Contemporary Kinship: Family Composition Effects on Resources for Older Americans

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Approximately 21 percent of married-couple households with children are stepfamily households (Stewart 346). The patterns of marriage and divorce and their effects on the status of children have been well documented in the United States (Case et al. 2001; Case et al. 1999; Bumpass et al. 1995). However, these changes have often been ignored in the research on population aging. Given the importance of kinship resources at even the individual level, how do we expect the societal changes in family formation, dissolution and composition to affect the well being of older Americans?

Wachter illustrates that changing family forms prompted by divorce and remarriage will increase the number of connections that individuals will have across generations (1997:1813). Step-kin may play more of the role of biological kin as new family types become more institutionalized in U.S. society; especially as social insurance and community services resources become more strained (Wachter 1997). Sociological theory would suggest that other factors, such as amount of contact or reciprocal expectations, would become important (Curran et al. 2003). In families formed by remarriage, stepchildren may have different amounts of contact with stepparents, and this may affect emotional ties or material reciprocity.

I use logistic regression to examine whether the parents in reconstituted families expect and receive different levels of care or transfers than married couples with no previous marriages. I examine measures of expectations of family resource sharing and measures of actual intergenerational transfers using data from the 1987-1988 and 1992-1994 waves of the National Survey of Families and Households.

I find that currently married persons that had previously been divorced or widowed were measurably more likely to expect children to share living quarters than persons with no previous marital disruptions. However, they were not significantly more likely to expect financial assistance (Table1). These results would be in keeping with the hypothesis that ties may not be as strong in higher order marriages, and parents look for social support from their children if they are uncertain about the future.

Biological children that live with older parents have greater odds of giving financial assistance to parents than non-residential children (Table 2). These types of support are consistent with traditional conceptualizations of caring for aging adults. While stepchildren do not measurably affect the actual or perceived levels of care in all of the models, they do move in the expected direction. In the next phase of the analysis, I will incorporate the 2001-2002 wave of the NSFH into the models. Final results will be presented using a mixture of text, tables, and graphs to make the argument that the institutionalization of new family forms is necessary to affect intergenerational resource transfers.

Table 1. Logistic Regression Models for Parental Expectations of Living with Children and Receiving Financial Assistance from Children

(Reference Category)	Live with Children		Financial Help from Children	
Variable	B	Odds Ratio	B	Odds Ratio
Constant	-1.029306	-	.2053	-
(Age 50-64)	-	-	-	-
Age 65-74	-.1353	.8734	-.2771*	.7579
Age 75+	.0659	1.068	-.3185	.7272
(Female)	-	-	-	-
Male	.4492***	1.567	.2753**	1.316
(White)	-	-	-	-
Nonwhite	.9218***	2.513	.8214***	2.273
(Only Marriage)	-	-	-	-
Previously Widowed	.7278**	2.070	.2558	1.291
Previously Divorced	.4062**	1.50	-.0782	.9247
(Non-resident Biological child)	-	-	-	-
Resident Biological Child	.1914	1.211	.3819	1.465
Resident Stepchild	-	-	-.3038	.7379
Non-resident stepchild	-.1287	.8791	.0799	1.083
Log-likelihood	-933.602		977.306	
LR χ^2	71.93		45.86	
Pseudo R^2	0.037		0.023	

*p<0.05 **p<0.01 ***p<0.001

Table 2. Logistic Regression Model for Assistance Parents Receive from Anyone Living or Not Living with them and Financial Assistance Parents Receive from Anyone Not Living them (in past 12 months)

(Reference Category)	Received Any Assistance		Received Financial Assistance	
Variable	B	Odds Ratio	B	Odds Ratio
Constant	-2.057	-	-1.998	-
(Age 50-64)	-	-	-	-
Age 65-74	.37225*	1.451	-.5587*	.5719
Age 75+	1.006***	2.735	-.3994	.6707
(Female)	-	-	-	-
Male	-.2760	.7588	-.3559	.7005
(White)	-	-	-	-
Nonwhite	.3246	1.3835	-.6266*	.5344
(Only Marriage)	-	-	-	-
Previously Widowed	.2673	1.306	.1699	1.185
Previously Divorced	.3202	1.377	.0941	1.099
(Non-resident Biological child)	-	-	-	-
Resident Biological Child	.2727	1.314	.759*	2.137
Resident Stepchild	-	-	2.129	8.408
Non-resident stepchild	-.1280	.8798	-.0766	.9263
Log-likelihood	-598.694		-424.278	
LR χ^2	27.08		21.76	
Pseudo R^2	0.0221		0.0250	

*p<0.05 **p<0.01 ***p<0.001

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