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Patterns of Courtship for Remarriage: Implications for Child Adjustment and Parent-Child Relationships

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Abstract

Most children who experience their parents' divorce also experience their custodial parent's remarriage. However, research has not addressed how patterns of courtship for remarriage influence the developing child and his or her relationships in the new family. This longitudinal study focuses on 57 remarried, stepfather families with a target child aged 9 to 13, using multimethod, multi-informant measures of child adjustment and parent-child relationships. Comparisons were made to determine whether the custodial mother's number of dating partners, remarriage courtship length, or the timing and sequence of typical courtship stages affected the child's adjustment and his or her relationships with the residential parents after remarriage. Results indicated that a longer time spent in a divorced, mother-custody household was associated with continuing diffi-

culty in stepfather-stepchild relationships and lower levels of the child's social competence during the initial months following remarriage. In addition, children whose custodial mother cohabited before remarriage appeared to be more socially competent throughout the two years after remarriage, while also experiencing less negative family relationships. Assertions about the ideal timing of courtship for remarriage are challenged.

During the period following divorce, custodial mothers and their children are faced with tasks of redefining their roles and relationships (Rodgers & Conrad, 1986) and in establishing new rituals and routines, which may take several years (Hetherington, 1989). When the custodial mother begins courtship for remarriage, the introduction of a courting partner may influence these processes of adjustment and restructuring. Further, the **timing** of maternal courtship and the point at which remarriage occurs during the post-divorce coping process are likely to influence child adjustment and remarried family relationships (Rodgers & Conrad, 1986). However, research has not addressed the extent to which patterns of courtship for remarriage influence the developing child and

his or her relationships with the custodial parent and stepparent (Coleman & Ganong, 1990).

Rodgers and Conrad (1986) have presented a theoretical approach from which to view the impact of courtship for remarriage upon family reorganization. A primary tenet is that the timing of the courtship process will impact both the custodial parent-child and stepparent-stepchild relationships. Specifically, Rodgers and Conrad (1986) propose that:

The earlier that courtship for remarriage is introduced in a divorced family system, the greater the degree of disruption in the establishment of new patterns of interacting in the custodial parent-child subsystem, particularly when the courtship involves the custodial parent (p. 771).

According to Rodgers and Conrad (1986), the greater the degree to which custodial mothers and their children have reconsolidated their relationships and have developed their own rituals and routines following the divorce transition, the more limited the impact will be when a courting partner is introduced.

However, the process of the formation of new intimate relationships involves many aspects other than timing. First, it may involve several partners before remarriage. Divorced mothers who date frequently may be less physically and psychologically available to their children than mothers who date less frequently. Second, courting relationships differ in length as well as timing. Long courting relationships in which the future stepfather gradually increases contact with the divorced family may necessitate different adjustment patterns than courting relationships which proceed more rapidly. Third, courting relationships begin at different points in the divorce process. Some relationships may begin during the first marriage; others may begin after separation but before divorce; still others may begin long after the divorce is final. Finally, it may not be readily apparent when courting relationships require adjustment and adaptation on the part of children. As courting relationships progress, dating frequency generally increases, and the children are likely to become more involved in joint family activities. However, actual renegotiation of roles and relationships with the custodial parent and the establishment of relationships with the future stepparent may not occur until the stepparent begins cohabitation or remarriage. It may be too that greater disruption is experienced by those single-

parent families that have well-established rituals and routines. In other words, the longer the period of time that custodial mothers and their children have spent living together in a divorced household, the *greater* will be the disruption, because established relationships may be more difficult to renegotiate than relationships that are in flux.

The purpose of this study is to test the proposition that earlier courtship for remarriage will negatively affect the developing child and his or her relationships with the custodial parent and stepparent after remarriage. In addition to the timing of courtship, we expected that the frequency of dating experiences, the sequence of courtship arrangements, the length of the relationship, and the quality of relationships which have been established prior to the remarriage would affect both child adjustment and residential parent-child relationships after remarriage.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were part of a longitudinal study of family adjustment to remarriage (Hetherington et al., 1992). Families were recruited through such diverse means as a review of marriage license records; random phone calls; radio, television, and newspaper features; public service organizations such as churches, scout troops, YMCAs and YWCAs; and special interest groups such as Parents Without Partners and stepfamily associations. All families met the criteria that parents were Caucasian and had at least a high school education, and not more than four children resided in the home. Three types of families were assessed three times in a 2-year period:

1. *Remarried families* were families in which the mother had been divorced, retained custody of her children, and was currently in the first months ($M = 4$ months, $SD = 2$ months) of a remarriage.

2. *Divorced families* were families in which the mother had divorced and retained custody of her children, but had not remarried.

3. *Nondivorced families* were families in which parents were in an original marriage.

For the divorced and remarried families, the mean length of time between the divorce and the first assessment was 3 years, 8 months. The mean

length of time between the final separation and the first assessment was 5 years, 8 months. Divorced and remarried mothers did not differ significantly with respect to length of divorce or separation.

