

Becoming Step-Fathers: Union Formation with Single Mothers

Abstract

While much of the current attention to promoting marriage focuses on barriers to marriage among single mothers, relatively little is known about the attributes of men willing to partner with single mothers. I use data from the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth to examine what characterizes men who become step-fathers, the type of union into which they enter, and the tempo of progression into coresidence. No previous studies have examined whether the pace of progression differs for men entering into step-fathering relationships relative to those forming relationships with women who do not have coresidential children. Preliminary results indicate men are more likely to enter into unions with childless women. Those who partner with single mothers are more likely to cohabit than marry. Furthermore, progression into coresidential unions is considerably more rapid for men becoming step-fathers than for those entering unions with women with no children.

The dramatic transformations in family formation processes have recently taken front stage in contemporary public policy debates. The share of births occurring outside of marital unions reached an all-time high in the early years of the twenty-first century (Ventura et al. 2001), and divorce rates, while declining, remain quite high (Goldstein 1999; Raley and Bumpass 2003). Many divorced individuals subsequently remarry, though the shares have been declining in recent years, largely offset by increases in cohabitation (Bumpass, Sweet, and Cherlin 1991). While American adults are also delaying marriage (Martin 2004), they are not foregoing romantic or coresidential relationships (Bumpass, Sweet, and Cherlin 1991). Between 1980 and 1990 the number of cohabiting couple households increased by 80 percent; in the following decade, it grew by 71 percent (Simmons and O'Connell 2003; U.S. Census Bureau 2001). More than half of all young adults in their 20s and 30s have lived with (at least one) opposite-sex partner without being married (Bumpass and Sweet 1995; Raley 2000).

High levels of relationship flux have resulted in an increasingly complex partner market. The composition of single mothers has changed, with substantial shares having never married, in contrast to previous decades when mothers responsible for raising their children were either widows or divorcees. Whereas parents were once less likely to either divorce or enter into a cohabiting relationship, this is no longer the case. Half of remarried couples in the United States have children in the household, 41% of cohabiting couples have children with them, and 15% had a child after they began living together (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989; Stewart, Manning, & Smock, 2003). Furthermore, children are frequently spread out across several households, as more than half of coresidential stepparents also have children who live elsewhere (Stewart, Manning, & Smock, 2003). Hence, a substantial proportion of adults at risk of entering a new coresidential union have children, either living with them or tied to them emotionally and financially.

Because women disproportionately retain custody for minor children following relationship dissolution, the pool of eligible women from which men can choose prospective mates contains a fairly large share of women who already have children from previous relationships. Yet while the effect of children on women's likelihood of forming new relationships has been extensively studied (Carlson and McLanahan 2004; Chiswick and Lehrer 1990; Graefe and Lichter 1999, 2002; Koo, Suchindran, and Griffith 1986; Qian, Lichter, and Mellott 2005; Lichter, Graefe, and Brown 2003; Teachman and Heckert 1985), less research has examined what role children play in men's decisions to enter into new relationships. While men have historically often played social fathers to partners' coresidential children, relatively little is known regarding how a prospective partner's children shape the kind of relationship into which men enter. Are the men who choose to assume the role of social father of lower quality than men who partner with childless women? Can men offer less commitment to women who have children from previous relationships? Because not all fathering statuses are equivalent, both in their stability as well as ramifications for and impacts upon children (Cooksey and Fondell 1996; McLanahan 2002; Yeung et al. 2000), and because of recent policy efforts to increase marriage among single parents (Lichter et al. 2003), it is important to understand which men are willing to join a family that contains another man's children.

Current Research on Step-Fathering

A small but growing body of scholarship has begun to explore factors shaping men's entrance into fathering situations (Anderson 2000; Bernhardt and Goldscheider 2001, 2002; Clarkberg et al. 1995; Goldscheider and Sassler 2006; Hofferth and Anderson 2003; Nock 1998; Stewart, Manning, and Smock 2001, 2003; Sweeney 1997). These studies have progressed in stages, moving from initial examination of factors shaping men's likelihood of remarrying, to more complex examinations of how custodial and non-custodial children influence marriage (Stewart 20XX). Most recently, studies have expanded the definition of unions to also incorporate informal arrangements, such as cohabitation. To date, however, only two studies have examined partners' children as an attribute of the relationship entered (Bernhardt and Goldscheider 2002; Goldscheider and Sassler 2006).

