

N° 60000 2750

PROGRAMA UNIVERSITARIO DE  
ESTUDIOS DE GENERO - U. N. A. M.

## Men, Parenthood, and Divorce in the Era of the Second Demographic Transition<sup>1</sup>

Frances K. Goldscheider, Pamela Webster, and Gayle Kaufman

Population Studies and Training Center  
Brown University

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<sup>1</sup> Paper prepared for the IUSSP "Seminar on Fertility and the Male Life Cycle in the Era of Fertility Decline" organized by the IUSSP Committee on Anthropological Demography in collaboration with El Colegio de Mexico, SOMEDE, the University of Zacatecas, the State of Zacatecas, the Municipality of Zacatecas, and the State Council of Population, Zacatecas, Mexico, November 13-16, 1995. We gratefully acknowledge the support of Center Grant P30-HD28251 to the Population Studies and Training Center, Brown University. Portions of this paper were drawn from the thesis proposal, "Men's Fertility Intentions and Family Formation Strategies in the United States" prepared by Gayle Kaufman July 5, 1995.

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### INTRODUCTION

There have been dramatic changes in family patterns throughout the industrialized world during the last third of the twentieth century. Whereas the previous century or so was characterized as a period of declining fertility within marriage, with little change in marital behavior beyond a very slow, long-term increase in divorce, the recent changes have involved changes in the very fabric of the family, with the growth in nonfamily living and in nonmarital cohabitation, and a doubling, or even tripling, of the divorce rate in a very short period in most industrialized countries. The changes have been so large, and the patterns so consistent, that they have been characterized as "the second demographic transition" (van de Kaa, 1987).

One of the implications of these rapid changes is that in countries undergoing these changes, the connections between men and children have become complex. Women have primary responsibility for children, and in particular, normally retain custody at separation or divorce. With the dramatic rise in the divorce rate, this has meant that young men and women contemplating marriage are not only likely to fear that their marriages will not last, but men (though not women) can expect that their coresidential relationship with their potential biological children might be tenuous, as well.

However, given the rapid rate of repartnering for men, many men will find themselves in a new coresidential situation with children--their partner's children. Although family scholars are increasingly encouraging demographers to recognize that such children in cohabiting unions should not be treated as living in one-parent families, since their mother is in a coresidential union with a partner (Bumpass, Raley, and Sweet 1995), there is little evidence one way or the other on whether men treat such children as "their own." A major reason *not* to do so is that men have even more reason to fear that their relationship with these nonbiological children will not last, since cohabiting unions and second marriages have even higher rates of dissolution than first marriages.

In contrast to women, where the parental role is increasingly separated from a marital relationship, the parental role for men is increasingly shaped by the marital relationship. Indeed, men may be taking this into account in developing their attitudes toward parenthood and their willingness to invest in developing

relationships with children. While men and women who are committed to parenthood is a central adult role should be more averse to divorce, this should be more pronounced for men. In this paper, we test this hypothesis by using data on attitudes toward parenthood to predict attitudes toward divorce, controlling for other factors likely to influence divorce attitudes. We test as well for differences between men and women in the parenthood-divorce relationship. We will compare older and younger people, since the issues are likely to be much more salient for younger men and women, who are in the process of making decisions about marriage, remarriage, and parenthood. Hence these relationships should be stronger for them. We will also examine whether having coresidential children reduces attitudes favoring divorce, and whether the effect of children differs by whether they are the respondent's biological children or are the children of the partner only.

## **BACKGROUND: MEN, PARENTHOOD, AND DIVORCE**

The increase in divorce in industrialized countries has been extensively documented (see, for example, Goode 1993). Although a long-term, relatively slow but steady increase in divorce rates has been underway in conjunction with industrialization (with often opposing trends in the less industrialized countries), in the 1960s and 1970s the divorce rate more than doubled in most of the industrialized world.

