-being *changes* with the formation of a stepfamily – such studies tend to suggest fewer differences.

Why might stepfamilies matter?

- Economic resources
 - Parental resources
 - Stress and instability
 - Community connections
 - Selectivity
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- Specific findings vary considerably across studies. My own work points to both positive and negative effects associated with stepfamily formation, and to varying effects across domains of well-being (e.g. Sweeney, Wang, & Videon, forthcoming; Sweeney, 2007).

Selectivity

- A growing number of studies attempt to statistically control for unobserved factors (e.g. Case et al., 2001; Evenhouse & Reilly, 2004; Ginther & Pollak, 2004). Results to date are mixed.
- Represents important emerging area of research, although such studies generally provide little insight into specific mechanisms underlying potential family structure effects, often rely on assumptions that are not directly testable, and require a solid understanding of process of stepfamily formation.
- The study of processes governing allocation of children and parents into families of various structures continues to be a neglected area of research.

Some concluding thoughts

- Processes of formation / dissolution of remarriage & stepfamilies are strategic areas for future research on families and health.
- But also need for better data!
 - e.g. availability of data to study remarriage has declined in recent years (e.g. loss of key information from U.S. Census, June CPS, vital statistics)
- Stronger linkages needed between theory and study designs (e.g. reduced emphasis on comparisons between youth living with two biological parents and those living with a stepparent).
- Greater attention needed to processes of stepfamily formation / dissolution.