Various theoretical explanations have been offered to explain the negative proclivity to assume the role of stepfather. Both exchange theory and a growing body of research on evolutionary biology suggests that men may be uninterested in providing resources for children to whom they are not biologically related (Anderson 2000; Anderson and Hofferth 2003), or unwilling to contribute financially to another man's child (Lampard and Peggs 1999). These perspectives suggest that men willing to become step-parents should be of lower socioeconomic status than those entering child-free unions. Men are presumed to prefer investment in biological children, as a symbol of marital capital (Becker 1974). In fact, a survey of single men found that willingness to marry a woman who already had children declined with greater earnings levels as well as educational attainment; the formerly married and older, on the other hand, expressed greater acceptance of marriage to a single mother (Goldscheider and Kaufman 2006; South 1991).

Either perspective suggests that respondents of higher social status should be less likely to become step-parents, a finding that is consistent with prior research on step-father families in the United States (Anderson 2000; Goldscheider and Sassler 2006), as well as in Sweden (Bernhardt and Goldscheider 2002). In other words, step-fathers may be negatively selected. For example, Anderson (2000) suggests that non-biological fathers may differ in various ways from biological fathers. For example, they may be less attractive partners because their earnings are low, or they may choose to marry a single mother because they are unable to find a childless woman willing to marry them (Anderson 2000). The data support this assertion; stepfathers and cohabiting father figures earn considerably less than married biological father (Hofferth and Anderson 2003).

Unexplored in these studies is the array of union types that men can potentially enter – they only examine marriage, not cohabitation or even remaining in dating relationships. Individuals in weaker bargaining positions may choose cohabiting unions over marriage. In fact, research on cohabitators finds they are selectively different from those who marry without first living together, in that they are generally of lower socioeconomic status, with less education and more unstable marital histories (Blackwell and Lichter 2000; Bumpass et al. 1991; Clarkberg 1999; Sassler and Goldscheider 2004; Sassler and McNally 2003). Schoen and Owens (1992) suggest that cohabitation may be a particularly attractive bargain for men who lack attributes that signify the ability to be a good provider. Recent research on the union outcomes of single mothers finds that those

who do enter into new coresidential marriages are less well-matched than married women who are childless (Lichter, Qian, and Mellott 2006; Qian, Lichter, and Mellott 2005).

Data and Methods

Data are from the recently released 2002 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG). The NSFG is a periodic household survey that investigates topics related to childbearing and reproductive health. Earlier waves limited their data collection to women. Cycle 6, conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) for the first time included men. In-person interviews were conducted from January 2002 through March of 2003. The NSFG is based on an area probability sample that represents the household population of the United States that is 15 to 44 years of age. Teenagers, African Americans, and Hispanics were oversampled. In order to improve the quality of data gathered in sensitive subjects, computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI) was used. The survey sample is designed to produce nationally representative data. In person-interviews were completed with 4,928 males.

The NSFG is a cross-sectional survey, with detailed questions designed to ascertain the dates of births, the initiation and conclusion of sexual relationships, as well as start dates for coresidential living arrangements such as cohabitation and marriage. The male component of the 2002 NSFG covers topics related to family formation and fertility and reproductive health, similar to the subjects assessed for the women's survey. Men were also asked about their activities with children and support of children with whom they did not live.

A major strength of the NSFG data is that it includes retrospective cohabitation, marriage, and fertility histories, as well as sexual relationships that were not coresidential. In other words, it includes parenting experiences not only of previously married and cohabiting men, but also for men who were never married, or were not living with a sexual partner at the conception and birth of a child. Nonetheless, parenting data for men is notoriously problematic. For one thing, men substantially underreport their parental status (Rendall et al. 1999), particularly when they are not married to their sexual partners. Furthermore, while information on the number of children men knew about was obtained, detailed information on these children's living arrangements (as well as whether and how they had changed over time) was not gathered. It is therefore not possible to determine whether the men in my sample were custodial parents, if children lived with them part-time, or even their involvement with their children at the time they entered into their relationship. These are important limitations (Stewart 2003). Furthermore, custodial fathers have been found to be more likely to remarry a woman who also has children (Goldscheider and Sassler 2006). Nonetheless, mothers continue to disproportionately retain custody for minor children. And reasons for paternal custody are often related to negative maternal behaviors (Hamer and Marchioro 2002).

For those who had been involved in a sexual relationship within the past twelve months prior to the survey, detailed information was ascertained regarding union status. Cohabiting men are distinguished from the married; relationship histories also allows us to ascertain if men cohabited prior to entering their marriage. The NSFG is unique in obtaining information on the start-date of sexual relationships for *all* men. For men who are neither married nor living with their partner, information on their most recent sexual partner is obtained. Several questions on partner attributes are next used to determine if

men's sexual partners were parents at the beginning of the relationship (as well as the number of children she had). This is used in conjunction with the information on relationship type to construct the type of union into which men entered – partnerships with childless women, and relationships with mothers. I am differentiate entrance into marital, cohabiting, and sexual non-coresidential unions with single mothers. Those men who reported having no sexual relationships in the past twelve months were classified as having no relationship. This group includes those men who reported never having had sexual relations with a woman, a group composed disproportionately of younger men.

