

Role of parental divorce in American patterns of intergenerational helping

Young adults today face many difficulties. They may have trouble finding jobs, or are working in positions with low pay that are below their education or skill level. High divorce rates indicate that some young adults will be dealing with the break-up of a marriage. The increasingly high rates of non-marital child bearing means that there are large numbers of single parents trying to make ends meet. Problems such as these often cause young adults to rely on their parents for support.

At the same time, parents may be experiencing problems of their own. Many of them have divorced, and are dealing with single parenthood or remarriage. This may make it difficult for them to assist their young adult offspring, and they may actually be in need support themselves.

Previous American Research

White (1992) specifically examined the influence of parental divorce and remarriage on the amount of assistance parents gave to their offspring. She looked at three types of support: social (such as listening, giving advice, and companionship), instrumental (including child care, help with transport and housework), and financial support. She found that fathers who were divorced or remarried, and mothers who were divorced (but not those who were remarried) gave less help to their adult offspring in all three areas of support than did parents in intact first marriages.

She attributed the decrease in financial support to the lower earnings and assets of ever-divorced parents. The lesser social and instrumental support appeared to be the result of decreased solidarity between children and their divorced parents, as measured by living greater distances apart, having less contact, and reporting lower quality relationships.

Other researchers have also found that divorced parents gave less help to their adult offspring than did parents in intact marriages (Cooney and Uhlenberg 1992; Hoyert

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discusses the impact of parental divorce
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1991; Umberson 1992). These findings do not bode well for children of divorce.

However, Aquilino (1994) found that young adults did not report receiving less assistance from divorced or remarried parents, with the exception that offspring living with single mothers received less money than those living with continuously married parents. This discrepancy in findings will be discussed later.

New Research

To examine some of these issues, a study was conducted by Paul R. Amato and Sandra J. Rezac at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and Alan Booth at Pennsylvania State University. The purpose of this study was to explore the effects of parental divorce and remarriage on the extent to which young adults believed they could ask for assistance, the amount of assistance parents provided, and whether offspring helped parents. To

Can today's young adults
count on their parents
for assistance as they deal
with the difficulties of
establishing their own
independent lives? And
what about the parents?
As they face their own
problems, do their children
provide support, or simply
drain their sometimes
tenuous resources?

examine these questions we drew on a 12-year longitudinal study that included interviews with an American sample of parents and their young adult offspring.

The data came from the Study of Marital Instability over the Lifecourse, which began

in 1980 with telephone interviews with a random sample of 2033 married persons (not couples). In 1992, interviews were conducted with 471 adult offspring of the original respondents. Their median age was 23 years. Thirty-four per cent were married, and 29 per cent had children of their own. Twenty-seven per cent lived with one or both parents.

Three different aspects of exchanges of assistance, based on questions asked of the children, were examined. First was the likelihood of *requesting help*. Adult offspring were asked how likely they were to call upon their parents if they needed assistance in the following six areas: transport, home or car repairs, other work around the house, advice or encouragement, child care, or a loan or gift of \$US200 or more. Second, they were asked if, in the last two years, they had actually *received help* from, or third, *given help* to, their parents in the same areas (excluding child care in the case of giving help). For respondents with divorced parents, questions were asked separately about mothers/stepfathers and fathers/stepmothers. For each of these three aspects of helping, summary scores were created of the proportion of items on which help was received, given, or likely to be requested.

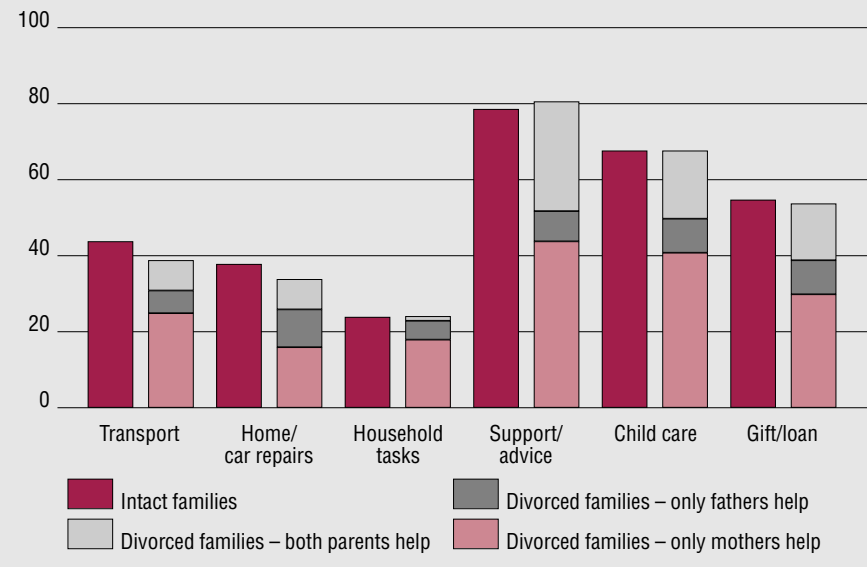
In conceptualising assistance, it was assumed that help was exchanged between households rather than individuals. This meant that in cases where parents were married and sharing a household, help from (or to) one parent implied help from (or to) the other. For example, if the parents are married, a gift or loan of money from one parent would decrease household income for both. Consequently, separate measures of assistance were not constructed for mothers and fathers when they shared the same household. In cases of divorce, we were concerned with the extent to which children exchanged help with fathers (and stepmothers, if remarried) and with mothers (and stepfathers, if remarried) relative to parents in continuously intact marriages.

