

“The Intergenerational Transmission of Divorce: A Longitudinal Look at Siblings”

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Introduction

A large literature shows that those whose parents divorced are at a significantly higher risk of themselves divorcing compared to adult children whose parents did not divorce (e.g. Pope and Mueller 1976; McLanahan and Bumpass 1988; Amato and Booth 1991; Teachman 2002; Amato and Cheadle 2005). While this finding has been replicated numerous times, more rigorous tests have focused on the intergenerational transmission of divorce among siblings (i.e., twins, non-twins, and adopted siblings) (McGue and Lykken 1992; Jockin et al. 1996; Wolfinger et al. 2003; Dronkers and Hox 2005; see also D’Onofrio et al. 2007). Although these studies are informative, they have nevertheless relied on cross-sectional, retrospective data. Cross-sectional data do not allow for an examination of how family transitions affect child outcomes, including the risk of divorce, across the life course. We address this gap by using longitudinal data, specifically the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), to examine differences in the intergenerational transmission of divorce among siblings. By following families over time and tracking changes in the structure and characteristics of the families in which children are raised, we are able to identify the pathways through which parental relationship transitions affect the relationship stability of their offspring (Cherlin 2009; Sandefur and Wells 1994).

A sibling focused study is a more rigorous approach to understanding the intergenerational transmission of divorce, but it also allows us to examine variation in the risk of divorce (and union instability) that is associated with unobserved characteristics both within families and observed differences between families. This paper will address the following questions: (1) Does a parental divorce increase the risk of divorce (and union instability) for *all* adult children? Likewise, are adult children whose parents experience multiple relationship transitions at an increased risk of the same? (2) How much of the intergenerational transmission of divorce operates through educational attainment, age at marriage, cohabitation, age at first birth, and employment (for women)? (3) What is the effect of one sibling’s divorce on another sibling, net of parental divorce? (4) Is the intergenerational transmission of divorce attenuated by between and within family differences? Although the results have been mixed, some studies suggest that the intergenerational transmission of divorce is moderated by race/ethnicity and offspring’s gender (Amato and Keith 1991; Amato 2001; Hetherington et al. 1983; McLanahan and Sandefur 1994; Moore and Chase-Lansdale 2001). To the extent that our sample size allows, we will also explore race/ethnic and gender differences in the intergenerational transmission of divorce.

Background

Amato (1996) posits that parental divorce operates through three mediating factors to affect the risk of offspring’s divorce: (1) life course and socioeconomic attainment (age at marriage, cohabitation, education, income, wife’s employment, age at first birth); (2) attitudes toward divorce; and (3) interpersonal behavioral problems. Each of these three factors has a direct effect on the risk of offspring’s divorce. Empirical research suggests that there are various pathways through which parental divorce increases the risk of offspring’s divorce, including residential mobility (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994), a stressful family environment prior to divorce (Mechanic and Hansell 1989; Peterson and Zill 1986; Amato and Booth 1997, Booth and Amato 2001; Jekielek 1998; Hanson 1999) and

quality of parenting (e.g., level of emotional support, inconsistent discipline, little supervision, and high conflict) (Hetherington and Jodl 1994; Astone and McLanahan 1991; Thomson et al. 1992).

Most studies have focused on the intergenerational transmission of divorce as it relates to one adult child. If parental divorce truly increases the risk of offspring divorce, then we would expect that all adult offspring whose parents divorced to be at a greater risk. A few studies have examined the transmission of divorce across siblings (McGue and Lykken 1992; Jockin et al. 1996; Wolfinger et al. 2003; Dronkers and Hox 2005; see also D’Onofrio et al. 2007). For example, using data from the National Social Science Family Survey of Australia of 1989-1990, Dronkers and Hox (2005) show that the risk of divorce is similar among siblings from divorced families in Australia and these similarities were not accounted for by parental and family characteristics. Also using Australian data, O’Onofrio et al. (2007) find that the intergenerational transmission of divorce among twins is both causally linked to parental divorce and partly explained by selection factors. Moreover, using the Minnesota Twin Registry data, McGue and Lykken’s (1992) results suggest that there is an interaction between genetic and environmental factors that help explain the intergenerational transmission of divorce. Wolfinger et al. (2003) also find that parental divorce affects siblings similarly in the General Social Survey and the 1994 Survey of American Families.

Again, while informative, these sibling studies rely on cross-sectional data and retrospective recall to examine the effects of parental divorce on offspring divorce. Cross-sectional analyses do not allow for modeling the underlying processes affecting adult offspring across the life course (i.e., pathways depicted in Amato's causal model). Furthermore, existing sibling studies do not address the more common issue of multiple parental relationship transitions experienced by children, nor do they address the timing of transitions and offspring age, which is important for understanding child outcomes (Cherlin 2009; Sandefur and Wells 1994). Our study addresses these issues using longitudinal data on multiple generations. Examining sibling differences using longitudinal data is a more comprehensive approach to studying intergenerational transmissions—it allows us to control for within-family unobserved characteristics likely to affect the risk of offspring divorce.