In each family, a child between the ages of 9 and 13 was selected to be the target child ($M = 11$ years, 5 months). Approximately half of the target children were girls. A total of 202 families participated at the initial assessment (58 remarried, 69 divorced, and 75 nondivorced families), and a total of 164 families participated in the final assessment. There were no significant differences between families who remained in the study and those who did not with respect to dependent measures (see Stanley-Hagan, 1992, for a discussion of attrition). Because this study focuses on courtship patterns for remarriage, only the remarried families will be discussed here. However, when comparisons with other family types are useful, these too will be discussed. The analyses presented here do not distinguish between the experiences of boys and girls, but instead focus on remarried families as a whole. Although the courtship process for remarriage may affect boys and girls differently, our sample size prohibits a powerful test of gender differences, and Rodgers and Conrad (1986) make no differential predictions based on child gender.

Procedure

Families were visited in their homes at three assessment periods: at an average of 4 months after remarriage; 1 year, 5 months after remarriage; and 2 years, 2 months after remarriage. Other family groups were assessed at comparable intervals. At each wave of data collection, family members were given a battery of standardized questionnaires and structured interview assessments measuring the domains of child behavior and parent-child relationships. In addition, family members were videotaped in structured problem-solving tasks, and at the dinner table. The problem-solving task was a 10-minute interaction session in which family members discussed, either in dyads or triads, areas of disagreement that at least one of the members had identified in the interview as causing difficulty in the relationship. In addition, an unstructured, 30-minute session of the family at dinner was also videotaped. Trained observers rated each member on a series of 5-point

global rating scales, including warmth/ responsiveness, hostility, coercion, and communication skill. Interobserver agreement reached at least 700Jo for all rating scales. Further detail on methods and procedures can be found in Stanley Hagan (1992).

Measures

Courtship patterns. Remarried mothers completed a series of questions addressing their post-divorce courtship patterns with the current spouse. Remarried mothers first indicated the number of people they had dated following divorce, and the order with which the following courtship events occurred: knew each other but were not romantically involved; dated but lived apart; lived together several days a week; lived together almost every day but maintained separate residences; and lived together and combined possessions in one home. Second, the length of time spent in each of these arrangements was recorded. Third, remarried mothers indicated the amount of contact the current spouse had with her children at these various stages of dating. These questions dealing with the amount of contact were rated on a 4-point scale from "a great deal" to "none." Finally, remarried mothers rated how often the child was included in joint activities with the future stepfather during courtship (1 = "less than once a month" to 5 = "more than once a week"), the child's reactions to these activities (1 = "extremely negative" to 5 = "extremely positive") and her feelings about the behavior of her child and her spouse toward one another (1 = "extremely unhappy and concerned" to 5 = "extremely happy and satisfied").

Child adjustment. Two broad-band measures of child adjustment, those of Child Externalizing Behavior and Child Social Competence, were used in these analyses. Both of these measures have been described in detail in Hetherington et al. (1992), and will be presented only briefly here. These measures were composite factors aggregated from reports by multiple informants and by multiple methods. Informants included both residential parents, the target child, and one or two of the child's teachers, if available. Methods included observational ratings, standardized questionnaires, and structured interviews. Parents and

teachers completed the Achenbach Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983). Parents and children rated whether or not a specific list of behaviors had occurred in the previous 24 hours, using the behavior checklist of Patterson (1982). Parents and children completed a Child Competence Inventory (CCI) that was adapted from the items of the Adolescent Q-sort of Baumrind (1979). These items were presented to the child in the format endorsed by Harter (1982) rather than the Q-sort method. Teachers also completed the teacher form of the Harter (1982) Perceived Competence Scale for Children.

Our goal was to derive global measures of psychosocial functioning that incorporated multiple perspectives. Because of the large number of measures and informants, we decided to collapse measures into several broad-band factors. To form these composite factors, scores on the assessments were first converted to z scores and then averaged. Thus, the composite factor score is a z score with unit weighting of the measures constituting the factor. Because this procedure resulted in Cronbach alphas that were of an acceptable range (detailed below), we were confident of this data reduction procedure. Although differences in perspectives are of theoretical interest, our goal in this study was to provide a first look at these dimensions in relation to courtship patterns.

The composite factor of Child Externalizing Behavior measured the degree of acting-out, non-compliant, antisocial behavior of the child. This was an aggregate of parents' and teachers' ratings of externalizing behavior using the Achenbach checklist, reports of coercive behavior in the last 24 hours from parents and the child, reports of delinquent activities in the last 24 hours from the child, and observational ratings of antisocial behavior directed toward mothers, fathers, and siblings during videotaped interaction sessions. Cronbach *alphas* for this composite factor were above .72 for each of the three waves of data collection.

The composite factor of Child Social Competence measured the degree of prosocial behavior of the child. This was an aggregate of the reports of parents from the Social Competence scale of the Achenbach Checklist, parental and child reports of prosocial behavior in the last 24 hours, parental and child reports of socially responsible behavior on the Child Competence Inventory, reports from teachers of social competence on the

Harter (1982) scale, and observational ratings of prosocial behavior directed toward family members during videotaped interactions. Cronbach *alphas* for this composite factor were above .65 for each of the three waves of data collection.