The increase in divorce has led to dramatic increases in the numbers of children raised separately from their fathers (Hofferth 1985; US. Bureau of the Census 1992). There has been some small increase in the numbers of children raised by their fathers, given the overall increase in divorce, but since the likelihood that children will remain with their mothers has not declined, the overall effect has been for a dramatic increase in men's residential separation from their children. There is substantial evidence that children suffer in this situation, with more emotional and school problems and lower educational attainment (McLanahan and Sandeful 1994), but there is also evidence that men suffer, as well. Their relationships with their children are much less extensive and less satisfying (Cooney and Uhlenberg 1990) and their mental and physical health deteriorates (Umberson and Williams 1993; House, Landis, and Umberson 1988).

Presumably, however, this would be less of a problem for men with weaker relationships with their children, which the division of labor by sex has reinforced, since women spend much more time with their children than do men. There is some evidence that men with strong relationships with their children are less likely to divorce. The first major analysis reporting this effect focused on the relationship between divorce and child gender, and found that families with girls only were at considerably higher risk of divorce than those with boys (Morgan, et

al. 1988). Given men's closer relationships with their sons, on average, this suggests that men with closer relationships with their children of either sex would be less likely to divorce, since the cost in terms of maintaining their relationships with the children would be greater. If so, then men who consider parenthood an important role for themselves should also be less approving of divorce.

The relationship between parental centrality and divorce approval might be influenced by other factors related to both, however, making it important to control for these other influences. A particular concern is salience, since those who are not married, or have no children, might be less concerned both about parenthood and about divorce, leading to a spurious relationship between the two. Those with children are particularly unlikely to divorce (Waite and Lillard 1991), and are likely to be less approving of divorce, as well. Those who have already experienced a marital disruption might also be both more tolerant of divorce and less concerned about children.

The issues are probably also more salient for younger persons than for older ones, although the aging mothers of sons often deeply hurt by the loss of contact with their grandchildren after their sons divorce (Furstenberg and Cherlin, 1990). It is also important to control for the effects of race/ethnicity, since blacks are more likely to divorce (Goldscheider and Waite 1991), and for socioeconomic status, which on family issues is usually best indexed by education (Goldscheider and Waite, 1991).

## **DATA, MEASURES, AND METHODS OF ANALYSIS**

### **Data**

Our analysis of the relationship between attitudes toward parenthood and toward divorce uses data from the 1987/88 National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH). A representative sample of 13,017 adults of all ages were asked a wide array of questions about their family-related attitudes and behaviors (Sweet, Bumpass, and Call 1988). Hence, we are able to ascertain whether respondents are married or cohabiting, and whether any children living with them are their children and/or those of their partner. The survey was based on a complex, stratified sample that yielded a double sample of persons in certain select categories, including those in stepfamilies, recent marriages, and cohabiting relationships.

### **Measures**

Our analysis links two attitude scales, measured at the same time: divorce approval and the centrality of parenthood. (In later work, we will use the

longitudinal dimension of these data in order to ascertain more precisely the correct causal direction between them.) We also include as controls measures of salience (age and current marital and parental status), in order to reduce causal confusion, and also control for indicators of race and class. Table 1 provides means for each of these variables for the total population, and for the two broad age groups (35 and younger, older than 35) that shape our analysis.

Divorce approval. Our dependent variable is a five-point scale based on level of agreement with the statement: "Marriage is a lifetime relationship and should never be ended except under extreme circumstances" with the options presented ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." We have scaled these responses so that higher values represent increased disagreement and hence, greater approval of divorce.

Parental centrality: This is our major independent variable. As with divorce, respondents were given five options with which to register their level of agreement with the statement: "It is better for a person to have a child than to go through life childless" which we have scaled so that higher values reflect greater agreement with the statement.

Salience measures: Our theoretical position is that these attitudes are likely to be affected by marital and parental experience. For marital status, we divide respondents into three categories: those who are currently married and the unmarried subdivided further into those who have experienced voluntary marital disruption (divorced or separated) and those who have not (the widowed and the nevermarried). For parenthood, we also divide respondents into three categories: those living with no children, with biological children, and with other children (mostly stepchildren or the children of their cohabiting partner). We treat the respondent's age as a salience measure, since those who have reached the ages when few become parents will have less need to connect their attitudes toward parenthood and divorce. However, age is also an important control, since we also expect that, given the rapid growth in divorce in recent years, the level of approval of divorce is likely to be higher among younger people.

