Repartnering after divorce

Marginal mates and unwe

Past research by the Australian Institute of Family Studies found that women were less likely than men to remarry after divorce, and that women with fewer economic resources were more likely to remarry than other women. Have these patterns changed over the past decade? Based on new Institute data, this article re-assesses the links between gender, economic resources and post-divorce repartnering.

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Repartnering after divorce, by marriage or de facto relationship, has been shown to confer a range of benefits for women and men. It can be a key pathway to improved financial circumstances, particularly for women, and to increased levels of health and emotional wellbeing (Funder, Harrison and Weston 1993).

Several factors have been found to influence the likelihood and timing of repartnering, particularly gender, age, post-divorce economic resources, and the presence of children (Weston and Khoo 1993; Khoo 1989; McDonald 1986). While these factors interact in complex ways, gender appears to act as the fulcrum. Indeed, Khoo (1989) found that in Australia men were more than three times as likely as women to repartner.

One popular explanation for low rates of repartnering by women is that women's increasing financial independence reduces their motivation to enter and maintain relationships (Sweeney 1995). Consistent with this hypothesis, early studies typically found that women with limited economic resources were more likely to remarry than other women (Coleman and Ganong 1990).

However, this pattern may have altered due to: changes in attitudes and values regarding gender roles – such as the greater value placed on women's economic achievements and men's involvement with children; changes in the labour market – such as reduced employment opportunities for older men; changes in consumption patterns – which may make two incomes seem increasingly necessary to achieve a desirable standard of living; and changes in law and public policy – such as substantial increases in social security payments and more rigorous child support enforcement.

These changes reflect and reinforce the benefits for women of having independent financial resources, both in and out of relationships. In this context, repartnering may not be perceived as a solution to the financial strain of divorce – even for women with few economic resources.

d d e d w o m e n

After considering the research literature, this article reassesses the linkage between gender, economic resources and patterns of post-divorce repartnering, using data from the Australian Institute of Family Studies *Australian Divorce Transitions Project*.

Exchange theory

While several bodies of literature provide explanations for trends in the formation, organisation and dissolution of couple relationships, exchange theory dominates the repartnering research literature. Exchange theory examines the changing costs and benefits of marriage, emphasising 'rational' choice in partnering decisions and mate selection. This approach may be criticised for not adequately recognising the more complex and unpredictable social and emotional aspects of relationships. However, its dominance in the literature and its focus on the link between economics and relationship formation make it a suitable framework for this study.

There are two 'exchange' models of the cohesion of couple relationships – the 'specialisation and trading' model, and the 'matching resources' model. Each model generates different predictions about the impact of men's and women's economic resources on relationship formation, and how responsibilities for children interact with economic resources.

The 'specialisation and trading' model assumes that the traditional gender division of roles (that is, husband as 'breadwinner' and wife as 'homemaker') maximises the gains from relationships for men and women. This model predicts that men with greater economic resources will be more likely to repartner than other men, whereas women with fewer economic resources will be more likely to repartner than other women (Cherlin 1992). It therefore links the growth of women's employment to declining rates of marriage, increased divorced rates and ex-nuptial births (Brines and Joyner 1999).

Research on remarriage in the 1980s provided support for the 'specialisation and trading' model. In a comprehensive review of this literature, Coleman and Ganong (1990: 926) concluded without qualification that 'the more money a divorced male has, the more likely he is to remarry, but there is an inverse relationship between income and remarriage for women'. Studies using other indicators of economic viability (such as education and occupation) found similar support for the specialisation model in respect to its predictions for men, but the findings were more complex for women (Khoo 1989; McDonald 1986). For instance, Khoo (1989) found low rates of remarriage for women with both very high and very low levels of education, and McDonald (1986) found that women who are not in paid work are less likely to repartner.

Most of these studies examined remarriage only. However, Khoo (1989) compared remarriage and de facto repartnering and found that the type of relationships women entered following divorce varied by socio-economic status. Women in professional or managerial occupations were less likely to remarry than other women, but were more likely to be in de facto or non-cohabiting relationships. This finding suggests that the 'specialisation and trading' model only applied to marital relationships, and that women's financial independence did not operate as an alternative to relationships, but as an alternative to marriage.

