Remarital Instability: Selection Bias or Context?

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Introduction & Purpose

- The increased likelihood of divorce among remarried couples is often attributed to two hypotheses:
  - Selection bias – Suggests that people in remarriages are systematically different than individuals in first marriages (i.e., lower levels of relational stability & dedication) because they have previously selected out of marriage
  - Context – The idea that stepfamilies are faced with unique, complex issues that can lower marital satisfaction

- This study proposes to examine the competing hypotheses related to theories of instability in remarriages in a racially diverse sample and assess if indicators of marital instability are similar across racial groups.

- For the purpose of this study, whether or not a couple has children/step-children is used as a proxy for determining context.

- This study examines stability and dedication across four marital groups: (1) First-marrieds without children; (2) First-marrieds with children; (3) Remarrieds without children; and (4) Remarrieds with children.

- Because of the higher rates of divorce among African-Americans and lack of information on divorce and remarriage for non-white samples, this study also examines how patterns of stability and dedication differ among European- and African-American participants. This study explores these research questions:
  - RQ1 – Do levels of marital instability and dedication vary by marital history alone, the presence of children, or the combination of the two?
  - RQ2 – Is this pattern similar for European- and African-American participants?

Methods

Sample

- N = 1,947 married individuals (68.4% female, 31.6% male)
- 64.1% European American, 35.9% African American
- 14.1% were in a first marriage without children, 37.8% in a first marriage with children, 10.7% in a remarriage without children, and 37.4% in a remarriage with children

Procedure

- Participants were recruited across Alabama as part of a larger study examining the effects of Relationship Education classes. Participants in this subsample provided demographic information and data on their marital relationship before taking part in the relationship education classes. The current study uses only pre-program data collected at time 1.

Measures

- Likelihood of Stability Scale (Booth, Johnson, & Edwards, 1983)
  - $n = .79$
  - The questions used for this scale were: (1) You have ever thought your marriage/relationship might be in trouble?; and (2) Have you/your partner ever seriously suggested the idea of divorce or separation?

- The scale reflects a risk assessment for instability as participants responded (1 = Never; 2 = Yes, but not recently; 3 = Yes, recently). The stability risk assessment ranged from 1 to 6 with 1 being low instability and 6 being high instability.

- Dedication Scale (Stanley & Markman, 1992)
  - $n = .84$
  - Participants were asked to answer (1) My level of commitment to the relationship, and (2) My opinion of your partner’s level of commitment to the relationship using a 5-point scale (1 = Not at all committed to 5 = Completely committed). Mean scores were calculated for the Dedication Scale.

Analysis & Results

- Separate one-way between groups ANOVAs were conducted to compare scores on the Likelihood of Stability Scale (Booth, Johnson, & Edwards, 1983) and on the Dedication Scale (Stanley & Markman, 1992) across the four groups:
  - Significant differences were found between the four groups on ratings of Likelihood of Stability, $F(3, 2051)=5.59, p<.001$, and on ratings on Dedication, $F(3, 2038)=3.89, p<.01$.
  - For the Likelihood of Stability Scale, post hoc analyses reveal significant differences between both groups of first married couples with and without children and remarried couples with children such that those in first marriages have lower levels of instability. Those in a remarriage without children were not statistically different from either group in their first marriage. See Table 1 – Total Sample.

- For the Dedication scale, post hoc analyses reveal that those in first marriages without children have higher dedication scores than those in remarriages with children and remarriages without children. Those in first marriages with children were not significantly different than any other group. See Table 2 – Total Sample.

Table 1. Mean scores and standard deviations of marital instability by marital status and presence of children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total Sample</th>
<th>European Americans</th>
<th>African Americans</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1st Marriages</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>without children</td>
<td>2.03 (1.43)</td>
<td>2.04 (1.55)</td>
<td>2.02 (1.26)</td>
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<tr>
<td>with children</td>
<td>2.15 (1.29)</td>
<td>2.15 (1.22)</td>
<td>2.16 (1.39)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Remarriages</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>without children</td>
<td>2.19 (1.43)</td>
<td>2.20 (1.40)</td>
<td>2.20 (1.39)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with children</td>
<td>2.34 (1.39)</td>
<td>2.38 (1.42)</td>
<td>2.37 (1.33)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Corresponding letters indicate a significant difference at the $p < .05$ level.

Table 2. Mean scores and standard deviations of marital dedication by marital status and presence of children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total Sample</th>
<th>European Americans</th>
<th>African Americans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1st Marriages</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>without children</td>
<td>4.16 (1.40)</td>
<td>4.17 (1.47)</td>
<td>4.17 (1.47)</td>
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<tr>
<td>with children</td>
<td>3.99 (1.25)</td>
<td>4.01 (1.33)</td>
<td>3.95 (1.21)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Remarriages</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>without children</td>
<td>3.93 (1.21)</td>
<td>3.74 (1.23)</td>
<td>3.74 (1.24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with children</td>
<td>3.95 (1.22)</td>
<td>3.89 (1.22)</td>
<td>3.89 (1.24)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Corresponding letters indicate a significant difference at the $p < .05$ level.

Discussion

- For the Likelihood of Stability Scale, remarried couples with children reported significantly higher levels of marital instability than did couples in first marriages both with and without children. Remarrieds without children did not differ from other groups. These results indicate that context (i.e., having children) may play a more crucial role in ratings of instability than selection (i.e., remarital status alone).

- These results are similar to previous findings which suggest the presence of stepchildren in a remarriage may lead to lower levels of marital satisfaction and higher levels of disruption, conflict, and instability in the household. White and Booth (1985) found that stepchildren can decrease overall family life, and therefore may decrease relationship quality within the family. Their findings aligned with Cherlin (1978) who first proposed that stepchildren, along with other factors unique to remarriage, cause stress and strain on the marital relationship. More recently, van Eeden-Moorefield and Pasley (2008) found that the stepparent-stepchild relationship quality may negatively affect the quality of a remarriage. They also concluded that remarriages without children would not likely be expected to experience this disruption and would more closely resemble first marriages. The current study found support for this on ratings of instability likelihood.

- For the Dedication Scale, results are less clear. Both selection bias (remarital status) and context (having children) are related to levels of dedication. Remarried couples with and without children reported lower levels of dedication than did those in first marriages without children, but did not differ from each other. This gives some support to the idea that selection bias may play a part in lower levels of dedication in remarriages. First marriages with children were not significantly different than those in either remarriage group, thus suggesting that children may decrease levels of dedication due to the added stress they bring to the marriage, regardless of type of marriage.

- Although the measures of “Likelihood of Instability” and “Dedication” were conceptualized as assessments of the same construct – “Instability,” different results for tests of differences by marital status and presence of children (and combinations of these factors) indicate that these measures should be held as distinct. Predicting disruption of the relationship seems to be driven more by context than by marital status group, while there is some evidence in this study that feelings of commitment/dedication to the relationship can be driven by marital status group.

- Further research is needed to understand the nuances and processes that lead to remarital instability related to both contextual factors and characteristics of remarried couples.
References


*Please send questions and/or comments to Kate Taylor Harcourt (harcokt@tigermail.auburn.edu)

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