

# TRENDS IN THE INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF DIVORCE\*

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*I use data from the 1973–1996 NORC General Social Survey to examine trends in the intergenerational transmission of divorce, the propensity for the children of divorce to end their own marriages. The rate of divorce transmission declined by almost 50% in the study period. This result was essentially unchanged by statistical controls for various personal and family background differences between respondents.*

Numerous researchers have shown that the children of divorce are disproportionately likely to end their own marriages (e.g., Amato 1996; Amato and Booth 1991; Bumpass, Martin, and Sweet 1991; Glenn and Kramer 1987; Kulka and Weingarten 1979; McLanahan and Bumpass 1988; Mueller and Pope 1977; Pope and Mueller 1976). These studies span 20 years, a period in which the divorce rate rose appreciably. Social acceptance of divorce has also increased. These developments may have altered the relationship between parental divorce and offspring divorce. Using data from all years of the NORC General Social Survey (GSS) except 1972,<sup>1</sup> I examine trends in the intergenerational transmission of divorce over the last 25 years.

This topic has seen limited research attention. In a meta-analysis, Amato and Keith (1991) found that recent studies reveal smaller negative effects of parental divorce than do older studies. Kulka and Weingarten (1979), comparing estimates from surveys conducted in 1957 and 1976, found no consistent changes in rates of divorce transmission. Using data from a single cross section, McLanahan and Bumpass (1988) found that the rate of divorce transmission did not vary for respondents from different birth cohorts. The current research, capitalizing on the repeated administrations of the GSS, offers a strong test for change in divorce transmission.

How can the basic phenomenon of divorce transmission be explained? Divorce sometimes has negative psychological effects on children (see Amato and Keith 1991 for review) that last into adulthood (Amato and Booth 1991;

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1. The 1972 GSS did not include the necessary measures of parental family structure.

Cherlin, Chase-Lansdale, and McRae 1998). Perhaps as a result, the adult children of divorce more often report low levels of marital satisfaction than do people from intact families (Amato and Booth 1991; Glenn and Kramer 1985). Recent evidence suggests that impaired interpersonal skills play a strong role in explaining the intergenerational transmission of divorce (Amato 1996).

## WHY THE RATE OF DIVORCE TRANSMISSION MAY HAVE CHANGED

Throughout the twentieth century Americans became more accepting of divorce (Phillips 1991), especially between the early 1960s and the late 1970s (Thornton 1989; see also Cherlin 1992). As the stigma surrounding divorce diminished, its harmful consequences for children may have lessened. This may have reduced the likelihood that these children dissolved their own marriages in the 1980s and 1990s.

Changing attitudes toward divorce may have two distinct consequences for youths whose parents divorce. First, as divorce has become more common and people have become more accepting of it, children in divorced families may suffer less stigmatization, either real or imagined. In the past, when divorce was less common (see, for example, Cherlin 1992), single mothers and their children were frequently harassed or ostracized (Phillips 1991). Under these conditions, children may have been less likely to develop normal relationships with their peers, mothers, or grandparents. This experience may have made divorce more traumatic for children, thereby leading to higher rates of divorce transmission earlier in the study period.

A second consequence of the increased acceptance of divorce may be the changing circumstances under which couples choose to end their marriages. In the absence of no-fault divorce laws, a couple desiring a divorce often needed to demonstrate the total and absolute deterioration of their relationship. Normative expectations persuaded quarreling couples to “stick it out” under circumstances such as domestic violence that today would be readily recognized as reasonable grounds for divorce. When couples finally ended their marriages, the situation may have deteriorated far more than is typical in divorces today, thereby bringing greater harm to children.

## METHODS

### Data

This research uses data from the General Social Survey (GSS; Davis and Smith 1996). The GSS, a national probabil-

ity sample of English-speaking households within the continental United States, has been conducted annually or biennially since 1972. Within each household, an adult aged 18–89 is randomly selected to be the respondent. I use all data for the years 1973–1996, excluding the black oversamples in 1982 and 1987.

The GSS sampling unit is the household, so respondents from larger households are underrepresented. I therefore weighted the data according to household size (see Davis and Smith 1996: appendix A). I repeated the analysis without the weights and obtained almost identical results.