Dependent Variable: Union and Step-Parent Status

I construct discrete types of union status for all men involved in a sexual relationship in the past year. Marital status information and data on the parenting status of partners upon the beginning of the union are utilized to differentiate between seven relationship possibilities: 1) Marriage to a childless woman; 2) Marriage to a single mother; 3) Cohabitation with a childless woman; 4) Cohabitation with a single mother; 5) Dating a childless woman; 6) Dating a single mother. An additional group was constructed to incorporate men who had not been involved in a sexual relationship in the prior year, which I refer to as; 7) Uninvolved. Modeling will involve estimating multinomial logistic regressions of the likelihood that a man entered into one of these union types. Because the majority of all marriages, particularly remarriages, are now preceded by a period of cohabitation (Raley 2001), marital unions are disaggregated into those preceded by a period of living together and whether that partner had children from a prior relationship, and those that did not begin with a cohabitation trial. This enables me to determine if those who cohabit prior to marriage differ in significant ways from those who do not relating to their proclivity for step-parenting.

The focus here is on the last (sexual) relationship that men identified. Not all of these relationships were intact at the time of the interview. Relationship dissolution was greatest among dating men; men identified these as no longer intact about 35 percent of the time for daters. Because we are interested in men's willingness to enter into romantic relationships of any kind based on the presence of children, we retain these unions.

Preliminary analyses examine the sample size of the different family structures described above, and for coresidential unions I also examine the timing of union formation. Table 1 indicates the family structure into which men entered if they had been involved in a sexual relation in the prior year. These initial results highlight the wide range of union possibilities available for men, as well as the various routes into step-parenting relationships men can take. They also suggest that men have a strong preference for unions that do not already contain children. The proportions of men entering into step-parenting relationships, whether via marriage, cohabitation, or dating, were considerably smaller than the shares of men who married, lived with, or dated childless women. Focusing first on the aggregate union outcomes reveals that men were about four times more likely to marry a woman with no children as they were to wed a single mother. The discrepancy was not as great among cohabiting men (who have not transitioned to marriage), as they were only about twice as likely to live with childless women than they were to reside with a single mother. But for men in dating relationships, preferences for partners with no prior children are again evident, with only

10.4% of men dating single mothers, compared to 38.3% of men reporting dating a woman with no prior children.

Table 1. Family Structure into Which Men Entered in Last Relationship*

	Aggregate Union Outcomes		Discrete Union Outcomes	
	%	N	%	N
Married, Partner did not have children	24.08	962		
Married Directly			12.49	499
Cohabited first			11.59	463
Married, Partner had children	6.13	245		
Married Directly			1.33	53
Cohabited first			4.81	192
Cohabit, Partner did not have children	6.03	241	6.03	241
Cohabit, Partner did have children	3.13	125	3.13	125
Date, Partner did not have children	38.30	1,530	38.30	1,530
Date, Partner did have children	10.41	416	10.41	416
No sexual relationship in past 12 months	11.91	476	11.91	476
N		3,995		3,995

* Unweighted

Race differences in men’s union formation patterns are presented in Table 2. To prevent small sample sizes, marriages are presented as a whole, rather than disaggregated by whether they were preceded or not by a period of cohabitation. As expected, Black men are more likely than whites to enter relationships with mothers. This holds across all relationship types. Relative to white men, black men were twice as likely to marry women with children, cohabit with mothers, as well as date women with children.

[Table 2 About Here]

Table 2. Family Structure into Which Men Entered in Last Relationship, by Race and Ethnicity*

	All Men		White Men		Black Men		Hispanic Men		Other Men	
	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N
Married, Partner did not have children	24.08	962	24.31	499	13.71	112	32.72	303	24.24	48
Married, Partner had children	6.13	245	5.85	120	8.08	66	5.18	48	5.56	11
Cohabit, Partner did not have children	6.03	241	5.36	110	4.65	38	8.75	81	6.06	12
Cohabit, Partner did have children	3.13	125	2.05	42	4.65	38	4.43	41	2.02	4
Date, Partner did not have children	38.30	1,530	40.67	835	40.39	330	31.86	295	35.35	70
Date, Partner did have children	10.41	416	9.06	186	18.24	149	7.24	67	6.57	13
No sexual relationship in past 12 months	11.91	476	12.71	261	10.28	84	9.83	91	20.20	40
N		3,995		2,053		817		926		198

* Unweighted

Preliminary analyses on the pace of relationship progression also indicate that the tempo of union formation was significantly more rapid when partners had children than when they did not. Future analyses will determine whether these distinctions remain net of controls for a range of background characteristics available, such as age at union, number of previous sexual partners, social class and family structure while growing up.