Parent-child relationships. Two broad-band measures of parent-child relationships, those of Parent-Child Negativity and Parent-Child Positivity, were used in these analyses. As with the measures of child adjustment, these measures were composite factors aggregated from reports by multiple informants and by multiple methods. Both of these composite factors have been described in detail in Hetherington et al. (1992), and will be presented only briefly here.

The composite factor of Parent-Child Positivity measured the degree of warmth, involvement, and responsiveness in the relationship. This was an aggregate of scores from three interview scales and four observational scales. The interview scales of Expressive Affection and Instrumental Affection were Patterson's (1982) measures of parental warmth/ involvement. The interview scale of Parental Rapport was made up of the items assessing parental closeness and involvement from the Zill and Furstenberg National Survey of Children (Furstenberg, Windquist-Nord, Peterson, & Zill, 1983). Expressive Affection was a 7-point scale obtained from parent and child reports, and assessed such things as displaying affection, praising or complimenting, and talking or laughing together. Instrumental Affection, from parent and child reports, was an 8-item scale that measured the frequency of activities such as going for a walk, giving extra privileges, and going to special activities together. Parental Rapport was a 6-item scale available from self and spouse reports, and included items such as how close the parent feels to the child and satisfaction of the parent in his or her role as father or mother. Finally, observers rated parents on scales of Warmth/ Involvement, Assertiveness, Communication Skill, and Self-Disclosure during videotaped interactions with the child. Cronbach *alphas* for this composite factor were above .71 for ratings of mothers and .72 for ratings of fathers for each of the three waves of data collection.

The composite factor of Parent-Child Negativity measured the degree of conflict, punitiveness, and negative affect in the relationship. This was an aggregate of scores from four interview scales

and three observational scales. The interview scale of Conflict Over Daily Routines was a 9-item scale from parent and child reports measuring the frequency of conflict over issues such as household chores and schoolwork. The interview scale of Conflict Over Adolescent Issues was an 8-item scale from parent and child reports measuring the frequency of conflict over issues such as curfew, dating, and substance use. The interview scale of Parental Nagging Communication was a 6-item scale from parent and child reports measuring how often the parent talked with the child about something he or she did wrong, explained reasons for household rules, or listened to a child's argument for changing rules. The interview scale of Negative Sanctions was a 10-item scale from parent and child reports measuring how often the parent yelled, took away privileges, or sent the child to his or her room. Finally, observers rated parents on scales of Hostility, Coercion, and Transactional Conflict in videotaped interactions with the child. Cronbach alphas for this composite factor were above .74 for ratings of mothers and .80 for ratings of fathers for each of the three waves of data collection.

The measures that made up each of our broad-band factors are summarized in Table 1.

RESULTS

Number of Courtship Partners

Remarried women were asked to indicate the number of men they had dated prior to meeting their future spouse. The median number of men dated was between three and five dating partners. About 100% of remarried women had dated only their future spouse, and 32% of women indicated that they had dated more than 10 men prior to meeting their future spouse.

Remarried women were also asked to indicate the number of men they dated after meeting their future spouse but before becoming seriously involved with him. Fifty percent of remarried women did not date again after meeting their future spouse. Only 10% of remarried women dated more than two other men after meeting their future spouse.

The number of dating partners prior to meeting the future spouse was negatively correlated with Child Competence in the first two waves (wave 1 $r = -.32, p < .01$; wave 2 $r = -.30, p < .01$) and was negatively correlated with Mother's Positivity in the first wave ($r = -.27, p < .05$). Thus, remarried women who had previously dated many partners showed less warmth and involvement with their children in the first months after remarriage, and their children appeared less socially competent during the first year of remarriage. No other correlations reached significance (median $r = -.01$; range = $-.24$ for wave 2 Mother's Positivity to $+.21$ for wave 3 Mother's Negativity).

Length of Courtship

The length of the various courtship arrangements are described in Table 2. As was reported by O'Flaherty and Eells (1988), the length of courtship for remarried women tended to be relatively brief: 80% of the women in this sample dated their future spouses for a year or less before beginning cohabitation. For 38% of women, this interval was 3 months or less.

Partial cohabitation, in which future spouses lived together several days a week, but maintained separate residences, was a common pattern, with 69% of women reporting this pattern prior to re-

TABLE 1. MEASURES MAKING UP COMPOSITE FACTORS

Measure	Source
Child externalizing behavior	
Externalizing	Mother father teacher
Coercive behavior	Mother father child
Delinquent behavior	Child
Antisocial to mother	Observer
Antisocial to father	Observer
Antisocial to sibling	Observer
Child social competence	
Social competence	Mother father
Prosocial behavior	Mother father child
Social responsibility	Mother father child
Social competence	Teacher
Prosocial to mother	Observer
Prosocial to father	Observer
Prosocial to sibling	Observer
Parent-child positivity	
Expressive affection	Parent child
Instrumental affection	Parent child
Rapport	Parent spouse
Warmth/involvement	Observer
Assertiveness	Observer
Communication skill	Observer
Self-disclosure	Observer
Parent-child negativity	
Conflict: Routines	Parent child
Conflict: Adolescent	Parent child
Nagging communication	Parent child
Negative sanctions	Parent child
Hostility	Observer
Coercion	Observer
Transactional conflict	Observer

marriage. However, the length of time spent in partial cohabitation was also relatively brief. Only 20% of women reported that partial cohabitation lasted for more than a year, and the median length of time was 4 months.