The sample size for all analyses is 21,963. Cases with missing data were deleted listwise for all variables except parental education (an additional dummy variable was coded for missing data), occupational status (missing data were set to the sample mean with a dummy variable for missing data), and age at first marriage (missing data were set to the conditional median according to respondent family background, with a dummy variable for missing data).<sup>2</sup>

### Variables

The dependent measure in all analyses is whether a respondent reported ever having been divorced. I formed a single dichotomous measure by merging information from two questions: one inquiring whether a respondent has ever been divorced and the other asking respondents about current marital status. The coding for all variables appears in Appendix Table A1. Never-married respondents were excluded from the analysis.

Twenty-eight percent of respondents from divorced families and 18% from intact families never married. If the propensity of the children of divorce to marry decreased substantially over the study period, any observed decline in the rate of divorce transmission could reflect sample selection bias. Although event-history analyses (results not shown) reveal a decline in the likelihood that children from divorced families will marry, the effect size is modest: less than one fourth of the magnitude of the decline in the rate of divorce transmission. Decreased selection into marriage by people from nonintact families can therefore explain, at best, a small portion of the decline in the intergenerational transmission of divorce.

The GSS includes two items that measure the structure of respondents' families of origin. Respondents were first queried about household composition at age 16. If respondents were not living with both biological parents, a second item ascertained the reason. My analysis is based on the 83% of GSS respondents from intact two-parent families, mother-only families resulting from divorce or separation, or mother/stepfather families resulting from divorce or separation. Respondents reporting other living arrangements and those whose living arrangements at age 16 were the product of pa-

2. None of the 1996 respondents and half of the 1994 respondents were queried about age at first marriage. Because these respondents combined with all others missing data on this item compose only 13% of the sample, I did not omit them. Repeating the analysis without these cases produced similar results.

rental military service, parental incarceration, or parental death were omitted from the sample.

The family-structure items were recoded as a dummy variable measuring whether a respondent hailed from a divorced family. Individual dummy variables for single-mother parenting and stepparenting did not significantly improve model fit.<sup>3</sup>

I control for parental education to rule out the possibility that divorce transmission is simply an artifact of low socioeconomic well-being in the family of origin. For respondents reared in intact families and stepfamilies, I use the higher level of education between the two parents. For respondents from mother-only families, I use mothers' education. Measures of income or occupational status are preferable but are not available. An item that asks respondents to recall their families' economic well-being almost certainly fails to provide accurate recollections.

On average, adults reared in nonintact households complete fewer years of schooling (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994) and fare less well vocationally (Biblarz and Raftery 1993). To ascertain whether the intergenerational transmission of divorce is simply the result of diminished socioeconomic well-being, I use two measures of respondent's socioeconomic status: education and occupational prestige.<sup>4</sup>

Researchers have shown that various other characteristics of respondents may affect the relationship between parental divorce and respondents' divorce. I ascertain whether the following characteristics affect trends in the rate of divorce transmission: race (see Bumpass et al. 1991; Glenn and Kramer 1987; McLanahan and Bumpass 1988), presence of siblings (see Mueller and Pope 1977), Catholicism (see McLanahan and Bumpass 1988), rural origins (see Pope and Mueller 1976), and gender (see Amato 1996; Glenn and Kramer 1987; Kulka and Weingarten 1979). Controlling for gender is especially important because men often fail to report their own divorces (Bumpass et al. 1991). Based on preliminary analyses, I add an interaction between parental divorce and Catholicism to the final model.<sup>5</sup>