Other controls: Since most social behaviors and the attitudes linked with them vary by race/ethnicity and by socioeconomic status in the United States, we include a measure of years of education and divide the respondents into nonHispanic whites, blacks, and others (Hispanic, Asian, and other).

### Methods of Analysis

We test the relationship between parental centrality and divorce approval using ordinary least squares regression (OLS). This assumes that the responses to the statement on divorce are normally distributed and that they approximate a continuous scale. Although this assumption is violated to a considerable extent,

since respondents' responses cluster at the negative end of the response continuum, we expect that our results are robust to this violation. In later work, however, we will test this assumption by respecifying the analysis using ordinal logit regression, which uses the ordinal nature of the data, but makes no assumption about whether the intervals between responses are equal.

We begin by specifying additive regressions, in which each effect is tested as if it were independent of the others. The equations are of the type:

$$Y = a + b_1X_1 + b_2X_2 + \dots + b_nX_n + e \quad (1)$$

where  $Y$  is the dependent variable (divorce approval), the  $X$ s are the independent variables whose effects we want to estimate, and the  $b$ s are the effect coefficients. The intercept of this equation is  $a$ ; the level of error is approximated by the amount of unexplained variance ( $1.00 - \text{adjusted } R^2$ ).

However, our central concern is that given the asymmetry between men and women in terms of custody at divorce, we expect that the effects of holding strong pro-parental attitudes should differ between men and women, so that commitment to parenthood should reduce divorce approval more for men than for women. We test this expectation by constructing an interaction term that allows us to determine whether the effect of parental centrality on divorce approval is significantly stronger for men than for women, allowing a one-tailed test of significance for this coefficient. This test takes the form of:

$$Y = a + b_1\text{Paratt} + b_2\text{Male} + b_3(\text{Male} \times \text{Paratt}) \dots + b_nX_n + e \quad (2)$$

where  $X_1$  in Eq. 1 has been specified to be the measure of attitudes toward the centrality of parenthood,  $X_2$  as Male, and  $X_3$  is their product.

We estimate these equations for the total sample and for those age 35 and younger and those older than 35, respectively.

## RESULTS

The results for the total population and for the younger and older ages are presented in Table 2. They show that those reporting high agreement with the importance of parenthood as a central adult role are less approving of divorce ( $b = -.146$ ), indicating that for each increase in level of agreement that parenthood is central (such as between "agree" and "strongly agree" or between "disagree" and "neither agree nor disagree"), support for divorce declines by about one-seventh of a level on the divorce approval scale, a highly significant result. Men are significantly less approving than women, possibly reflecting the fact that changes in women's lives have been greater than in men's, so that traditional marriage has become less beneficial to many women than to men (Waite, 1995), making divorce a less painful option for them than for men. However, the difference between men

and women has less effect than moving one response category on the parenthood scale.

The effects of several of the dimensions of the salience variables are particularly strong. Divorce approval declines with age, and is highest among those who have experienced marital disruption. The currently married are the least supportive of divorce, with those who are unmarried for reasons other than voluntary disruption intermediate, only slightly more approving than the currently married. In each age sub-sample, those who currently have no children living with them are significantly more approving of divorce than those with biological children in their home (the reference category), although for reasons that are not yet clear there is no difference between these two groups in the total sample. However, those living with their partner's children are substantially more supportive of divorce than those living with their own biological children.

Turning to the effects of the control variables, blacks are somewhat more approving of divorce, consistent with their much higher level, although members of other race/ethnic groups (Asians and Hispanics) are not significantly different from nonHispanic whites on this dimension. As expected, those with more education are more approving of divorce.