Full cohabitation, in which future spouses combined possessions into a single home, was reported by 78% of remarried women. On average, full cohabitation lasted slightly longer than partial cohabitation. The median length of time in a common household prior to remarriage was 9 months. For 80% of the sample, full cohabitation lasted for 2 years or less. Across the entire sample, the longer the elapsed length of time since the divorce, the shorter the period of full cohabitation before remarriage ($r = -.39, p < .01$). Thus, women who had been divorced for longer periods of time remarried more quickly after full cohabitation began than women who had been divorced for shorter periods. This may reflect some hesitancy to enter a remarriage (i.e., live together longer) when relationships begin quickly after divorce. It is interesting to note, however, that a small minority of women remained in each of the three transition periods, (dating, partial cohabitation, and full cohabitation) for several years.

The length of dating prior to cohabitation, the length of cohabitation, and the total length of the courting relationship after separation and prior to remarriage were correlated with the dependent variables at each wave. None of these 54 correlations reached significance (median $r = .005$; range $-.207$ to $+.256$). Thus, the length of the courtship itself appeared to have little or no implications for remarried family relationships or child adjustments after remarriage.

The timing of courtship after separation is also summarized in Table 2. Perhaps the most striking aspect was the great diversity in the timing of courtship patterns. Some women moved immediately into a relationship which resulted in remarriage, while for others this interval was considerably longer. For 170Jo of women, the length of time from separation to cohabitation with the future husband was a year or less. For 19% of women, this interval was more than 7 years. A third of the women began dating their future spouses less than a year after separating from their first husbands. However, several women reported that they had known him prior to the separation. Twenty percent of women had waited 5 years or more after separation before dating their future husbands.

The correlations between these variables and the dependent variables of child adjustment and parent-child relationships after remarriage are displayed in Tables 3-5. The significant correlations indicate that the longer the period of time elapsed before the beginning of the courtship relationship (whether defined by dating, cohabitation, or remarriage) the less social competence displayed by the children in the beginning months following remarriage. In addition, if a longer period of time elapsed before courtship, after remarriage both mother-child and stepfather-stepchild relationships showed higher negativity, and mother-child relationships showed less positivity. This pattern was replicated when children's observed behavior to parents (which was not part of the composite measures) was correlated with these courtship timing variables. Table 6 lists the correlations between courtship timing and observer's ratings of

TABLE 2. TIMING OF DATING PATTERNS WITH FUTURE SPOUSES

	Mean	Median	Minimum	Maximum
Length of courtship arrangements				
Knew one another, not involved	16.3	2.5	0	168
Dated, lived apart	12.5	5	0	144
Partial cohabitation	9.1	4	0	72
Full-time cohabitation	13.3	8.5	0	49
Total length of relationship from separation to remarriage	28.8	25	0	88
Time from final separation to:				
Dating	15.5	9.5	0	87
Divorce	26.3	19	3	100
Cohabiting full-time	49.2	50	1	146
Remarriage	62.2	58	1	161
Time from divorce to remarriage	35.9	27.5	0	109

Note: $n = 58$, except for one mother for whom dating history was not available. Time is in months.

TABLE 3. PEARSON CORRELATIONS BETWEEN TIMING OF COURTSHIP AND CHILD ADJUSTMENT AFTER REMARRIAGE

	Child Externalizing			Child Competence		
	Wave I	Wave2	Wave3	Wave I	Wave2	Wave3
Time from final separation to:						
Dating	.10	.22	-.03	-.34..	-.19	.10
Divorce	.00	.11	-.19	-.11	-.09	.01
Cohabiting	.08	.20	-.02	-.38**	-.17	.07
Remarriage	.18	.25	.01	-.41**	-.21	-.03
Time from divorce to remarriage	.20	.20	.17	-.38**	-.17	-.03

**p < .01.

TABLE 4. PEARSON CORRELATIONS BETWEEN TIMING OF COURTSHIP AND MOTHER-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS AFTER REMARRIAGE

	Mother-Child Negativity			Mother-Child Positivity		
	Wave I	Wave2	Wave3	Wave I	Wave2	Wave3
Time from final separation to:						
Dating	.34**	.07	.18	-.39**	-.32*	-.14
Divorce	.25	.18	.20	-.21	-.21	-.16
Cohabiting	.29*	.20	.20	-.37**	-.22	-.12
Remarriage	.30*	.17	.17	-.37**	-.25	-.12
Time from divorce to remarriage	.14	.06	.01	-.25	-.13	.00

*p < .05. **p < .01.