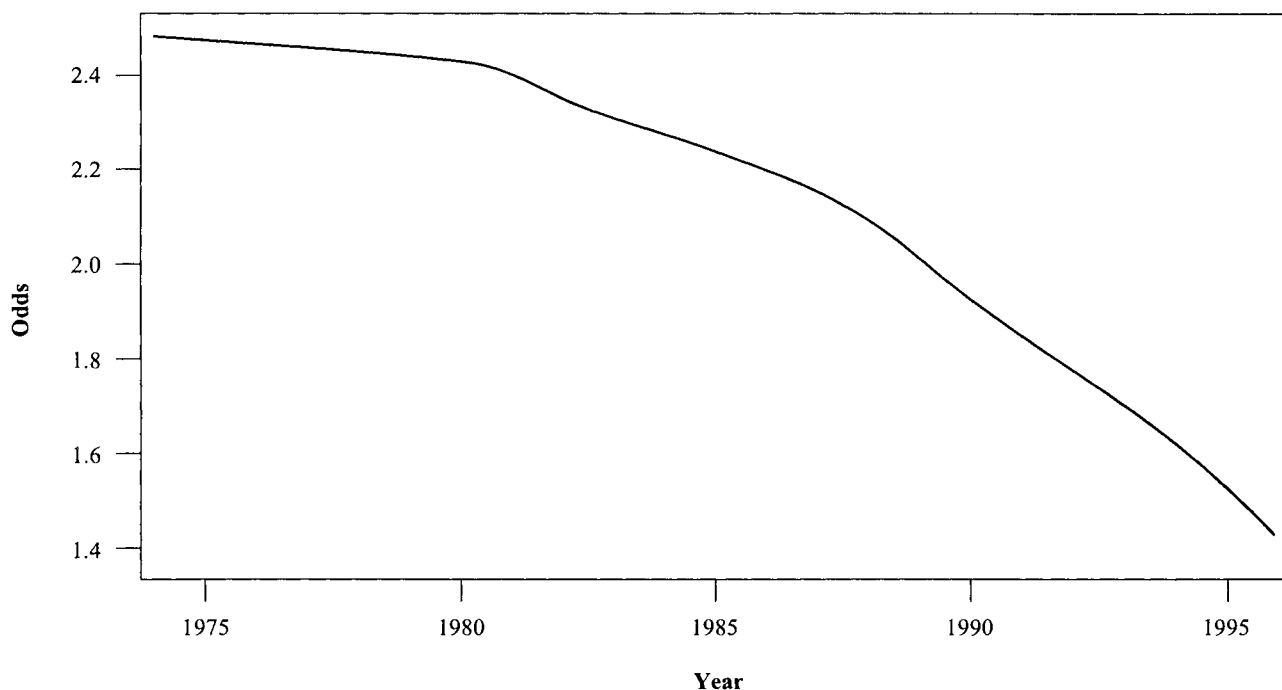
Finally, I include in all models a variable measuring the difference between the respondent's age at the interview and age at first marriage. As this variable serves a methodological rather than a substantive purpose, I discuss it with the analysis.

3. One shortcoming of the GSS is its lack of detailed measures of family structure: It is impossible to identify respondents whose parents divorced more than once. Multiple disruptions worsen the lot of children (see, for example, Amato and Booth 1991; Wu 1996). Because many more respondents from recent cohorts have experienced multiple disruptions, measurement error as a product of the GSS family-structure variables should bias results toward an *increase* in the rate of divorce transmission over the years of the study.

4. I do not use income as a control variable because it is often sharply affected by respondent's divorce, making it hard to determine whether low income is a cause or consequence of divorce.

5. Interactions between Catholicism and survey year and between Catholicism, survey year, and parental divorce were nonsignificant. Moreover, additional analyses revealed that rates of divorce transmission did not vary significantly by respondent's sex, race, or education or by parent's education.

FIGURE 1. LOWESS MODEL VERIFYING LINEARITY IN DECLINE OF DIVORCE TRANSMISSION, 1973–1996 (SPAN = 0.7)



## NONPARAMETRIC ANALYSIS

I hypothesize a reduction in the rate of divorce transmission but have no a priori basis for specifying the functional form of this decrease. Accordingly, I conduct a nonparametric analysis that will justify the functional form specified in the subsequent analyses.

In the nonparametric analysis, I estimate a series of logistic regression models:

$$\log(p / 1 - p) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 F + \beta_2(\text{AGE} - \text{AGEWED}), \quad (1)$$

where  $p$  is the probability of personal divorce,  $\beta_0$  is the constant,  $F$  is the dummy variable measuring family structure of origin, and  $\beta_2(\text{AGE} - \text{AGEWED})$  is a piecewise linear spline with knots at 6 and 17 (see below). In this expression, AGE is the respondent's age and AGEWED is the age at which each respondent first married.

This is not an optimal analytic strategy. Respondents' divorce is right-censored; that is, respondents may still dissolve a marriage after the interview. Survival modeling is preferable for this situation, but the GSS does not provide information on divorce timing and therefore lacks adequate data for survival modeling.

