

Maryhelen MacInnes
Department of Sociology, Michigan State University
Extended Abstract

The impact of child disability on divorced mother's union formation

Contemporary statistics clearly indicate that ours is a divorce culture. While estimates vary, approximately 40% of first marriages end in divorce (Bramlet & Mosher, 2002). Moreover, the majority of those divorces will involve children: about half of divorces involve couples with children (Amato, 2000). Yet divorce is not the endpoint for the majority of these families. The vast majority of divorced women remarry. Remarriages account for about half of all weddings, and upwards of 75% of divorced women will remarry within 10 years (Bramlet & Mosher, 2002). Moreover, many divorced women choose to cohabit, either prior to a remarriage or in lieu of remarriage (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989).

The literature clearly indicates that children with disabilities destabilize marriages (Corman & Kaestner, 1992; Joesch & Smith, 1997; Mauldon, 1992; Spearin, Park, D'Ottavi, & Goldscheider, 2003). Children who have disabilities are more likely to experience their mother's divorce than are otherwise similar nondisabled children. While children with disabilities seem to destabilize marriages, little has been done to assess their impact on the likelihood of remarriage among their mothers.

It is reasonable to anticipate that raising a child with a disability should have an impact upon the likelihood of remarriage. Divorced mothers raising a child or children with disabilities may be more strongly motivated to seek another husband than are women whose child or children are nondisabled. Raising a child with a disability can be immensely taxing in both an emotional and a pragmatic sense. Such children can be immensely costly (Lukemeyer, Meyers, & Smeeding, 2000). These children often require services from a variety of health professionals as well as equipment or other health-related supplies, many of which are not covered by health insurance. Further, raising a child with a disability can be stressful for the caregivers (Darling, 1987; Ireys & Silver, 1996). In fact, these stresses are thought to explain the higher risk of divorce among parents raising children with disabilities. Thus, we may see that women raising children

with disabilities will be more likely to remarry than are those who have only healthy children.

However, the literature on remarriage generally suggests that children are a barrier to remarriage (Koo & Suchindran, 1980). Scholars suggest that children may serve as a barrier to remarriage by limiting mothers time and capacity to search for a spouse, or may decrease women's desirability to potential partners as men are reluctant to take on responsibility for another man's offspring. Raising a child with a disability may serve as an even larger barrier to remarriage for either reason. Caring for a child with a disability is even more time consuming than caring for nondisabled children. Moreover, if men are reluctant to take on caregiving responsibilities for nondisabled children, they may be particularly reluctant to take on children with amplified needs, such as those exhibited by children with disabilities (Mauldon 1992). As such, we may see that divorced mothers raising children with disabilities are less likely to remarry than otherwise similar mothers of nondisabled children.

Yet remarriage is not the only option available to individuals who desire the companionship and aid that a partner brings. Cohabitation has grown increasingly common over the course of the last three decades. We now see that a majority of marriages are preceded by cohabitations (Bumpass & Lu, 2000), and are particularly common preceding remarriage (Smock & Manning, 2004). While many couples cohabit in anticipation of marrying, some view cohabitation as an alternative to marriage. Cohabitation provides many of the benefits of marriage, but does not require the same degree of commitment. If men are reluctant to take on legal responsibility for the care of children with disabilities, we may see that divorced women raising children with disabilities are more likely to be single, or that they are equally likely to be in a union as are women whose children are nondisabled, yet are more likely to be in a cohabitation and less likely to be remarried.

In one of the few studies exploring this issue, Mauldon (1992) assessed the hazard of remarriage from the perspective of children using data from the 1981 NHIS. She concluded that while children with disabilities have a greater likelihood of experiencing their parents divorce, there was little difference with regard to the hazard of remarriage. Specifically, Mauldon (1992) compared the time to their mother's remarriage for children

with disabilities to that among nondisabled children. She found no evidence of a longer duration to remarriage among children with disabilities.

This study aims to more fully investigate the impact of child disability on mother's prospects for union formation. While Mauldon's analysis suggests that there is no impact of disability on remarriage, I propose that by only looking at remarriage, we may be missing part of the story. In recent decades, cohabitation has become increasingly common, particularly following divorce. This study aims to explore the impact of raising a child with a disability on post-divorce union formation, looking at its impact on the likelihood of remaining single compared to cohabiting or to remarrying.

Data and methods

This study will make use of recent data that contains information on both the marital status/ histories of women and strong measures of child disability: matched data from the 1993 NHIS and 1995 NSFG. The 1993 NHIS is a national survey designed and administered by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS). Information is obtained about the health, disability, and other characteristics of each member of the household. Likewise, the 1995 NSFG is a national survey that examines marital, fertility, contraception and employment trajectories of women ages 15-44, designed and administered by NCHS. It contains information regarding marital history, as well as a variety of demographic and economic characteristics. The file includes information about the birth dates of all children regardless of residence. The 1993 NHIS provided the sampling frame for the 1995 NSFG. As a result, records from women interviewed in the 1993 NHIS can be linked to records of the same women interviewed in the 1995 NSFG. The resultant matched dataset thus includes information on both child disability status and on the characteristics of their families.

Analytic strategy

This study will use a series of logistic regression models to assess the impact of raising a child with a disability on the union-formation outcomes of divorced women. The sample contains information on all women whose first marriage ended in divorce at least two years prior to the date of the NHIS survey. I am able to use the characteristics of

women and their children at the time of divorce (including the disability status of children) to predict whether women will be remarried, single, or cohabiting at the time of the survey, controlling for relevant covariates such as mothers race, age, duration since divorce, and the like.

A superior analytic approach would be to conduct a competing-outcomes Cox hazard model to assess the impact of child disability on the risk of both remarriage and cohabitation as types of first union following divorce. Unfortunately, the matched data set only contains information on the first and current cohabiting unions, thus prohibiting such an analysis. However, the data do permit hazard modeling of time to remarriage. As such this model will also be used, in conjunction with models predicting current union status, to assess the impact of child disability on union formations.