Beyond the decrease in approval of divorce with age, which could suggest that younger people will remain more approving as they age than those who are currently older, given the changes in divorce rate they experienced, the factors influencing approval of divorce are quite different between the two age groups (<35, 36+). These changing relationships by age may indicate that they have shifted over time. The effect of parental centrality has *not* changed substantially, and is even slightly stronger among the younger group, so that the fact that divorces now are more likely to involve children than in the past is not reflected in changes in peoples' attitudes. There is also little gender difference, with younger men relatively no more or less approving than younger women than is the case among older men and women.

The effects of the marital status dimensions of salience do not differ very much between age groups. Having divorced or separated increases approval of divorce equally in the older and younger groups, and there is also little difference between the two age groups in the effect of being married versus being widowed or nevermarried. The effect of actually having biological children in the household may be somewhat weaker among younger people than among older respondents, but this difference is unlikely to be significant.

However, the effect of having partner's children in the household has a stronger influence on increasing support for divorce on older persons than it does among otherwise comparable younger people. This suggests either that older people have more difficulty parenting children in a complex relationship, or

perhaps that the children, themselves, are older, and hence more challenging to their stepparents.

The two age groups reveal an unexpected result, showing that the increase in approval of divorce with each younger age shown by the combined analysis was hiding a more complex pattern. While the oldest respondents are much less approving than middle-aged respondents, the *youngest* respondents are also much less approving than those somewhat older than themselves. Each of the coefficients is significant, and they reverse sign. This may indicate that very young adults have not yet needed to discover the reasons for divorce their somewhat older cousins used to dissolve their marriages, since they are either still unmarried or in the early years of marriage. However, it may be that these attitudes presage a decline in divorce as these very young people age into the prime years of divorce. The effects of education, in which the more educated are more favorable to divorce, also appear to be weakening, and are not significant in the younger cohort. These results provide some suggestion that younger people are beginning to respond to the divorce epidemic, with differing attitudes, and differing factors predicting their attitudes, compared with older respondents.

What of our main hypothesis--that men who are relatively more committed to parenthood will be more resistant than otherwise similar women? Have men begun to realize that the rise in divorce is weakening their parental bonds, and connecting their attitudes toward parenthood with their attitudes toward divorce?

To answer this question, we must turn to a direct test of the interaction to see if this is actually the case. The analysis presented in Table 3 indicates that nearly all of the gender difference is the result of men's greater concern over the connections between parenthood and divorce; men with low parental centrality do not differ from similar women in their approval of divorce, and may even be more approving of divorce ( $b=.079$ ), since their non-children costs of divorce may be less for men than for women. As parental centrality increases, however, the difference between young men and women increases. The significant interaction coefficient indicates that considering parenthood more central reduces approval of divorce nearly 40% more among men than among women (for men, the effect is the sum of the main and interaction coefficients  $(-.135$  and  $-.048)$  while for women it is just the main coefficient. In contrast, there is no significant interaction among older persons (data not shown). For each age group, adding the interaction variable has no effect on the other variables in the analysis.

## DISCUSSION

This research has examined the relationship between attitudes toward the centrality of parenthood and approval of divorce, focusing on particular on



differences between men and women. We find that for both men and women, those who rate parenthood as a more important adult role are less approving of divorce, but the relationship is stronger for men than for women. It is not surprising that members of both sexes should make this connection. For women who care deeply about being parents, divorce is disruptive of the children's well-being, since in many cases it leads to poverty, as women attempt to support their children alone. Men have an additional concern, however, which focuses on their own ability to maintain the parental role after divorce, given the presumption of female custody. There has been very little research on men's attitudes toward parenthood, particularly in societies in the second demographic transition (Kaufman, 1995).

We also found that those for whom the costs of divorce are more salient (the married and those with biological children) are less approving of divorce. Men are also less approving than women, although our results indicate that this is only true among men with strong parental orientations. Men who do not consider parenthood to be a central adult role are no less, and might even be more approving of divorce than comparable women.