To contend with right-censoring, I use a procedure similar to that employed by Glenn and Kramer (1987). I construct a new variable by subtracting age at first marriage from current age. A lowess model revealed a curvilinear and non-monotonic relationship (not shown) between respondents'

divorce and  $(\text{AGE} - \text{AGEWED})$ , so I model the difference between them as a piecewise linear spline. Including this term in regression equations should largely ameliorate the right-censoring bias by modeling the duration of exposure to the hazard of divorce.<sup>6</sup>

To explore trends in the rate of divorce transmission, I combine adjacent years of GSS data into 10 periods, each containing approximately 2,000 or more respondents.<sup>7</sup> For each of the 10 groups, Model 1 is estimated. This produces a rate of divorce transmission for each group. These rates are then plotted against survey year using lowess smoothers. The result, a nonparametric depiction of trends in the rate of divorce transmission, is shown in Figure 1.

In Figure 1, the abscissa represents survey year, and the ordinate depicts the increased odds of divorce for respondents from divorced families compared with those from intact families. The plotted line suggests that respondents from divorced families have experienced a near-linear decline in the rate of divorce transmission. Before 1975, respondents from divorced families were about 2.5 times more likely to have dissolved their marriages than were people from intact families. By 1995, parental divorce increased the likelihood of personal divorce by less than 50%.

6. This constructed variable is highly correlated with respondent's age:  $r = .41, .71,$  and  $.93$  for the three segments of the spline. Therefore, I cannot include age as a control variable.

7. Low prevalence of divorce, particularly from early survey years, prevents me from estimating separate models for each survey year.

The nonparametric analysis suggests linearity in the decline in the rate of divorce transmission. Therefore in subsequent analyses I constrain the attenuation to linearity to facilitate the inclusion of covariates.

### PARAMETRIC ANALYSIS

Table 1 shows the results of the parametric analysis, where all survey years are pooled and divorce transmission is constrained to a linear decline across each successive year.<sup>8</sup> In the additive model, parental divorce substantially increases the likelihood of respondents' divorce (Model 1). But have rates of divorce transmission diminished over time? Model 2 reveals a negative and statistically significant ( $p < .01$ ) interaction between parental divorce and survey year, confirming a decrease over time in the rate of divorce transmission.

How much has the rate of divorce transmission declined over the last 20 or so years? The answer can be found from substituting values for the year variable (coded as the last two digits of the survey year) into the following equation, derived from the parameter estimates shown in Model 2:

$$\text{rate of divorce transmission} = \exp(2.898 - .026\text{YEAR}). \quad (2)$$

For 1973, the equation yields a ratio of 2.72. This indicates that GSS respondents in 1973 whose parents divorced were almost three times more likely to report a personal divorce than were respondents who lived with both biological parents at age 16. By 1996, this ratio had declined to 1.49—a dramatic decrease in the intergenerational transmission of divorce over the last 20 or so years. Nevertheless, parental divorce continues to influence the likelihood of marital disruption. Finally, the introduction of the control variables (Model 3) has little impact on these results.

### CONCLUSION

This paper shows a substantial decline in the rate of divorce transmission for respondents interviewed between 1973 and 1996. This finding persists with controls for various socio-demographic factors and cannot be explained by decreased selection into marriage by people from divorced families. In particular, the intergenerational transmission of divorce is not attenuated by controls on respondent's education or occupational prestige. This finding is consistent with Amato's (1996) argument that the etiology of the intergenerational transmission of divorce is psychological and not mediated by socioeconomic well-being.

In this paper's introduction, I sketched two socio-historical explanations that could explain the decline in the rate of divorce transmission. Because the GSS does not permit adjudication between them, this task must await future research.

8. This model specification allows the rate of divorce transmission to vary according to survey year. An alternate specification would be to allow divorce transmission to vary according to the respondent's birth cohort. Although this alternate model design produces results (not shown) similar to those of the model I estimate, a model based on birth cohort is not desirable because the divorce rate changes as a function of time period and not birth cohort (Thornton and Rodgers 1987).