TABLE 5. PEARSON CORRELATIONS BETWEEN TIMING OF COURTSHIP AND STEPFATHER-STEPCHILD RELATIONSHIPS AFTER REMARRIAGE

	Stepfather-Stepchild Negativity			Stepfather-Stepchild Positivity		
	Wave 1	Wave2	Wave3	Wave I	Wave2	Wave3
Time from final separation to:						
Dating	.31*	.02	.33*	-.16	-.16	.11
Divorce	.14	.09	.02	-.05	-.10	.05
Cohabiting	.31*	.10	.35*	-.13	-.04	.16
Remarriage	.27*	.15	.33*	-.20	-.15	.07
Time from divorce to remarriage	.19	.11	.35*	-.18	-.09	.03

*p < .05.

TABLE 6. PEARSON CORRELATIONS BETWEEN TIMING OF COURTSHIP AND OBSERVED CHILD BEHAVIOR AT WAVE 1

	Negativity		Positivity	
	To Mother	To Stepfather	To Mother	To Stepfather
Time from final separation to:				
Dating	.40**	.24	-.25	-.07
Divorce	.18	.04	-.17	-.05
Cohabiting	.32*	.31*	-.33*	-.22
Remarriage	.37**	.35**	-.34*	-.23
Time from divorce to remarriage	.28*	.35**	-.25	-.22

*p < .05. **p < .01.

positive and negative behavior of children directed toward their mothers and stepfathers. The longer the elapsed time before courtship for remarriage began, the more negative were children observed to be toward their mothers and stepfathers, and the less positive they were toward their mothers. It is important to note that most of these associations were only temporary. However,

negativity between stepfathers and their stepchildren was still higher 2 years after remarriage when courtship was introduced later rather than sooner after separation.

Thus, in the first months after remarriage, children whose mothers had moved relatively quickly to a new relationship displayed more social competence and directed less negative be-

havior toward their residential parents than children whose mothers began a later courtship. Moreover, remarried family relationships appeared less negative when courtship was introduced earlier after separation, and for stepfather-stepchild relationships, these effects persisted 26 months after remarriage. If our measure of negativity is an indicator of disruption in relationships, then these results stand in contrast to the hypotheses of Rodgers and Conrad (1986), who stated that earlier courtship for remarriage should be associated with greater disruption in custodial parent-child relationships.

Sequence of Courtship

By far the most common sequence of dating involved a gradual movement through stages from "dated but lived apart," to "lived together several days a **week**" or "almost every day," to "combined residences" before remarriage. Over half of the sample followed this particular sequence. Only 90Jo of the women ($n = 5$) did not live with their courting partners at least several days a week prior to remarriage. The sequences of dating patterns are summarized in Figure 1. Women whose relationships reverted to a previous stage (i.e., broke up during courtship) are not presented ($n = 4$). It should be kept in mind that the

relationships which are depicted here are only those which eventually resulted in remarriage. This study did not investigate those dating relationships which did not result in remarriage.

About half of the sample ($n = 26$; 450Jo) reported that they began to date their future spouse prior to the divorce of the previous marriage. Several women ($n = 15$; 260Jo) reported sharing residences full-time before the divorce of the previous marriage was finalized. Although it was not explicitly asked of the mothers, the timing of the remarriage and the length of the courtship suggested that some of these relationships began during the first marriage.

The effects of these courtship sequences on future stepfamily relationships and child adjustment were investigated through repeated-measures analyses of variance. No significant effects were found for whether or not dating began before the divorce of the first **marriage** was final. In addition, there were no differences found between families in which the mother cohabited before the divorce was final compared to those who did not follow that pattern. However, in families where mothers cohabited prior to remarriage, children showed higher levels of Social Competence, $F(1,41) = 6.22, p = .017$, and lower levels of Child Externalizing, $F(1,41) = 3.43, p = .071$, throughout the study, compared to families in which the mother did not cohabit. The means for Child Social Competence are depicted in Figure 2.

In addition, levels of Stepfather-stepchild Negativity were lower for families in which the stepfathers cohabited before remarriage, $F(1,38) = 4.52, p = .04$. These means, along with comparative means for Father-child Negativity in non-divorced families, are presented in Figure 3. As shown, mean levels of negativity for families who had cohabited were not different from those found in nondivorced families. As with social competence, cohabiting families appeared more positive, perhaps because of the longer period of adjustment.

Finally, a wave-by-group interaction was found for Mother-child Negativity, $F(2,37) = 8.59, p = .001$, indicating that negativity was highest for noncohabiting families one year after remarriage. No changes over time were found for families who had cohabited. These means are depicted in Figure 4, along with comparable means for negativity in divorced and nondivorced families. Similar to the above findings, cohabiting

