

The effects of post-retirement marital disruption on intergenerational exchanges, and the obligations of mid-life ‘adult children’ to care.

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Abstract

This paper explores how the occurrence and timing of parental marital disruption within the ‘child’s’ lifecourse can influence the obligations they feel to care for their parents in later life. Pre-existing studies of marital disruption have tended to emphasise the negative effects of childhood experiences of parental divorce on intergenerational obligations to care. Through interviews with mid-lifers in Southampton (UK), the research challenges the existing literature by demonstrating how marital break-down occurring across participants’ lifecourses (during childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, and in mid-life), has detrimentally affected the feelings of obligation they have to care for their parents in significant ways. We focus in particular on participants who have experienced disruption relatively recently, following their parent’s retirement. Our findings highlight parental retirement as a key lifecourse event, which can unsettle marital dynamics, family relations and intergenerational exchange frameworks. We exemplify how the deterioration of marital relations in post-retirement couples has resulted in weakened relationships with their (adult) children, who have expressed deteriorating obligations to care for their parents as a result. These findings are presented within the context of an increasing informal care gap in the UK, rising divorce rates during the 1980s and 1990s, and the complex intergenerational exchange frameworks of our ‘sandwich generation’ participants. We conclude by considering the implications of these findings for family-centric social care policy in the UK.

Introduction

A substantial number of quantitative studies from the USA and NW Europe (UK, Norway and the Netherlands) have conjectured that parental divorce weakens child-parent bonds, and the obligations adult children feel to care for their parents in later life (Grundy, 2005; Fokkema *et al.*, 2008; Dykestra, 1997; Furstenburg *et al.*, 1983; Daatland, 2007). Within the UK context, this raises concerns in relation to the provision of care for older people over the next 30 years. Family-centric care models, and the policies they inform, assume that the short-fall in formal care provision will be met by mid-life ‘adult children’, who are expected to provide informal care for their parents as they progress through later life. Demographic changes (increasing life expectancies and reduced fertility) have reduced the capacity of mid-life cohorts to provide this care, which has resulted in an ‘informal care gap’. This gap is projected to continue widening over the coming years, resulting in a short-fall of 250,000 kin care-providers in the UK by 2041 (Pickard, 2008).

Parental marital disruption is likely to intensify this short-fall, as fewer adult children who are able to provide informal care will feel the obligation to do so, given the weakening of child-parent bonds in families where marital disruption has occurred. These concerns are particularly salient given the increase in the proportion of recent cohorts of mid-life adult children who have experienced parental marital disruption due to the increase in divorce rates in the UK during the 1980s and 1990s (Smyer, 1982). This research adopts a qualitative approach to explore the complex family relations and intergenerational exchange frameworks that underpin feelings of obligation to provide care within families where parental marital disruption has occurred.

Literature review

An extensive literature has emerged since the 1980s, exploring the effects of divorce and other marital disruptions on child-parent relations during childhood, adolescence or young adulthood

(Aquilino, 1994; Arditti, 1999; Cooney *et al.*, 1995; Riggio, 2004). A more limited number of studies have addressed the impacts of marital disruption on child-parent relations further down the lifecourse, when the adult child has reached mid-life, and the parents are entering later life. These studies have largely been quantitative, drawing predominantly upon cross-sectional data, and focusing on divorce as the primary indicator for marital disruption (Grundy, 2005; Fokkema *et al.*, 2008; Dykestra, 1997; Furstenburg *et al.*, 1983; Daatland, 2007).

Despite overall agreement that parental divorce weakens intergenerational solidarity later down the family lifecourse, the ways in which the *timing* of marital disruption (i.e. the transition through periods of disruption, where these were located on the child's lifecourse, and their duration) can influence obligations to care have remained contested or overlooked. This has largely been due to a lack of data enabling satisfactory theorisations of the complex longitudinal effects of marital disruption. A number of studies have indicated that divorce occurring later in the parental marriage, once the child has reached young adulthood, will have a less detrimental effect on the strength of child-parent bonds (Shapiro, 2003; Kaufman, 1987). This is largely thought to be due to the formation of strong child-parent bonds during childhood and adolescence, which were spent in close contact with both parents. Conversely, where marital disruption resulted in reduced contact with either Mother or Father during childhood (usually through the departure of a parent from the family home following separation or divorce), it is thought more likely that the bond between the non-custodial parent (which in approximately 90% of divorces is the father – Seltzer, 1991) will wear thin. Other events occurring after the break-down of the marriage (such as migration, re-partnering, and building a new family with new offspring) are thought by some to augment this deterioration (Tomassini, 2007; Seltzer and Bianci, 1988).

