Predicting Social Transitions from Adolescence to Adulthood: Marriage, Marital Quality, and Divorce

LifE

1. Research Questions

In this paper, we adopt a life course perspective to consider how experiences of adolescents in close relationships with parents, friends, and romantic partners as well as their later position in the life course shape their level of marital quality and influence marital stability in adulthood.

Previous research suggest that early social relationships are linked with adult partner relationships (e.g., Möller & Stattin, 2001; Sabatelli & Bartle-Haring, 2003; Scharf & Mayseless, 2001) and that parental divorce in childhood or adolescence increases the likelihood of adult children's divorce (e.g., Feng, Giarrusso, Bengtson, & Frye, 1999; Amato, 1996; Amato & DeBoer, 2001).

The primary goals of this study are

a) to examine the connections of adolescents' experiences in close relationships with later marital interactions and

b) to test the intergenerational transmission of divorce and marital quality.

2. Sample of Analysis – The LifE-Study

Our analysis is based on data from the german longitudinal LifE Study (Fend, Georg, Berger, Grob, & Lauterbach, 2002) with a sample size of N=1527. LifE-Study is representative with respect to marriage and birth rate for the cohort of 30 through 39 years old in Western Germany. Individuals with lower educational achievement and of non-german citizenship are slightly under-represented. Divorce rate is slightly higher than on the average.

The target population for this analysis consists of 839 married, and 205 ever divorced or separated individuals. 50.3% of the sample is female.

In 1983 a self-administered questionnaire was given to the then 16 years old individuals. In 2002 the sample was contacted again and mailed a survey questionnaire. At this point in time participants were 35.45 years of age on average (SD=0.57).

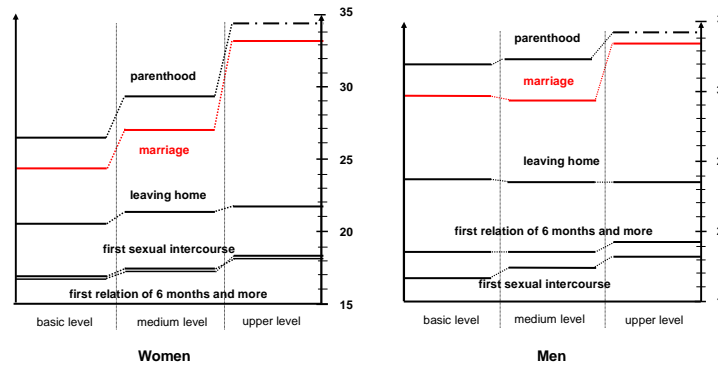## 3. Transitions to Adulthood in Germany

Women   **Men**

Figure 1: Social transitions from adolescence to adulthood.

Figure 1 shows the medians of the survival function of five selected social transitions from adolescence to adulthood. Analysis is done separately for females and males and for three distinctive levels of educational achievement.

Females' life course transitions seem to be very much structured by their educational and vocational attainment. Median age at marriage vary from 24.2 years (basic educational level) to 33.1 years (upper educational level) within the three distinguished groups of females.

Educational achievement exerts less influence on social trajectories of males.

4. Intergenerational Transmission of Divorce

As table 1 indicates, we found evidence of the transmission of divorce from parents to daughters but not from parents to sons. This is consistent with some prior studies (e.g., Bumpass, Martin, & Sweet, 1991; Amato, 1996; Feng et al., 1999). Other research found a similar, although weaker, transmission of divorce from parents to sons (e.g., Glenn & Kramer, 1987).

Inclusion of demographic and life course variables (as controls) in the sequential logistic regression did not weaken the intergenerational transmission of divorce from parents to daughters.

Table 1: Intergenerational Transmission of Divorce

	Offspring divorced or separated in adulthood					
	Female (n=468)			Male (n=440)		
Predictors	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Adolescence						
Family of origin:						
Parents divorced or separated[a]	2.15*	2.24*	2.54*	1.67	1.62	1.39
Educational level of the father	---	1.28+	1.34+	---	1.00	.94
Family size (number of children)	---	.88	.94	---	.74*	.75+
Adulthood						
Age and education:						
Age	---	.88	.87	---	1.49*	1.51+
Education[b]:						
Basic vocational training	---	1.90*	2.06+	---	.84	.78
College or university degree	---	.59	.32**	---	.52+	.47+
Work, marriage and family:						
Level of employment	---	---	1.03***	---	---	.99
Length of relationship with spouse	---	---	.82***	---	---	.85***
Parenthood (biological children)	---	---	.57+	---	---	.41**
χ^2	4.23*	13.66*	114.49***	2.57	14.67*	66.33***
df	1	6	9	1	6	9

Note: Table values are odds ratios. Significance tests are two-tailed: + p < .10; * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001
[a] Parents divorced or separated when offspring was in childhood or adolescence
[b] Reference value is sophisticated vocational training

5. Predicting Women's Marital Quality

The results in table 2 suggest that a warm and supportive *parent-child relationship* in adolescence is predictive of marital closeness and intimacy in females' partner relationships in adulthood. Conflictual relations with parents on the other hand predict later marital disagreement and conflict.

Contrary to our expectations, the *quality of parents' marital relationship* was not linked to females' later intimacy in partner relations. However, it was connected with the level of conflict, disagreement, and arguing in the adult child's marriage.

The *quality of cross-gender relationships* at the age of 16 turned out to be predictive of the later marital satisfaction in respect of intimacy as well as in respect of conflict and disagreement. Results indicate that it is the emotional experience in cross-gender relationships rather than sexual experience that is of importance for women's later intimate relations.