FIGURE 1. SEQUENCE OF DATING PATTERNS LEADING TO REMARRIAGE

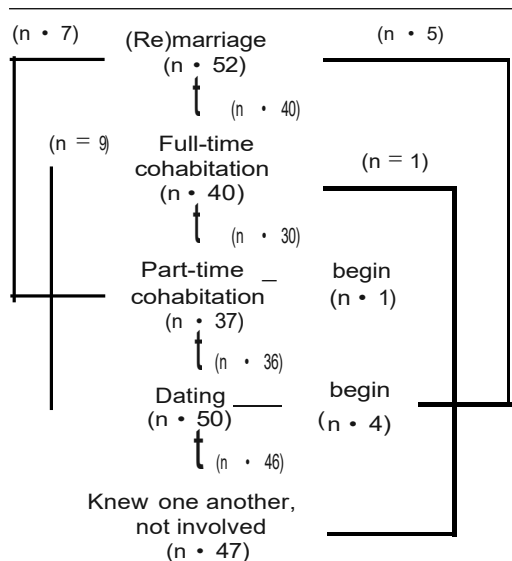
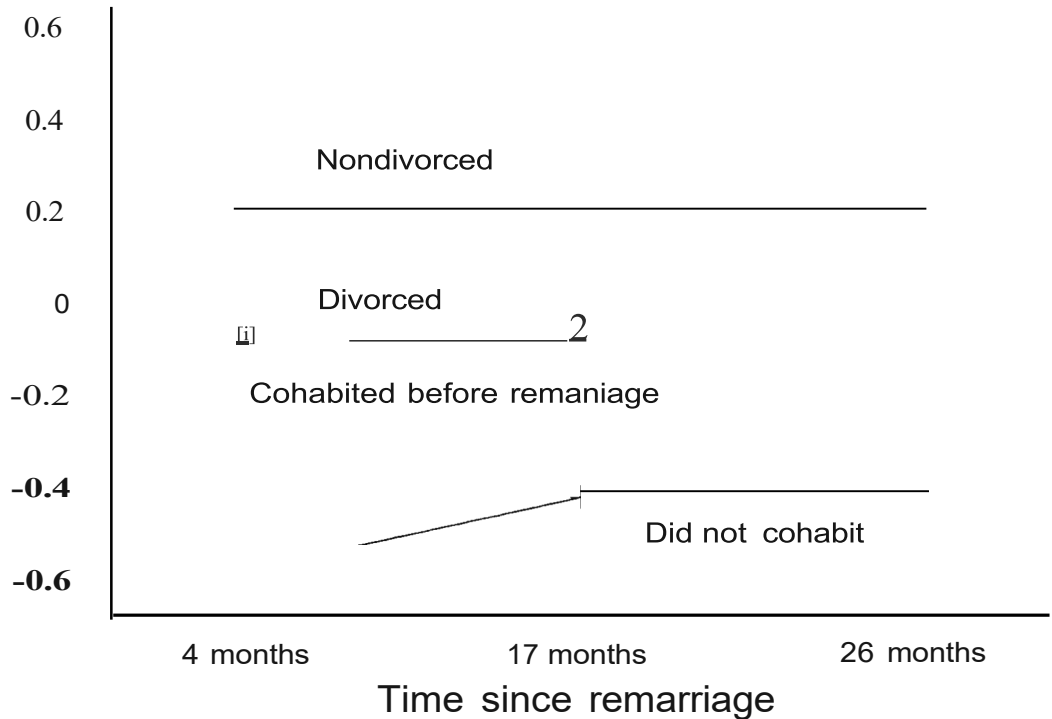


FIGURE 2. CHILDREN'S SOCIAL COMPETENCE AS A FUNCTION OF FAMILY SITUATION



families did not experience a difficult transition period after the remarriage.

Contact, Joint Activities, and Family Relationships Prior to Remarriage

As expected, most stepfathers gradually increased the amount of contact with their future stepchildren over the stages of courtship. Most stepfathers (750fo) had very little or no contact before dating began. After dating began, but before cohabitation, 25% of stepfathers had little or no contact with their future stepchildren. A small proportion of stepfathers (13%) continued to have little or no contact with their future stepchildren even when they were cohabiting at least part-time. During the dating period, 56% of mothers reported that their children were included in their activities with the future spouse at least once a week, but 17% of mothers reported that these joint activities occurred once a month or less. Similarly, 600fo of mothers reported activities between their children and the future stepfather oc-

curing once a week or more. About 15% of stepfathers interacted with their future stepchildren once a month or less during dating. Higher levels of contact with the future stepfather when dating but living apart were associated with higher stepfather-stepchild negativity at wave I ($r = .35, p < .01$) and at wave 2 ($r = .39, p < .01$).

Most of the mothers (78%) reported that their children responded either moderately or extremely positively to the joint activities with the future stepfather. Less than 4% of mothers reported that their children responded even moderately negatively. In addition, 64% of mothers reported being at least moderately satisfied with their child's behavior toward the future stepfather before remarriage, although 26% of mothers reported concerns in this area. Seventy-five percent of mothers reported being satisfied with their future spouse's behavior toward the child, while 16% reported being concerned about the future spouse's behavior. The child's satisfaction with joint activities correlated with Stepfather's Positivity in the first wave ($r = .38, p < .01$). The child's behavior

FIGURE 3. NEGATIVITY IN (STEP)FATHER-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS AS A FUNCTION OF FAMILY SITUATION