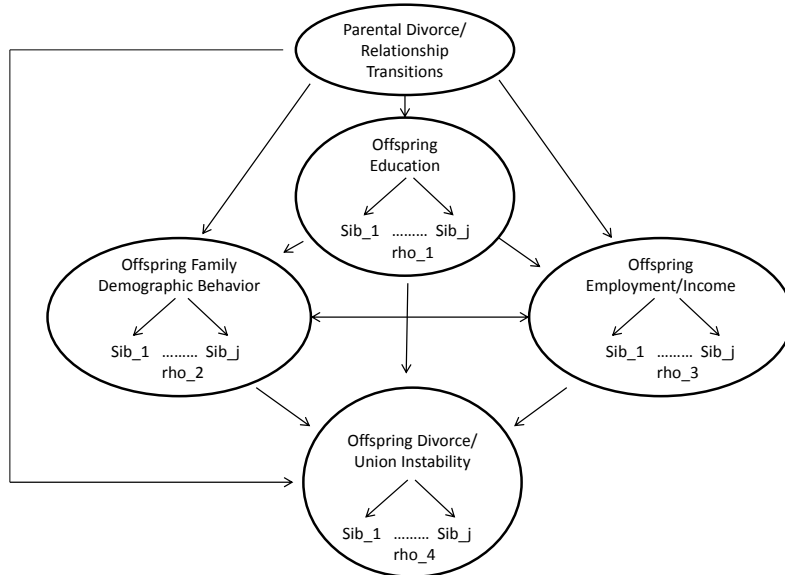
Methods & Data

This paper uses data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), a nationally representative, longitudinal study of 5,000 households (and 18,000 individuals) which began in 1968. The PSID tracks household members even after they leave the originally sampled household. This design is well-suited for intergenerational studies because it allows for linking parents, children, and siblings. We can observe family transitions in original families (e.g., parental divorce, subsequent cohabitation, remarriage, and divorce) and the family transitions (and fertility behaviors) of the children as they age. The PSID includes information about educational attainment, employment, income, and wealth, enabling us to examine how socioeconomic characteristics mediate the intergenerational transmission of divorce. The PSID does not, however, include information about interpersonal behavioral problems, parenting quality, marital conflict, or attitudes toward divorce. Figure 1 shows the multilevel structural model (individuals nested within families) we use to examine the intergenerational transmission of divorce.

Our model includes the direct paths from parental divorce and relationship transitions (experienced while the children are living in the parents’ household) to offspring’s educational attainment, family demographic behavior (i.e., cohabitation, marriage, age at first marriage, and age at first birth), employment and income, and offspring’s divorce/union instability (i.e., cohabitation

dissolution) experiences. Each intermediate outcome is estimated with a random-effect at the family level to allow for variation (and covariation) between and within sibships (with the intra-sibship correlation for outcome k denoted as ρ_k). The model also includes the direct effect of education on family demographic behavior, employment, income, and marital/union instability.¹

Figure 1. Structural Model for the Intergenerational Transmission of Divorce.



Offspring family/household formation and labor force outcomes are also allowed to directly influence each other, but we will model this using a lagged value for the predictor. For example, employment status at time t will be included as a predictor for marital status at time $t+1$, and similarly for divorce/union instability of offspring.

Our first research question concerning the extent to which siblings similarly experience the same parental divorce (and relationship transitions) is tested by the intra-sibship correlation, ρ_4 , and whether it is positive and significantly different from zero. Furthermore, we can compare our estimate of ρ_4 from a baseline model (that only includes parental and offspring divorce), to correlations when the mediators are sequentially introduced into the model. This comparison will tell us how much of the association among siblings is accounted for by differences between families and siblings. Using the coefficients for each path, we can calculate the total effect of parental divorce on offspring's union instability and decompose it into the direct and indirect effects that operate through each of the mediators. Finally, although omitted from the path diagram above, we will also examine whether race and gender moderate the effects of parental divorce (and relationship transitions) on offspring outcomes.

The intergenerational transmission of divorce is important for understanding overall inequality in the United States, given its negative consequences for offspring. While some of the explanation for why parents and their offspring get divorced is selection, the extent to which intergenerational and familial processes lead to divorce is important to understand. Using both longitudinal and siblings' approaches to examine the intergenerational transmission of divorce stands to improve our understanding of the mechanisms underlying links between parents' and offspring's relationship patterns. This work will be informative for both scholars and policy makers.

¹ We will also allow for a relationship in the opposite direction if the cohort members become a parent while still in school.

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