

Intergenerational Interplays of Partnership Breakdown and Mental Well-being

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Abstract

This paper considers associations and interplays over the life-course and across generations in the linkages between mental well-being and partnership breakdown. Earlier studies have shown some intriguing intragenerational linkages over time: Kiernan (1986) showed that those who divorced had higher average neuroticism scores *before* marriage; Zimmermann and Easterlin (2006) found a similar indication of higher levels of life dissatisfaction before marriage for those who divorced. The association between parental divorce and the partnership dissolution of off-spring has been found across virtually all European nations (Kiernan, 2002). Moreover, findings from UK longitudinal research suggest that parental divorce is one of the best predictors of partnership breakdown among their children (Kiernan and Mueller, 1999). From the psychological literature there is also strong evidence of associations between depressive symptoms in mothers and their children (American Journal of Psychiatry, 2006).

We use the British Cohort Study of 1970, which has collected detailed information at birth, ages 5, 10, and 16 during childhood, and 30 and 34 in adulthood. From this information we are able to identify partnership breakdown among the maternal generation and for the cohort members themselves. We also have measures of mental well-being and personality traits for the mothers and behaviour inventories for the cohort members during childhood. Moreover, mental well-being was measured by malaise scores for the mothers when the cohort members were aged 5, 10, and 16 and for the cohort members at age 16, well before partnership formation, age 30 and, in a reduced inventory at age 34. There are several other indicators of personality traits and well-being for the mothers and the cohort members that can be drawn upon as appropriate. We have already developed a wide range of indicators of socioeconomic and family background and of characteristics of the sample members, including educational test scores that can be introduced into the analysis as controls or further explicands.

Our goal is to explore both the intergenerational ‘inheritance’ of both well-being and divorce and to better inform understanding on some of the mechanisms underlying and precursors of partnership breakdown and its implications for well being. Much is written about possible predisruption effects on well being after partnership breakdown and these are often attributed to the beginnings of the process of partnership breakdown; however there is much less literature on the precursors.

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