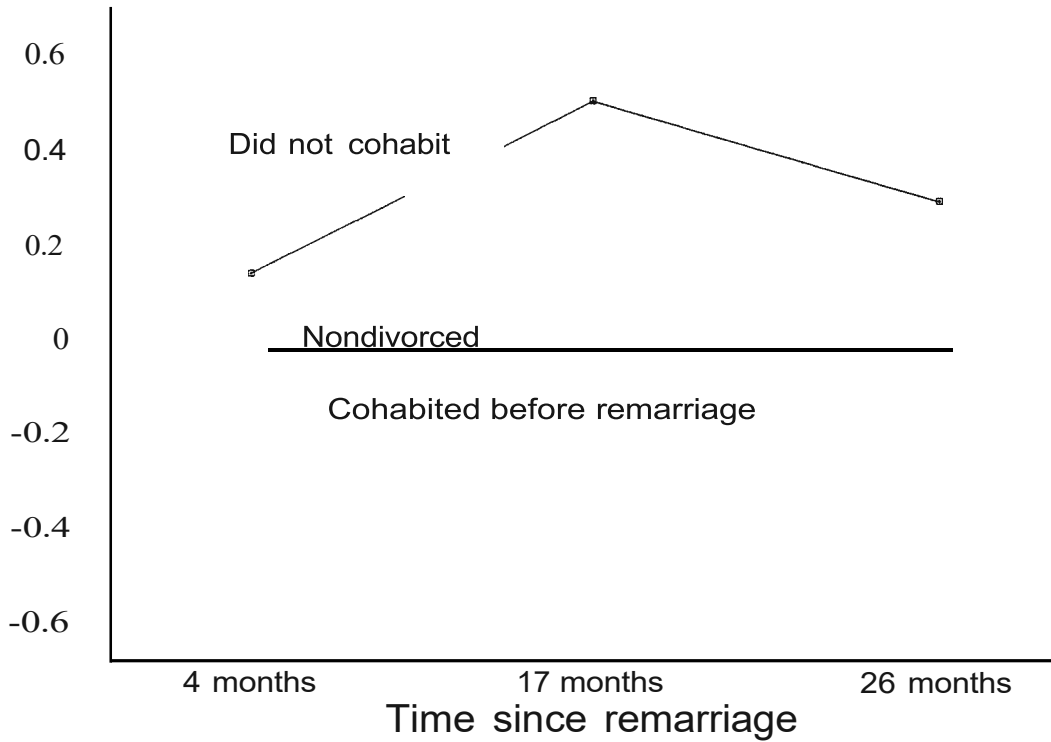


FIGURE 4. NEGATIVITY IN MOTHER-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS AS A FUNCTION OF FAMILY SITUATION



toward the stepfather prior to remarriage was also correlated with Stepfather's Positivity in the first months ($r = .43, p < .01$) and at the one-year follow-up ($r = .43, p < .01$). Similarly, the stepfather's behavior toward the child during courtship correlated with his positivity after remarriage ($r = .42, p < .01$) and two years later ($r = .35, p < .05$). It should be kept in mind that these ratings of satisfaction before remarriage are retrospective reports taken at the first wave. However, it is interesting to note that there were no significant correlations between the amount of contact children had with their future stepfathers and mother' reports of their children's satisfaction with those joint activities.

DISCUSSION

There was a great deal of diversity in the courtship patterns exhibited by the remarried mothers in this study. Some women apparently had returned to dating relationships established long ago; others developed new relationships. Some women began cohabiting immediately after separating from their first spouse; others waited several years after the divorce was final and never cohabited. The relationship of the courtier to his future stepchildren may have had no definite beginning: Some stepfathers had little contact with the children even while cohabiting several times during the week. What we have termed "partial cohabitation," or living together several days a week to almost every day, may involve a range of qualitatively different meanings, from spending a few nights together when children are away visiting the noncustodial parent, to being a regular part of the child's and family's daily routine. Nevertheless, these analyses provide a first look at the influence of different courtship patterns prior to remarriage on subsequent parent-child relationships and the adjustment of early adolescent children.

The length of the courtship itself appeared to have little implications for future stepfamily relationships. Neither the length of time spent dating (between separation and full cohabitation), nor the length of time spent cohabiting before the remarriage was related to the quality of parent-child relationships or child adjustment in the two years after remarriage. However, those who did cohabit before remarriage had less negative parent-child relationships after. Further, children of cohabiters appeared more socially competent through-

out the 2-year period after remarriage. There are two explanations for these findings. First, cohabitation may provide a more gentle transition to remarriage. The future stepfather is gradually incorporated into family routines, and the period of adaptation is longer, making remarriage seem less abrupt. Alternatively, cohabitation may be as difficult a transition as remarriage, but because the families in this study had adjusted to that earlier change, no effects of this were seen during the period after remarriage.

These results call into question assertions by Rodgers and Conrad (1986) that the earlier that courtship for remarriage is introduced after divorce, the greater the disruption of family and individual functioning. In our study, it appeared that a longer time spent in a single-parent household translated into *more* difficult relationships between the stepfather and his stepchildren. In addition, the longer the time spent in a divorced household, the lower were the levels of the child's social competence in the initial months following remarriage. There are several possible explanations for this result, which is contrary to expectation.

