Explaining the intergenerational transmission of divorce: Effects of deprivation or social learning?

O. Arránz Becker
P.B. Hill
RWTH Aachen

There is substantial literature showing that children from families with separated or divorced parents themselves have a higher risk of marital instability. Several theoretical approaches have been used to explain this phenomenon. Firstly, it has been claimed that disruption of the parents’ marriage reduces availability of economic resources and thus facilitates leaving home and marrying early which are known risk factors to marital stability. Similarly, a second explanation focuses on the stress generated by the parents’ divorce, “pushing” children out of their homes and into the marital bonds with their partners before having acquired the necessary skills to fulfil spousal roles. A third approach argues that in divorce families, children tend to learn adverse interaction styles and perceptions of the marital relationship and apply them to their own intimate relationships in their later lives, rendering them vulnerable to relationship instability. These perceptions and behaviours include adverse cognitive working models, reliance on dysfunctional interaction patterns, a strong focus on relationship conflict, the belief that divorce is an appropriate means of resolving marital problems, a less traditional view of marriage, and possibly a lower degree of commitment to close relationships in general.

In the empirical research done so far, it can be observed that social learning explanations have been neglected in favour of the other two approaches. The present study addresses this issue, using data from a German study conducted at the RWTH Aachen. Male and female subjects (N=2041), socialised in the Eastern and Western parts of Germany, were interviewed by telephone about diverse determinants of relationship stability. The measured predictors consist of both sociodemographic and couple interaction variables, along with indicators of the degree of conflict within the relationship.

Basically, the transmission effect is replicated for married and unmarried subjects from Eastern and Western Germany. In addition to this, the role of various factors as mediators of this effect is confirmed. Specifically, most of the transmission effect is accounted for by a particular perceptual focus on conflict, a younger age at cohabitation with the current partner, adverse working models and couple interaction patterns, and a general reluctance to institutionalise the relationship. Controlling for these constructs reduces the effect of parents’ on childrens’ relationship stability to insignificance. Therefore, future studies predicting childrens’ divorce from their parents’ marital success should extend their scope by assessing aspects of perception and behaviour within romantic relationships.