Other research has questioned these analyses however, contending that child-to-father kinship obligation is particularly weakened by *later-life* divorce (Aquilino, 1994; Cooney, 1994). Whereas Furstenburg *et al.* (1995) find that divorce occurring after the child reaches adulthood has no effect on parent-child relations, suggesting ambivalence as a more suitable framework for theorising the effects of later-life divorce on family dynamics. Re-partnering following divorce further complicates these findings (Cherlin, 1992). Early studies found that older remarried couples tended to retain positive and supportive relations with their children (Vinick, 1978), while more recently, Lowenstein and Ron (1999) revealed more problematic relationships. Undoubtedly, the sequential transition through divorce followed by re-partnering results in more diverse and complex family structures – which Riley and Riley (1996) have conceptualised as the “latent kin matrix”, placing some emphasis on support exchange via the ‘voluntary relations’ between former in-laws and step-families.

We address three distinct gaps in these literatures. First, the lack of longitudinal analyses of parental marital disruption and its effects (i.e. how the location, or *timing*, of parental marital disruption on the (adult) child's lifecourse may impact upon the strength of relations with their parents and thus the obligations they feel to provide care, Shapiro, 2003); second, the dearth of analysis considering the effects of multiple and varying forms of parental marital disruption (Tomassini, 2007); and third, the paucity of qualitative work exploring the complex intergenerational exchange frameworks that mid-life ‘adult children’ are embedded within (often conceptualised as the ‘sandwich generation’ - Grundy and Henretta, 2006) and how these are underpinned by their ‘moral’ obligations to care.

Methods

Our research addresses these agendas through a longitudinal analysis of marital disruption across the lifecourse, and the impacts of these experiences on child-parent bonds and obligations to care. Our methodology involves the use of a Life History Calendar (LHC) to record the location of parental marital disruption on the adult child's lifecourse, enabling us to examine how the *timing* of

parental marital disruption (i.e. during childhood, adolescence or adulthood) influences parent-child relationships and obligations to care. Importantly, we acknowledge the heterogeneity of marital disruption, and through narrative and semi-structured interviews with adult children we seek to unravel how (multiple) disruptions of varying form and duration impact upon adult child-parent bonds and obligations to care in different ways. Furthermore, we explore how elongated lifecourses have complicated the intergenerational transfers and exchanges of mid-lifers, who may find themselves embedded in exchange frameworks across multiple generations (with parents, children and grandchildren).

Preliminary findings: post-retirement marital disruption and weakened obligations to care
Semi-structured interviews are currently being undertaken with a sample of 40 participants in Southampton (a city on the South Coast of the UK) who have experienced parental marital disruption either during childhood, adolescence/young adulthood, or during mid-life. Data collection will be completed by November 2011, and a full analysis of these data will be presented in this paper. Preliminary analyses have revealed the importance of the events underpinning marital disruption, and indicate that parental marital disruption occurring after retirement can cause a marked deterioration in adult child-parent relations (particularly with fathers). This suggests that retirement marks an important watershed for maturing marriages, and is often followed by shifting marital dynamics as husband and wife renegotiate their positions in society, and their roles within the family. We provide evidence that these changes can engender weaker relations between older parents and their mid-life children, and a reduced obligation for the latter to provide care to the former as their care needs intensify with age. This is a key finding, given the preoccupation of previous studies with the effects of parental marital disruption occurring during childhood or adolescence. Our findings inform understandings of the *propensity* for current and future cohorts of adult children in mid-life to care for their elderly parents, and we highlight the implications for the provision of care within the UK under extant care policy, which neglects to consider how feelings of obligation will dilute the capacity for mid-lifers to fill the informal care gap.

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