

Intergenerational Interplays of Partnership Breakdown and Mental Well-being

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Extended 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 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. Mental well-being is measured by malaise scores for the mothers when the cohort members were aged 5 and 16 and for the cohort members at age 16, well before partnership formation, and at age 30. Several other indicators of personality traits and well-being for the mothers and the cohort members are used. We have developed a wide range of indicators of socioeconomic and family background and of characteristics of the sample members, including educational test scores that are introduced into the analysis as controls or further explicands.

The paper explores both intragenerational continuities in and the intergenerational 'inheritance' of mental well-being and partnership behaviours, especially partnership breakdown. These detailed analyses also help to inform understanding on some of the mechanisms and precursors underlying 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.

We show a range of key associations: mother's depression when the cohort member is age 5 is linked to her subsequent partnership breakdown; both are in turn linked to externalising and internalising behaviour problems for the cohort members and to their educational test scores; these in turn link to mother's and cohort member's depression when the cohort member is aged 16; cohort members who experience family disruption are less likely to have married or partnered by age 30, but are also more likely to have experienced partnership breakdown or divorce if they had

partnered or married by age 30; finally lasting legacies for depression of the cohort member at age 30 are explored. In all analyses there are controls for early childhood poverty and early motherhood, as well as a range of other key measures.

The paper concludes that there is evidence that depression matters for partnership behaviour but that partnership behaviour also matters for depression. There is evidence for intragenerational and intergenerational 'transmission' of both depression and divorce. Some of the possible reasons for these linkages are discussed and linked to the existing literature.

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