**TABLE 1. LOGISTIC REGRESSION ANALYSES EXAMINING DIVORCE ON PARENTAL FAMILY STRUCTURE AND TIME PERIOD**

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
<b>Parental Family Structure</b>			
Divorced	.662*** (0.059)	2.898*** (0.663)	2.556*** (0.677)
Intact	—	—	—
<b>Age Minus Age First Wed</b>			
0-5 years	.438*** (0.043)	.438*** (0.043)	.450*** (0.043)
6-16 years	.072*** (0.008)	.072*** (0.008)	.074*** (0.008)
17+ years	-.023*** (0.002)	-.023*** (0.002)	-.024*** (0.002)
Age Minus Age First Wed, Data Missing	-.372*** (0.065)	-.368*** (0.065)	-.166* (0.074)
Survey Year	.041*** (0.004)	.044*** (0.004)	.047*** (0.004)
Divorced Family × Year	—	-.026** (0.008)	-.024** (0.008)
<b>Parent's Education</b>			
Less than high school diploma	—	—	-.234*** (0.043)
High school graduate	—	—	—
Junior college graduate	—	—	-.061 (0.122)
College graduate	—	—	-.008 (0.065)
Postgraduate	—	—	.052 (0.091)
Data missing	—	—	-.167† (0.092)
Nonurban Residence at Age 16	—	—	-.194*** (0.041)
Only Child	—	—	.062 (0.079)
Male	—	—	-.068† (0.036)
Black	—	—	.011 (0.066)
Catholic	—	—	-.515*** (0.049)
Catholic × Divorced Family	—	—	.358* (0.145)
<b>Respondent's Education</b>			
Less than high school diploma	—	—	.139** (0.052)
High school graduate	—	—	—
Junior college graduate	—	—	.038 (0.093)

(continued)

(Table 1, continued)

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Respondent's Education (cont.)			
College graduate	—	—	-.546*** (0.059)
Postgraduate	—	—	-.341*** (0.089)
Occupational Prestige	—	—	-.008*** (0.002)
Occupational Prestige, Data Missing	—	—	-.390*** (0.059)
Intercept	-7.646*** (0.440)	-7.870*** (0.446)	-7.401*** (0.446)
Log-Likelihood	-11,486.20	-11,479.92	-11,269.87
BIC'	-564.33	-539.25	-833.16

Source: General Social Survey, 1973–1996.

Notes: *N* for all models is 21,963. Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. To adjust for survey weights and between-cluster variation, I computed significance tests using the Huber-White formula.

†*p* < .10; \**p* < .05; \*\**p* < .01; \*\*\**p* < .001

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## APPENDIX TABLE A1. CODING OF VARIABLES USED IN THE ANALYSIS

Variable	Coding
Age Minus Age First Wed	Continuous variable recoded as piecewise linear spline, with knots at 6 and 17.
Age Minus Age First Wed, Data Missing	Coded 1 if data are missing, 0 otherwise.
Catholicism	Coded 1 if Catholic, 0 if not Catholic.
Education of Head of Respondent's Parental Family	Set of five dichotomous indicators, each coded 1 if family head is not a high school graduate, is a junior college graduate, is a college graduate, has a postgraduate degree, or data are missing; high school graduate is the reference category.
Occupational Prestige (Hodge, Siegel, and Rossi scale)	Continuous variable; 100-point scale.
Occupational Prestige, Data Missing	Coded 1 if data are missing, 0 otherwise.
Respondent's Race	Coded 1 if black, 0 if nonblack.
Respondent's Education	Set of four dichotomous indicators, each coded 1 if respondent is not a high school graduate, is a junior college graduate, is a college graduate, or has a postgraduate degree; high school graduate is the reference category.
Respondent Has Experienced a Personal Divorce	Coded 1 if yes, 0 if no.
Respondent's Family Structure	Coded 1 if respondent lived with a divorced single mother or remarried divorce mother at age 16, 0 if respondent lived with biological parents.
Respondent's Urbanicity at Age 16	Coded 0 if respondent lived in a city of 50,000 or more people or in a suburb of a large city; coded 1 if respondent lived in a town of under 50,000 people or in a rural area.
Sex	Coded 0 if female, 1 if male.
Siblings Present	Coded 1 if only child, 0 otherwise.
Survey Year	Last two digits of calendar year; continuous variable.

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