First, the multiple transitions involved in divorce, the establishment of a consolidated custodial mother family, and the subsequent establishment of a remarried family may be more difficult for children than a transition from living in a nuclear unit to living in a remarried family soon afterward. With a rapid transition to a new marriage, there is little time for children to adjust to living in a custodial mother household. It might be less disruptive for children to move into a remarried household relatively quickly following divorce than to establish a stable single-parent household only to have that stability disrupted by the new transition. Thus, the greater the length of time spent in a single-parent home may lead to greater disruption because routines have been established, and these cumulative effects of multiple reorganizations and transformations of family roles and routines are stressful for early adolescent children. Systems theory suggests, in fact, that systemic change (in this case, remarriage) occurs more easily in systems which are already in a period of change (in this case, separation and divorce) (e.g., Minuchin, 1985).

Second, divorced mothers may transgress generational boundaries by relying on their children, especially their daughters, for emotional support

(Hetherington, 1989). It has been suggested that such cross-generational alliances may place children's overall individual well-being at risk (Minuchin, 1974). In slow-to-remarry families, these may more likely occur for longer periods of time, resulting in more disruptive family relationships later. Support for this contention can be found in Figure 4, where Mother-child Negativity for continually divorced families showed a steady increase over the time period studied (see Stanley Hagan, Hollier, O'Connor, & Eisenberg, 1992, for a detailed discussion of parent-child relationships in this data set).

Third, mothers who have been divorced for longer periods may date more frequently, and thus children may be exposed to a greater number of men who try to assume the role of a stepfather. Because a greater number of dating partners was associated with lower child competence over the first year of remarriage, there is support for this assertion. Particularly for the early adolescent children in this study, who are undergoing the transformations of puberty, exposure to a number of their mother's dating partners may be difficult (Hetherington, 1989). In addition, because the number of dating partners was negatively correlated with Mother's Positivity after remarriage, it may be that women who date more frequently are less available to their children and offer them less support during the courtship process.

Fourth, it may be that the entrance of the stepfather, whenever it occurs, has beneficial effects for the development of social competence for children. Stepfathers can provide emotional support for the child, or be a resource or buffer for the child against conflictual relationships elsewhere in the family system (Hetherington, 1989; Hetherington, Stanley Hagan, & Anderson, 1989). Further, the entrance of the stepfather is likely to be associated with financial support for the entire family and emotional support for the mother, which are associated with more positive and authoritative parenting by custodial mothers (Hetherington, 1989; Hetherington et al., 1989).

Finally, it may also be that children who are less socially competent make courtship more difficult for divorced mothers. Some stepfathers may view the children as part of a "package deal" and may be less willing to participate actively with their future stepchildren (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1985). Courting partners who are apprehensive about developing a parent-child relationship

may be more likely to delay remarriage or to terminate their dating relationships if they view their future stepchildren as difficult. Because observations of children interacting with their mothers and stepfathers concur with the findings of negativity and positivity generally, there is support for this assertion as well. Also in this study, the quality of the relationship established prior to the remarriage was indeed indicative of future family relationships; however, this was based on retrospective evaluations, and must be interpreted cautiously.

Several factors which were not addressed in this study need to be considered in order to interpret these findings effectively. It is important to evaluate issues of cohabitation and remarriage as they relate to the larger family system, including the noncustodial father, and to the history of the original marriage. For example, the child's closeness and conflict with the noncustodial father before and after divorce could relate to the child's response to cohabitation, remarriage, and the acceptance of the stepfather into the family. Moreover, conflict between biological parents could also relate to the child's acceptance of cohabitation, remarriage, and the stepfather. Loyalty conflict issues such as these may be particularly salient for the early adolescent children in this study.

A larger systems perspective would recognize the contextual factors surrounding the dissolution of the first marriage. The circumstances surrounding the divorce will affect how children and parents adjust to a subsequent situation. For example, it may be important to consider whether the relationship with the cohabiting partner caused or contributed to the original divorce.

Further, the role of courtship that does not lead to remarriage is likely to have effects for both divorced mothers, their children, and their relationships. Experiencing several breakups following divorce may exacerbate feelings of depression in mothers; children, too, may experience sadness at the loss if a close relationship had developed with the courting partner.

The impact of courtship for relationships with the noncustodial parent also needs to be examined. Rodgers and Conrad (1986) posit that the coparenting relationship, the noncoparenting relationship, and the noncustodial parent-child relationship all are likely to undergo transformation during the courting process.

Finally, the impact of courtship for remarriage on younger and older children is likely to be very different. As stated previously, the early adolescent children in this study who are dealing with the developmental tasks of negotiating autonomy in family relationships, the onset of sexuality and appropriate display of affection toward family members, concern for privacy, and so on, may be more vulnerable or sensitive to the courtship patterns of their divorced parents than are younger or older children.

In essence, then, finding that the patterns of courtship for remarriage do appear to affect child adjustment and parent-child relationships may raise even more questions than it answers. At the very least, it leads us to look more closely at what had previously been assumed to be the more advantageous sequence and timing of courtship for remarrying families. Certainly, further work with larger samples of couples is merited to ascertain whether the trends found in this research are generalizable to the larger population of remarrying parents. Our contribution highlights other variables that ought to be considered before further investigations are undertaken.

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