The 'matching resources' model assumes that social and economic changes, as outlined in the introduction, have altered the nature of marital exchange. This model holds that equal costs and rewards can occur in relationships where gender roles are neutral if spouses' economic resources are roughly equal. Research showing similarity of spouses' education and occupation, and an increasing positive association between spouses' earnings, supports this model (Burtless 1999; Lichter et al. 1995). From the vantage of this framework, the likelihood and timing of repartnering depends on the relative ease of finding a match. Low rates of remarriage on the part of highly educated women may thus be the result of a relative scarcity of well educated single men in their age group (Weston and Khoo 1993), possibly exacerbated by a continued tendency for men to form relationships with younger women following divorce.

Current context

Applying these models to the current Australian context, Birrell and Rapson (1998) argue that there has been a decline in the number of couples in Australia because men's economic position has been declining relative to women's. They suggest that the increased number of women with tertiary qualifications, and a deteriorating labour market (including high levels of male unemployment and job insecurity) have led to a growing mis-match between the resources of men and women at the upper and lower ends of the socio-economic spectrum.

These researchers maintain that as women with tertiary qualifications outnumber men, highly educated women find it harder to find a man who can offer them much over what they already have. They argue that women who possess limited education and resources are more likely to accept the traditional notion of marriage, but men in their

'market' will be unable to fulfil the role of breadwinner because of labour market changes. Therefore, women of low socio-economic status may opt for reliance on Parenting Payment (formerly Sole Parent Pension) rather than risk a relationship with a man with an unreliable income (Birrell and Rapson 1998). This line of reasoning is consistent with low rates of repartnering among women with very low levels of education (Khoo 1989), and women not in paid work (McDonald 1986). However, low rates of repartnering among women who are not in paid work may also result from reduced social interaction which provides opportunities to meet partners.

Influence of children on repartnering

Women's greater responsibility for children following divorce is another common explanation for gender differences in repartnering rates. Exchange theory conceptualises children as an economic appendage and as a barrier to new relationships due to the constraints on time and financial resources they impose. However, the 'specialisation and trading' model suggests that sole mothers with minimal economic resources will be motivated to repartner due to their greater need for financial security (Wineberg 1999).

Rather than a barrier or spur to repartnering, children might be perceived as an alternative to a new relationship following divorce, particularly if sexual relationships are perceived as high risk and not reliable emotionally (Smart and Neale 1999). At minimum, children provide company and can act as the hub of an ongoing family life for the resident parent.

In their review of 1980s research, Coleman and Ganong (1990) concluded that children influenced remarriage for women but not for men. But while men's involvement in parenting (in marriage and after divorce) is increasing, as is the number of sole-father families (Pleck 1997; Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan 1997), few studies have examined the influence on repartnering of variations in post-divorce involvement with children. As an exception, Khoo (1989) examined the repartnering of men who had 'custody' of children and found that they were as likely to repartner as 'non-custodial' fathers. While this finding challenges the assumption that women's greater responsibility for children explains gender differences in repartnering rates, the combination of responsibilities for children and financial circumstances may explain these gender effects. Children might influence women's but not men's propensity to repartner because women often face a greater struggle to get back on their feet financially following divorce (see the article by Weston and Smyth elsewhere in this edition).

Alternatively, divorced men with children might be more eager to repartner than divorced women with children, or divorced men with children might be more acceptable to single women than divorced women with children are to single men. These hypotheses are usually based on presumptions about women's greater affinity with children, but others link men's increased involvement in raising children to men's egalitarian attitudes – attitudes which might be particularly attractive to women (Kaufman 2000). Similarly, Smart and Neale (1999) point to the attraction of the 'sensitive new age guy'.

To sum up, the two 'exchange' models generate different predictions about the influence of men's and women's economic resources and responsibilities for children on relationship formation. The specialisation and trading model predicts that women with few resources will be more likely than other women to repartner following divorce, particularly if they have dependent children. Conversely, there will be a positive relationship between economic resources and men's propensity to repartner. The matching resources model, which presumes an increasing positive association between partner's economic prospects, suggests that the likelihood and timing of repartnering for both men and women will depend on the ease of finding a partner with resources equal to their own. The degree to which children act as a barrier to repartnering depends on the extent to which they limit time and resources.

Data which test these theoretical formulations are now examined.

Australian Divorce Transitions Project

The data presented here are drawn from the *Australian Divorce Transition Project,* a study based on a random national telephone survey of 650 divorced Australians (Western Australia was excluded due to legislative differences between that State and the rest of Australia).

