

Marriage Selectivity and Stepfamily Formation

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Abstract

Although child outcomes specific to stepfamilies have been well researched, the literature is not resolved on the process by which these families are formed, nor which persons are likely to enter these unions. Determining which men are prone to become stepfathers is paramount to understanding conditions that promote both negative and positive outcomes in stepchildren. We examine two potential explanations of stepfamily formation: 1)marriage selectivity and 2)marital search theory. These perspectives have been invoked in discussions of stepfamily formation, yet the literature has not sufficiently controlled for the marriage market conditions essential to each perspective. Using the first two waves of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), we estimate the impact of local marriage market conditions on the likelihood of men entering a stepfamily union. Preliminary findings do not unequivocally support the marriage selectivity perspective. In follow-up, we will incorporate characteristic-specific sex ratios of the local marriage market.

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Introduction

Cohabiting and marital stepfamilies are pervasive in the United States. In 2011, more than 40% of American adults reported having at least one step relative (Pew Research Center, 2011). It has also been estimated that one-third of Americans will reside in stepfamilies for at least a portion of their childhood, and one-fourth of these families will cohabit (Bumpass, Raley, & Sweet, 1995). Upon union dissolution, mothers in the United States are significantly more likely than fathers to retain physical custody of biological children (Argys et al., 2007); therefore, children are more likely to live full-time with stepfathers as opposed to stepmothers. Since children in stepfamilies are more vulnerable to a host of negative consequences (e.g., teenage pregnancy, high school dropout, and behavior/emotional difficulties, etc.) compared to children in traditional two parent families (Cooksey & Fondell, 1996; Sweeney, 2010), stepchildren in stepfather-biological mother families are likely at an increased risk for negative outcomes. Although the outcomes associated with stepfamilies have been well documented, the literature is not resolved on how these family structures are formed.

There are several potential explanations of this phenomenon. Chief among them is the “marriage selectivity” hypothesis. When applied to stepfamily studies, this perspective predicts that a high sex ratio in (re)marriage markets (e.g., an abundance of women in relation to men) fosters conditions that are unfavorable to women. That is, when men with desirable qualities are in short supply, women with less desirable characteristics must compete against more attractive women (e.g., childless, younger) for potential mates. It logically follows that the most attractive women have greater access to the most suitable male partners (e.g., employed, more educated), leaving women with the least attractive qualities to partner with less desirable mates. In sum, this perspective asserts that men with undesirable qualities are “negatively selected” into stepparenthood by virtue of the marriage market (Hofferth & Anderson, 2003; Hofferth, 2006).

In opposition to the marriage selectivity perspective, Oppenheimer’s marital search theory argues that women with sufficient financial resources will continue their marital search rather than settle for an unsuitable mate (Oppenheimer, 1988). Indeed, recent research finds that single mothers return to the marriage market with higher standards for new partners and an emphasis on seeking “good providers.” Further, mothers who possess desirable traits—e.g., employed, low birth parity—are likely to “trade up” in terms of new partners’ economic potential, and mothers with greater access to financial resources are more likely to prolong the marital search as opposed to “settling” for a partner with poor earning potential (Bzostek, McLanahan, & Carlson, 2012). Interestingly, extended marital searches have also been observed among the most disadvantaged women in the marriage market—unwed mothers. Despite limited financial resources, it seems that unwed mothers also resist marriage to less suitable partners, choosing instead to cohabit, or continue on as single mothers (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Lichter et al., 2006).

The “marriage selectivity” perspective predicts that more suitable male partners have a higher likelihood of forming non-stepfamily unions. Therefore, this preliminary analysis expects that male partners who had higher levels of education and were employed prior to union formation will have decreased odds of forming stepfamily unions by NSFH2. Alternatively, the marital search perspective states that despite single mothers’ disadvantage in the marriage market, these women will be more selective of higher order partners due to social learning, and a more pronounced need for economic stability. Therefore, a lack of evidence for the marriage selectivity perspective would lend support to the marital search perspective.

While there is evidence that men with lower levels of education and limited income—traits that are often associated with negative selection—are overrepresented in stepfamilies (Goldscheider &

Sassler, 2006), previous research has not expressly tested the impact of marriage market conditions on stepfamily formation (Goldscheider & Kaufman, 2006; Hofferth & Anderson, 2003; Hofferth, 2006). Without controlling for marriage market conditions, the expectation that less suitable men are more available and are, therefore, more likely to marry single mothers remains an untested assumption. However, in order to truly understand the process of stepfamily formation, we must first determine whether stepfathers are negatively or positively selected into stepparenthood. Accordingly, we begin our analysis by first answering the question: are stepfathers “negatively selected?”

This study seeks ultimately to test the mediating effects of marriage market conditions on stepfamily formation. As such, the forthcoming portion of this analysis will build upon preliminary findings presented herein by asking whether stepfathers are negatively selected into stepfamilies when marriage market conditions are unfavorable to women?

Data and Method

Individual-level data come from the first two waves of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), which interviewed 10,005 primary respondents at NSFH1 (1987-1988) and NSFH2 (1992-1994) (Sweet, Bumpass, & Call, 1988; Sweet & Bumpass, 1996). The NSFH is especially suited to our study as respondents answer questions related to union histories, partner preference, and willingness to stepparent. As families with stepchildren, single parent families, cohabiting couples and recently married person were double sampled by the NSFH, these data have been commonly used in stepfamily research. Yet, these data also include an adequate sample of primary respondents who were never married, divorced or widowed at NSFH1. Further, the NSFH makes it possible to link individual-level data obtained at NSFH1 and NSFH2 to aggregate-level data.