Parental divorce and remarriage

We first looked at the three aspects of helping between parents and young adults, comparing young adults from intact parental households with those who had single and remarried mothers and fathers. Young adults were less likely to feel they could request help from divorced fathers, received less help from them, and gave less help to them than to parents in intact families, regardless of whether or not the fathers had remarried. It appeared that following parental divorce young adults relied less on their fathers for assistance, and gave them less assistance. This could reflect the greater likelihood of children living with their mothers following divorce, and having less contact with their fathers.

Offspring from both intact and divorced families appear to be getting the same amount of parental assistance.

Figure 1. *Per cent of young adults receiving help from parents by parental family structure*



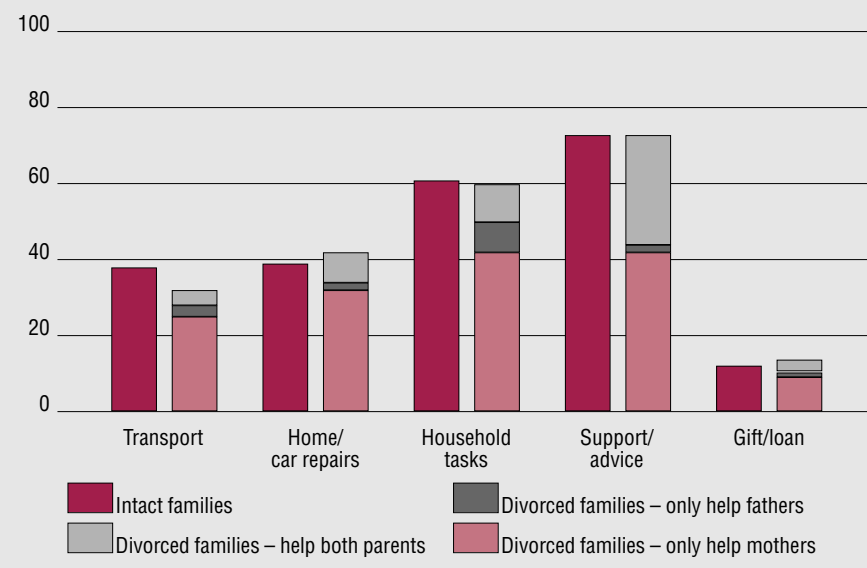
For mothers of young adults the findings were not as straightforward. Remarriage seemed to be an important factor in the relationship with mothers, where it was not with fathers. Young adults were less inclined to ask single or remarried mothers for assistance, compared with parents in intact families. Offspring actually received the same amount of help from remarried mothers and parents in intact families, but less from single mothers. They gave the same amount of help to single mothers and intact families, but slightly less to remarried mothers.

The finding that offspring received less help from single mothers than remarried mothers or parents in intact families, but gave them more probably reflects the general notion that single mothers have fewer

resources. If the mothers had remarried, however, their offspring received as much assistance from them as from intact families. It seems likely that mothers who remarry have greater resources than single mothers, and can help offspring more. Offspring were less inclined to help remarried mothers, possibly reflecting the tension which is sometimes found in stepfamilies.

This last idea is supported by the results of taking into account the amount of affection between the parents and children, as measured by six questions asked of the children about parental understanding, trust, respect, fairness, affection, and overall closeness. The findings for single mothers changed very little, but the gaps between remarried and continuously married parents in asking for and giving help closed by about three-quarters. This suggests that offspring gave less help to remarried mothers because they felt less close to them than to continuously married parents.

Figure 2. *Per cent of young adults giving help to parents by parental family structure*



Overall exchange of help

Our next question concerned the overall level of assistance received and given by offspring. Following divorce, children have two households rather than one with which to exchange assistance. It is probable, therefore, that although these children exchange comparatively less help with parents in each household, the sum of the help from both is comparable with that exchanged between children and continuously married parents.

Figures 1 and 2 show the percentage of young adults who exchanged various types of help with their parents, dependent upon the marital status of the parents. The first bar for each type of help shows the results for offspring whose parents are in intact first marriages. The second bar shows the cumulative help from divorced parents, separating the contributions of mothers only, fathers only, and both parents. This last category of 'both parents' does not duplicate the help reported from just one parent or the other, but rather it reflects only the cases where offspring actually received help from both the mothers' and fathers' households.

Figure 1 shows how much help young adults reported receiving from their parents. The largest amount of assistance came in the area of support/advice, with roughly 80 per cent of the young adults reporting having received this type of help from their parents. The least assistance was reported with household tasks, with only 24 per cent receiving this type of help.