Table 1. Predictor variables and socio-demographic profile of respondents (N=650)

Predictor variable	Men (n=289) %	Women (n=361) %
Highest level of education		
Low (less than year 12 certificate)	31	42
Medium (year 12 certificate, technical or trade)	30	17
High (post year 12 certificate, diploma or degree+)	39	41
Total	100	100
N	288	360
Time out of paid work in the former marriage		
Some	26	-
None	74	-
Less than one third	-	44
More than one third	-	56
Total	100	100
N	278	322
In paid work at the time of separation?		
Yes	85	63
No	15	37
Total	100	100
N	288	345
Post-divorce employment patterns		
Continuous employment	54	37
Employed most, some or none of the time	46	63
Total	100	100
N	288	352
Asset wealth at the time of separation		
Low (less than $114,000)	44	47
Medium ($114,000-$268,500)	36	30
High (more than $268,500)	20	23
Total	100	100
N	207	187
Personal gross annual income		
Low (less than $23,500)	35	-
Medium ($23,500-$40,000)	32	-
High (more than $40,000)	33	-
Total	100	-
N	256	-
Resident parent status		
Resident parent	15	74
Non-resident parent	45	4
Children split residence or alternating	22	11
Children living independently	18	11
Total	100	100
N	277	352

Notes: Sub-totals may not sum to N because of missing information. Respondents were coded as 'high' asset if the total net value of their assets was greater than the cut off for the 1997 social security non-home owner Pension Assets Test (that is, $268,500). The medium and low asset wealth groups were determined by a median split for those cases where assets were valued at less than $268,500. Levels of education and income were based on a roughly even split of survey respondents.
Source: Australian Divorce Transitions Project, Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2000.

This survey, conducted in late 1997 by the Australian Institute of Family Studies, examined the divorce transition and its consequences for parents.

Information was collected on respondents' entry into new relationships, and the formalisation of these relationships through marriage. Respondents were categorised as either remarried, cohabiting (that is, in a de facto relationship), in a non-cohabiting relationship, or single. Other questions established the living arrangements of the children of the former marriage; parents living with at least one of these children were called 'resident parents' and those not living with any such children were called 'non-resident parents' (see Table 1). In other cases the children were split between parents or alternating between parents (that is, parenting was shared), or living independently. Virtually all resident parents at the time of interview were also resident parents at the time of separation.

Results are presented in two parts. First, rates and types of repartnering for men and women are compared. Second, the extent to which certain factors influence repartnering are assessed for men and women separately. Specifically, the influence of respondents' age, their economic resources and their responsibilities for children are examined. The economic resources examined include education, work history and asset wealth at the time of separation. Current income is also examined for men (unlike the situation for women, divorced men's current income appears to provide a reasonable indicator of income early in the separation period). The indicators of responsibilities for children include the age of youngest child, the number of children, and resident parent status.

Repartnering rates

Consistent with previous research, Figure 1 shows that men (44 per cent) were significantly more likely than women (29 per cent) to repartner following divorce ('repartnered' includes married and de facto relationships). However, a higher proportion of women than men were in non-cohabiting relationships.

Repartnering influences

A key question that flows from Figure 1 is: What factors influence repartnering and how do these factors vary by gender? Sequential logistic regression was used to answer this question. Logistic regression is used to predict a discrete outcome such as group membership – in this case, the likelihood of repartnering, remarrying, or remaining single – from a set of predictor variables (Tabachnik and Fiddel 1996). In the sequential process, predictor variables are included in analysis in a series of steps to assess whether each variable significantly adds to the prediction of relationship status, when the influence of all preceding variables is controlled. In this study, variables were entered in chronological order. In addition, the length of time since separation was controlled.

The influence of respondents' age on repartnering was first examined. Consistent with past research, the younger that men and women were at the time of separation, the more likely they were to repartner.

While respondents' age and the age of children are closely connected, their effects differ. When the effect of respondents' age was controlled, women with older children were more likely than women with younger children to repartner. However, women with younger children who did repartner tended to formalise new relationships through remarriage. While the age of youngest child had no direct effect on men's repartnering, men whose children were living independently were more likely to repartner than other men.

The influence of children's residence on repartnering varied by gender. Resident mothers were less likely to repartner than non-resident mothers and those who shared parenting. In contrast, having primary responsibility for children did not affect men's propensity to repartner. However, when economic resources were taken into account, the influence of children's residence on women's repartnering became considerably weaker, suggesting that this gender effect may at least partly result from women's financial circumstances following divorce. This interpretation gains further support from supplementary analyses that indicated that women who had low levels of education and women from marriages of lower asset wealth were less likely to share parenting with their former spouse following divorce.

