Marriage Selectivity and Stepfamily Formation: Do Single Mothers Settle?

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How prevalent are American stepfamilies?

One-third of American children will reside in stepfamilies

40% of Americans have at least one step-relative

Source: Bumpass, Raley, & Sweet (1995)
Source: Pew Research Center (2011)
The process and impact of stepfamily formation

Narrative: Stepfathers are negatively selected
• Single mothers are disadvantaged in the marriage market
• Stepchildren are vulnerable to:
  • Teenage pregnancy & early sexual debut
  • Poor academic performance
  • Behavior/emotional difficulties

Marriage selectivity perspective
• Union formation is a numbers game
• Marriage market conditions = sex ratio
• Sex ratio < 1 = unfavorable marriage market conditions for women
  • More competition + fewer choices
An alternative hypothesis...

Oppenheimer’s Marital search perspective
• Women with sufficient financial resources will not “settle”
• Rather, the marital search will be extended until a preferable mate is available

Consistent with some stepfamily literature
• Mothers return to the marriage market with:
  • Higher expectations for subsequent unions
  • Emphasis on “good providers”
  • Mothers with desirable traits “trade up” in terms of new partners’ economic potential (Bzostek et al., 2012)
  • The most disadvantaged mothers are the least likely to remarry (Edin & Kefalas, 2005)
Competing Hypotheses

Support for Marriage Selectivity
• H1: When marriage markets favor women (SR >1), more desirable male partners (e.g., employed) will enter unions with single mothers

• H2: When marriage markets favor men (SR<1), the least desirable male partners will form stepfamilies

Support for Marital Search
• H3: The sex ratio has no significant impact on stepfamily formation.
Data and Analytic Samples

National Survey of Families and Households

Selection criteria:
1. Not cohabiting or married at NSFH1
2. Dissolved union between NSFH1 & NSFH2
3. Reinterviewed at NSFH2

Men (n=1,260)
- 29 years old
- Earned $16,179/year
- 79% white non-Hispanic
- 48% ≤ high school diploma
Data and Analytic Samples

1990 Census

Labor Market Areas
- Based on journey-to-work patterns
- Not confined to state or county boundaries

LMA Sex Ratio
- Men (16-49) : Women (18-44)
- =1 indicates equilibrium
- <1 indicates unfavorable marriage market conditions for women
- Range 0.77-10.3; $M = 1.41$

1990 Labor Market Areas ($n=394$)

Source: United States Department of Agriculture
Research Design

Analytical Strategy
- Weighted multinomial logistic regression

LMA Sex Ratio
- Men (18-49) : Women (18:44)

Controls (NSFH1)
- Age
- Race/ethnicity
- Education
- Employment
- Earnings
- Childhood family structure
- Coresidential biological children

Dependent variable (NSFH2)
1. Remaining single (reference)
2. Cohabit with stepchildren
3. Cohabit without stepchildren
4. Married with stepchildren
5. Married without stepchildren
## Relative Risks of Union Type at NSFH2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Cohabit With a Woman</th>
<th>Marry a Woman</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>With Children</td>
<td>With No Children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Each Versus Remain Single</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td>0.98 ***</td>
<td>0.95 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White non-Hispanic (ref)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Black non-Hispanic</strong></td>
<td>2.30 *</td>
<td>0.40 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>1.31</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>College graduate</strong></td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>1.03</td>
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<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>1.58</td>
<td>1.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coresidential biological child</td>
<td>**3.70 **</td>
<td>**3.21 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LMA Sex Ratio</td>
<td>**5.71 ***</td>
<td>0.35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: National Survey of Families and Households, Waves 1 and 2
Note: Only significant results are displayed. Model also controls for earnings (logged) and childhood family structure (‘1’ nuclear family; ‘0’ other family structure).
Conclusions

- Very little support for marriage selectivity perspective
  - It is not the least desirable men who form marital stepfamilies
  - Marital stepfathers seem to be “positively selected”
- Favorable marriage market conditions are associated with increased odds of men forming two very different unions:
  1. Cohabiting stepfamilies
  2. Marital unions with childless women
  3. NOT marital stepfamilies
- Custodial fathers are 11 times more likely to marry a woman with children as opposed to remaining single
  - Consistent with literature that suggests single fathers are extremely eager to recreate a familiar family environment
  - Further evidence that single mothers do not necessarily marry the least desirable men
Future research

• Telling half of the story
  • Future research will incorporate female partner characteristics
• Data limitations
  • NSFH offers the largest sample of stepfathers
  • BUT the latest wave does not include geocode information
  • Next steps: 2010-2006 National Survey of Family Growth
• Research design
  • These processes may be further clarified by stratifying the model according to marriage market conditions
  • Additional contextual variables:
    • Proportion unemployed
    • Average AFDC payment
Thank you!