There is clear evidence that *nonbiological* children do not have the same effects on approval of divorce as do biological children. This may reflect the fact that they are evidence of partnership breakup, since the current relationship could not exist if the biological parents of the children had stayed together. More likely, however, the respondents' relationships with these children are not as strong as they are with their biological children, providing less divorce insurance, as it were. There may also be greater stresses on the marriage as a result of the complexities such children often seem to pose (White and Booth, 1985).

The results also provide some basis for optimism that the high levels of divorce might decrease. Men appear to be increasingly aware of the costs of high levels of divorce and repartnering for them--both in losing the benefits of coresidence for the parental bond, and acquiring other, more problematic parental relationships. It is among younger men that the greater effect of parental centrality on approval of divorce appears. This could lead to younger men's becoming more flexible in their reactions to the new demands for participation in housework and childcare made by their wives, hence avoiding divorce. The fact that the youngest adults are also less supportive of divorce than those age 35 and younger reinforces this optimism.

It appears that those on the front lines of the second demographic transition have recognized an aspect of it that is almost never noted by scholars--the costs to men of their changing relationships to children. The body of research on the costs to children is enormous, and to women, as those who suffer from the financial losses of divorce. But men lose as well, and their parental bonds matter to them, if not to the chroniclers of the phenomenon. The evidence presented in

this research indicates that men may well both be able and willing to do something to offset the worst excesses of this new 'demographic transition.'

In further work, we will investigate other influences on divorce attitudes, including childhood family structure, religiosity, and current gender role attitudes. We will also examine whether the factors shaping attitudes toward divorce differ between men and women on dimensions other than parental attitudes. Most critically, however, we will focus on men and women in unions with children, and measure not just their attitudes toward children but also their actual involvement with children. We plan to use the reinterview data to test for whether the patterns we find relating parental attitudes to divorce attitudes parallel the relationships between actual parental involvement and the actual termination of a marital or cohabiting relationship. This will reveal whether men who are involved with their children are better able to prevent divorce.

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Table 1. Means for Variables in the Analysis

	Total	<36	36+
Divorce approval	2.08	2.14	2.04
Centrality of parenthood	3.22	3.13	3.29
Male	0.40	0.42	0.39
Disrupted marriage	0.18	0.16	0.20
Other nonmarried (Married)	0.29 0.53	0.35 0.49	0.24 0.56
No children in household	0.60	0.46	0.70
Partner's children in household (Natural children in household)	0.03 0.37	0.04 0.50	0.02 0.28
Age	42.84	25.57	54.66
Black	0.18	0.19	0.18
Other (White)	0.09 0.73	0.11 0.70	0.07 0.75
Years of Education	12.20	12.79	12.07

Table 2. Factors Increasing Divorce Approval, Total, Younger and Younger Respondents

Variable	Total	<36	36+
Parental centrality	-.146**	-.157**	-.123**
Male	-.071**	-.070**	-.078**
Disrupted marriage	.621**	.578**	.584**
Other nonmarried	.098**	.151**	.253**
No children in hh	-.008	.071'	.120**
Partner's children in hh	.227**	.067	.292**
Age	-.004**	.025**	-.014**
Black	.065*	.073	.031
Other	.028	.033	-.031
Years of education	.027**	.010	.022**
(Constant)	2.256	1.657**	2.692**
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	.072**	.067**	.096**
N of cases	12,093	5,028	7,066

\*\* p < .01; \* .01 < p < .05; ' .05 < p < .10

Table 3. Factors Increasing Divorce Approval  
 Respondents Age 35 or Less

Variable	Model 1	Model 2
Parental centrality	-.157**	-.135**
Male	-.070**	.079
Male*parental centrality	-	-.048'
Disrupted marriage	.578**	.579**
Other nonmarried	.151**	.151**
No children in hh	.071'	.073'
Partner's children in hh	.067	.067
Age	.025**	.025**
Black	.073	.034
Other	.033	-.021
Years of education	.010	-.035
(Constant)	1.657**	1.580**
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	.067	.067
N of cases	5,028	5,028

\*\* p < .01; \* .01 < p < .05; ' .05 < p < .10