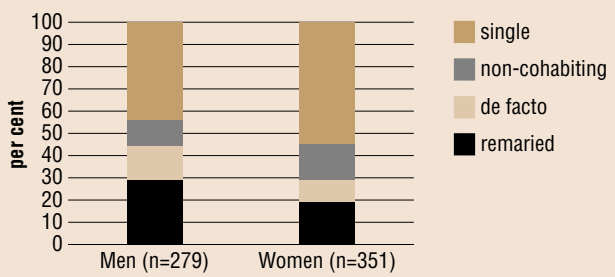
Of the economic resource variables examined, work history was one of the most important determinants of relationship status for women and men. Women who spent more than a third of their former marriage out of paid work were less likely than other women to remarry, and women who had been out of paid work after divorce were less likely to repartner by marriage or de facto relationship. However, higher proportions of both groups of women had a partner with whom they were not living. Some of these women were likely to have been social security recipients and thus would have risked losing their financial support if they moved in to marriage or a 'marriage like' relationship.

Men who were in paid work at the time of separation were more than twice as likely to repartner and almost three times as likely to remarry as other men. The proportion of time spent out of work during the previous marriage and the amount of time spent in work post-separation were also significantly related to their relationship status. It is worth noting that while a quarter of men had time out of work during their former marriage, few *chose* to take time out of work (for example, to pursue alternative lifestyles or non career priorities).

Men with inconsistent work histories had lower economic resources as measured by education, asset wealth at the time of separation, and current income. These characteristics were also associated with low rates of repartnering for men, but their influence was over-ridden by the effect of work history because of considerable overlap between the groups (low education, low income, low asset wealth and inconsistent work histories). In combination, these results suggest that there is a threshold of economic resources below which men are unlikely to repartner.

Women with inconsistent work histories also tended to have lower economic resources (as measured by education and asset wealth). However, women with lower asset wealth on divorce were less likely to repartner regardless of their

Figure 1. Relationship status at the time of interview, by sex



Note 1. p<.001
Note 2. Ten men and eight women were excluded because there were no children of the former marriage, and two women were excluded because relationship status was unknown.
Source: Australian Divorce Transitions Project, Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2000.

work history. Supplementary analyses indicated that women with few resources (low education and minimal asset wealth) were more likely to say that they were the primary 'breadwinners' in their former marriage – that is, that they contributed more financially to the wealth of their former marriage than their former husbands did. Their former marriages were therefore likely to have been under considerable financial pressure.

Women with high levels of resources, as measured by education and asset wealth on divorce, were less likely to remarry than other women, but were more likely to be in de facto and non-cohabiting relationships. This pattern was particularly evident for women with high levels of education, consistent with earlier research by Khoo (1989). However, when asset wealth was included in the model (subsequent to education), education was no longer significant, perhaps because asset wealth is a more direct predictor. These findings indicate that women with greater resources are not less likely to repartner, they are just less likely to remarry.

In particular, women with inconsistent work histories and lower asset wealth were less likely to repartner, and men on the fringes of the labour market were clearly also on the fringes of the 'mating market'. This suggests that unemployment, work insecurity and income inequality are influencing patterns of relationship formation and dissolution in Australia, as Birrell and Rapson (1998) claim.

Low rates of repartnering at the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum may reflect a case of 'marginalised mates'. Birrell and Rapson (1998) contend that women with few resources are unlikely to enter relationships with men with an unreliable income stream. The fact that women with few economic resources were more likely than other women to be the primary 'breadwinners' in their former marriage indicates that they are likely to move in 'mating markets' with men who have been particularly affected by labour market deterioration – men on the fringes of the workforce. This is not to suggest that economic gain motivates repartnering for women. Recent research by Parker (1999) suggests that women with few resources have little intention to repartner after relationship breakdown. Men and women who are unemployed, or in precarious (or insecure) employment, may be socially as well as economically marginalised (Paugam 1995), with fewer opportunities to meet people and establish relationships.

Low rates of repartnering at the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum may reflect a case of 'marginalised mates'

Men with high levels of education and higher income levels did not differ from men with average levels of education and income in terms of their relationship status. However, men with higher asset wealth at the time of separation were less likely to repartner than men with average levels of wealth. While women with higher asset wealth were less likely than other women to remarry but more likely to be in de facto relationships (as previously mentioned), men with higher asset wealth who did repartner were more inclined than other men to formalise new relationships through remarriage.

Post-divorce repartnering trajectories

Consistent with earlier research, men in this study were more likely than women to repartner following divorce. However, while early studies typically found that women with fewer economic resources were more likely to remarry (a finding which gave some fuel to the view that role specialisation was the foundation for 'successful' relationships), the Institute's present study suggests that men and women with few resources are less likely to repartner by marriage or de facto relationship.