The most striking finding is that offspring from both intact and divorced families appear to be getting the same amount of help. For example, 44 per cent of young adults from intact families reported receiving help with transport, while a total of 39 per cent of those from divorced families reported receiving the same type of help. This 5 per cent difference in help with transport was the largest difference between the intact and divorced families across the six measures of receiving help from parents. In fact, for two of the six areas the percentages were identical, and for one area, support/advice, the offspring of divorced families received more help than those from intact families.

Of divorced parents giving this assistance, mothers were far more likely to give help than fathers. For example, of the 39 per cent who received help with transport, 25 per cent received help from their mothers but not their fathers, 6 per cent received help from their fathers only, and 8 per cent received help from both parents. The pattern was similar for other types of help received.

Figure 2 shows that young adults were more likely to give their parents support or advice than any other form of assistance,

with 73 per cent reporting this type of help. The least common form of help given to parents was a gift or loan of \$200 or more, with only about 12 per cent having done this. Again, we find that roughly the same amount of help was being given to divorced and intact parents, with the largest difference being only 6 per cent.

Interesting patterns emerge when the two Figures are compared. Parents and young adults were each giving and receiving similar amounts of help with transport, home or car repairs, and support or advice. Young adults were much more likely to give than receive help with household tasks, likely reflecting at least in part the fact that roughly one fourth of the offspring currently lived with one or both parents. While 55 per cent of the young adults received a gift or loan of \$200 or more, only about 12 per cent of the young adults gave this to their parents, showing that they were not as secure financially as their parents. Overall, young adults exchanged as much help with divorced parents as with parents in intact first marriages.

Parental marital quality

Previous research suggests that parental marital discord is associated with less contact and affection between adult offspring and their parents (Booth and Amato 1994; Cooney 1994; Rossi and Rossi 1990). One could argue that parental conflict, rather than divorce, affects the extent of help exchanged between generations. Because we have data on parents' marriages prior to divorce it was possible to assess this, but we found that parental marital quality was not a key factor. There was some evidence that parental marital quality was related to children's willingness to request assistance from their parents, but this relationship was modest and was accounted for by lowered affection for both mothers and fathers.

Furthermore, we found no evidence that parental marital quality had later consequences for the actual giving and receiving of assistance.

To summarise, adult offspring were less likely to request help from divorced parents than from parents in intact first marriages. Divorce also decreased the actual amount of help exchanged between fathers and offspring, but not between mothers and offspring. Single mothers received more but gave less help to their children than did mothers in first or subsequent marriages. Remarried mothers gave as much assistance as did first married mothers, but received less. Finally, when account was taken of the fact that children of divorce had two parental households instead of one, they received and gave as much support as did children from intact families.

Conflicting Research

The finding that children of divorce were not disadvantaged with respect to everyday exchanges of support is generally in accordance with Aquilino (1994), but conflicts with findings by White (1992) and others described earlier. There appears to be an important difference in who was interviewed. Like Aquilino, we used reports from the adult offspring, while the other studies generally relied on reports from the parents.

Parents can only report on the assistance that people in their own households are giving to the offspring. This is an accurate account of the amount of help young adults are getting from their parents if the interviewed parent is living with the child's other parent. However, if the parent is divorced, he/she cannot report how much help the child may be getting from the other parent's household. This is likely to lead to an under-reporting of the help being given to offspring with divorced parents.

The same is true for the help offspring give to their parents. If it is split across two households, each parent would be likely to report getting less help from his or her children, while the children may actually be giving the same amount of help.

Conclusions

What have we learned as a result of this study? First, the deprivation experienced by single mothers affected the levels of exchange between mothers and children. Offspring of single mothers gave more and received less than offspring of mothers in first marriages and remarriages. Second, remarried mothers gave as much as first married mothers, but received less. While this put remarried mothers at a disadvantage, unlike single mothers they had the support of a new partner. Third, the opportunity for the children of divorce to draw on two households appeared to make up for the lower support received from each household. Finally, parents' marital quality had little influence on the exchange of aid between parents and adult offspring. Overall, what we saw was a picture of family members adapting to alterations in family structure in a way that minimised the effects of these changes by maintaining patterns of needed support.

One can ask if the findings from a study of American respondents can be generalised to Australian offspring. Researchers have generally found that Australians also turn to their extended family, particularly their parents, for assistance with financial, practical, and emotional matters (see, for example, d'Abbs 1991; and Millward 1992).

In discussing the findings from an Australian study of 23-year-olds, Hartley (1992a) indicated that following parental divorce, young adults often experienced strained relationships with their parents, particularly their fathers. After the initial difficulties, they tended to become closer to their mothers. Using the same dataset, Hartley (1992b), also noted that adult children of divorce were more likely to keep in contact

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with their mothers than their fathers. The young adults reported that they relied on their parents, but particularly their mothers, for support. These findings are all largely consistent with American findings, suggesting that the Australian patterns of intergenerational exchange following parental divorce are likely to be similar to what we found in the United States.

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