Table 2: Predicting Women's Marital Quality from Adolescent Relationships

Predictors	Intimacy Step 1	Intimacy Step 2	Conflict Step 1	Conflict Step 2
Adolescence				
Status of family of origin:				
Educational level of the father	-.07	-.06	-.02	-.04
Family size (number of children)	.07	.06	-.09+	-.07
Relationship between parents:				
Marital dissatisfaction of parents	-.05	-.08	.12*	.12*
Parents divorced or separated	-.02	-.01	.01	.00
Divorce x dissatisfactory relation	.02	.01	.04	.06
Parent-child relationship:				
Support and intimacy	.15**	.11*	---	---
Conflicts	---	---	.22***	.24***
Friendship experiences:				
Close relation to same-gender friends	.08	.08	-.06	-.07
Quality of cross-gender relationships	.12*	.12*	-.17**	-.16**
Age at first sexual intercourse	.03	.05	.00	.01
Adulthood				
Age and education:				
Age	---	-.06	---	.01
Education:				
Basic vocational training	---	-.03	---	-.03
College or university degree	---	-.07	---	.09+
Work, marriage and family:				
Level of employment	---	-.15*	---	.15**
Occupational self-efficacy	---	.07	---	.00
Length of relationship with spouse	---	.05	---	-.01
Marriage order (second marriage)	---	.05	---	.08
Parenthood (living with children)	---	-.09+	---	.17**
Traditional division of household chores	---	-.27***	---	.19***
N = 422				
R²	5.8%	12.9%	12.3%	18.2%

Two aspects of the offsprings' marital quality were measured:

Marital conflict: In 2002 three items from the Schneewind and Ruppert (1992) instrument of marital quality were applied to measure conflict, disagreement, and arguing in marital interactions. The scale has an alpha reliability of .83.

Closeness and intimacy between spouses was assessed in 2002 with six items adapted from the Furman and Buhrmester (1985) instrument of personal relationships and social networks. Alpha reliability of the scale is .86.

A factor analysis of all the items supported a two factor solution.

6. Predicting Men's Marital Quality

Men's results differ in significant ways from that of women (see table 3).

Parent-child relations in adolescence prove to be predictive only with respect to the level of conflict shown in later intimate partner relations. A conflict-laden parent-child relation in adolescence is associated with a higher level of conflict, yelling, and arguing in males' partner relations later in life.

For men, their parents' marital interaction and the *quality of their parents' marital relationship* turn out to be a role model for their own partner relation with respect to closeness and intimacy.

In contrast to females, the quality of cross-gender relations at the age of 16 does not exert influence on males' later intimate relationships. However, *close relations to same-gender friends* at this age do have a consistent positive impact on later intimate relationships, this being true with respect to both of our measures of marital quality.

Table 3: Predicting Men's Marital Quality from Adolescent Relationships

Predictors	Intimacy Step 1	Intimacy Step 2	Conflict Step 1	Conflict Step 2
Adolescence				
Status of family of origin:				
Educational level of the father	.02	.02	.04	.04
Family size (number of children)	-.04	-.03	.02	.01
Relationship between parents:				
Marital dissatisfaction of parents	-.13*	-.13*	.05	.05
Parents divorced or separated[a]	.06	.05	-.08	-.08
Divorce x dissatisfactory relation	.03	.01	-.06	-.03
Parent-child relationship:				
Support and intimacy	.03	.04	---	---
Conflicts	---	---	.11*	.15**
Friendship experiences:				
Close relation to same-gender friends	.15**	.13*	-.12*	-.09+
Quality of cross-gender relationships	.10	.10	-.07	-.09
Age at first sexual intercourse	.14**	.13*	-.06	-.06
Adulthood				
Age and education:				
Age	---	-.04	---	.03
Education[b]:				
Basic vocational training	---	-.07	---	.08
College or university degree	---	-.09	---	.13*
Work, marriage and family:				
Level of employment	---	.13*	---	-.12*
Occupational self-efficacy	---	.14**	---	-.10*
Length of relationship with spouse	---	-.01	---	-.01
Marriage order (second marriage)	---	-.02	---	.02
Parenthood (living with children)	---	-.13*	---	.16**
Traditional division of household chores	---	-.01	---	-.02
N = 417				
R²	7.3%	13.1%	4.5%	10.3%

Note: Table values are standardized regression weights.

Supportive relationships to same-gender friends and to peers seem to be of special importance for boys' development of social skills. These skills (in the long run) affect marital adjustment.

Literature offers quite a lot of evidence that early sexual intercourse in adolescence is associated with adjustment problems in adulthood (e.g., Möller & Stattin, 2001). In respect of marital adjustment we find this link only for boys.

Parents' divorce in childhood or adolescence (as the simple fact of the absence of a parent) does not add anything to explain *females' and males' marital quality* in adulthood.

Inclusion of demographic and life course variables (as controls) in the sequential multiple regression does just slightly reduce the predictive power of adolescent's experiences in close relationships (see table 2 and table 3).

7. Conclusions

We find strong evidence for the *intergenerational transmission of divorce* from parents to daughters (see table 1). Yet, the inheritance of divorce cannot simply be explained by the absence of a parent (usually the father). Results in table 2 and table 3 suggest that the parent-parent relation (as a role model for the children) and the parent-child relationship add significantly to explain the intergenerational transmission of marital quality and divorce.

A *warm and harmonious family environment* in childhood and adolescence proves to be *predictive of positive adult love relationships*. This turns out to be especially true for women. They seem (in the long run) to be more sensitive to the quality of relationships within their family of origin.

In adolescence, *same-gender and cross-gender relations* become more significant as sources for adolescent's social and socio-cognitive development. This study shows that, at the age of 16 for girls, experiences in cross-gender relationships, and for boys, experiences in same-gender relationships are most predictive of later marital adjustment.