In the main, the observed influence of economic resources on repartnering is consistent with the pattern predicted by Birrell and Rapson's (1998) mis-match theory. These authors argue that a growing mis-match between men's and women's economic resources at the lower and upper ends of the socio-economic spectrum has led to a decline in the proportion of men and women in relationships in Australia. In the present study, repartnering was most common among men and women with an 'average' economic profile, which suggests that the 'mating market' is more open or flexible in the middle of the socio-economic spectrum than in the extremes.

The data provided evidence for the existence of a threshold of resources below which men and women are unlikely to repartner by marriage or de facto relationship.

While men and women with an 'average' economic profile appeared the most likely to repartner, on the whole, there were some nuances in the patterns of repartnering of men and women with higher levels of economic resources. Men with higher economic resources were less likely to repartner than men with average economic resources, but those who did repartner tended to remarry. Conversely, women with higher economic resources were less likely to remarry than other women, but were more likely to be in de facto and non-cohabiting relationships. This might indicate that wealthy men are more conservative than other men – that is, they see marriage as more acceptable than co-habitation. Low rates of marriage among women with higher economic resources may reflect a concern for personal autonomy within post-divorce relationships. Previous research indicates that cohabitors are more individualistic than those who are married, and place a higher value on equity within relationships (Glezer 1997).

One dimension of personal autonomy that low rates of marriage among women with high economic resources may reflect is a concern for financial autonomy within post-divorce relationships. Previous research indicates that de facto relationships tend to operate on different 'ground rules' than marriage: not only are cohabitors more likely to share household tasks, they are more likely to keep their finances separate. While the cost of maintaining a single household is obviously less than the cost of maintaining two households, we can not assume that repartnering provides a solution to the economic strain of divorce, nor that it is perceived as such, given the trend towards greater incidence of cohabitation (Glezer 1997).

For the most part, economic resources appeared to have the same influence on repartnering for men and women in this study, but the influence of responsibilities for children on repartnering varied by gender. Women who had responsibility for children all or most of the time (resident mothers) were less likely to repartner than women whose parenting responsibilities were less onerous. In contrast, having primary responsibility for children did not appear to influence men's propensity to repartner.

This gender effect appears at least partly to result from the poverty of sole-mother families in comparison with their sole-father counterparts (see Weston and Smyth elsewhere in this issue of *Family Matters*). Women who had low levels of education and women with low levels of asset wealth were inclined not to share parenting with their former spouse. The combination of primary or total responsibility for children and minimal economic resources may explain low rates of repartnering among these women. This is not to suggest that children should be perceived simply as a barrier to repartnering for women. Parker (1999) found that women with two or more children have little intention to repartner following relationship breakdown. The dynamics of choice for these women are not clear from the survey data.

It is important to note that economic resources and responsibilities for children are only two of the many possible factors explaining gender differences in repartnering rates following divorce. Other factors not examined in this study may interact with these factors, or mediate their effect on repartnering, and thus might help to explain the patterns found here. These factors include psycho-social variables such as values, attitudes and fears concerning relationships. For example, hesitation about forming new relationships following divorce may derive from negative experiences in one's former marriage, such as the experience of spousal violence, which has been found to vary by socio-economic status (Sheehan and Smyth, in press); or a perceived lack of emotional support or intimacy, which has been found to vary by gender (Duncombe and Marsden 1995). However, while many psychological factors may influence whether or not men and women are open to new relationships, this study demonstrates that men's and women's economic resources and responsibilities for children are influential in determining whether or not, and in what form, repartnering actually occurs.

Conclusion

The insights provided by the Institute's *Australian Divorce Transitions Project* suggest that post-divorce repartnering trajectories are not straightforward. While gender remains the most important factor influencing whether or not people repartner following divorce, the interaction between gender and socio-economic resources appears to have changed in the past decade, in line with social and economic change. Women are still less likely than men to repartner following divorce, but women and men with few resources are less likely than other men and women to repartner by marriage or de facto relationship.

In light of concern about high rates of poverty among sole-mother families, earlier Australian Institute of Family Studies research (Funder, Harrison and Weston 1993) highlighted two pathways out of poverty for women following divorce – repartnering, and assistance to re-enter the workforce. This more recent Institute study indicates that these should not be perceived as separate pathways, but rather pathways that merge, as re-entering work appears to be a platform for repartnering for many women.

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