We present preliminary models for male respondents who: 1) were not cohabiting or married at NSFH1; or 2) dissolved cohabiting or marital unions between NSFH1 and NSFH2; and 3) formed a cohabiting or marital union by NSFH2. In the absence of geographical information linking primary respondents to LMAs between 1987-1988 and 1992-1994, we further restrict our sample to male respondents who also resided in the same region of the U.S. at NSFH1 and NSFH2, yielding a total analytic sample of 417 men. Summary statistics are presented in Table 1.

In an effort to determine whether stepfathers are negatively selected, we incorporate weighted multinomial logistic regression models in the preliminary analysis. Our dependent variable includes four union formation outcomes that occurred between NSFH1 and NSFH2: 1) cohabiting without stepchildren; 2) cohabiting with stepchildren; 3) married without stepchildren; and 4) married with stepchildren. As a crude measure of contextual level characteristics, we include respondents' region of residence and urban context in our preliminary models.

In the second part of this analysis, we will link NSFH individual records to 1990 Census and 1990 PUMS-L data aggregated at the Labor Market Area level. This level of geography often approximates marriage markets in the literature (Guzzo, 2006; Harknett, 2008; D. Lichter & McLaughlin, 1992; Raley, 1996). Using multilevel regression models, we will determine whether stepfathers are negatively selected into stepparenthood in marriage markets that are unfavorable to women. Our request for restricted-access contextual data is currently in progress at the National Survey of Households and Families Study, which is housed at the Center for Demography and Ecology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Results

Table 2 displays preliminary findings. It seems that there is no significant difference in education between men who enter alternative family unions—irrespective of the presence of stepchildren—and those who enter non-stepfamily marital unions (Table 2). Yet, men who reported employment at NSFH1 have significantly increased odds of forming marital stepfamilies relative to marital non-stepfamilies. Previous research suggests that preferential characteristics at first and higher-order marriages are distinct. Although education may signify earning potential at a younger age when most first marriages take place, employment outcomes are more likely to be realized for older men who enter the remarriage market. It may be the case that education is no longer the most reliable predictor of earning potential at the point of remarriage (Shafer, 2012).

Additionally, men who have coresidential biological children have increased odds of forming cohabiting non-stepfamily unions as opposed to marital non-stepfamily unions. This finding might support the contention that custodial fathers enjoy an advantaged status in the remarriage market (Goldscheider & Sassler, 2006). Through caring full-time for a biological child, these men may have demonstrated their potential as a successful father to future children.

Although our preliminary findings do not lend support to the marriage selectivity hypothesis, further analysis is required to determine whether stepfathers may be negatively selected into stepfatherhood in marriage markets that are unfavorable to women. This further analysis is paramount to clarifying our understanding of stepfather-biological mother union formation.

Table 1. Weighted Summary Statistics of Family Formations between NSFH1 & NSFH2

Variables	%		%
Family Formation by Union Type		Partner/Wife characteristics	
Cohabit without Stepchildren	7	Mean Age (SD)	29.89 (0.48)
Cohabit with Stepchildren	19	Race/ethnicity	
Married without Stepchildren	60	White non-Hispanic	84
Married with Stepchildren	14	Black non-Hispanic	7
Male characteristics		Hispanic	6
Mean Age (SD)	32.54 (0.45)	Other non-Hispanic	4
Race/ethnicity ¹		Education	
White non-Hispanic	83	Less than high school	24
Black non-Hispanic	7	High School	30
Hispanic	7	Some college	29
Other non-Hispanic	3	College graduate	16
Education ¹		Contextual characteristics	
Less than high school	12	Region	
High School	39	Northeast	17
Some college	31	Midwest	31
College graduate	18	West	23
Employed ¹	91	South	29
Social learning characteristics		Metropolitan area	76
Two-parent biological family ¹	73		
Never married	67		
Coresidential biological children	38		
N	417		

¹Measured at NSFH1

Source: National Survey of Families and Households (1987-1988) & (1992-1994)

Table 2. Weighted Estimated Relative Risks of Family Formation by Union Type, NSFH1 (1987-1988) & NSFH2 Married without Children Vs.

	Cohabit without Stepchildren	Cohabit with Stepchildren	Married without Stepchildren
	RR	RR	RR
Male characteristics			
Age	0.98	0.98	0.96
Race/ethnicity (Ref: White non-Hispanic) ¹			
Black non-Hispanic	6.62 *	6.33	2.60
Hispanic	3.32	1.14	8.18 *
Other non-Hispanic	0.34	0.00	0.00
Education (Ref: < HS) ¹			
High School	1.25	1.46	2.13
Some college	0.51	0.51	0.65
College graduate	0.46	0.46	0.83
Employed ¹	0.68	0.79	16.02 **
Partner/Wife characteristics			
Age	1.05	1.11 **	1.20 ***
Race/ethnicity (Ref: White non-Hispanic)			
Black non-Hispanic	0.51	1.83	0.81
Hispanic	1.03	2.26	0.29
Other non-Hispanic	5.80	0.00	0.78
Education (Ref: < HS)			
High School	0.42	0.50	0.28 *
Some college	0.11 ***	0.30	0.20 **
College graduate	0.39	0.05 *	0.07 **
Social learning characteristics			
Two-parent biological family ¹	1.00	0.30 *	0.83
Never married	0.57	0.44	0.62
Coresidential biological children	0.35 **	0.37	1.57
Contextual characteristics			
Region (Ref: South)			
Northeast	1.33	4.05	0.47
Midwest	1.80	2.48	1.77
West	1.93	2.43	1.58
Metropolitan area	3.45 **	4.05	4.19 **
N	417		

***p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05

¹Measured at NSFH1

Source: National Survey of Families and Households (1987-1988) & (1992-1994)