Maternal repartnering: Do child physical custody arrangements matter?
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Parental separation and divorce have become increasingly common experiences for young children growing up in industrialized countries in recent decades. Between 1970 and 2000, for instance, the probability of a child experiencing parental union dissolution by age five roughly doubled in the UK (Kiernan 2004, Panico et al.2010). Furthermore, in the current context of high rates of non-marital births, cohabitation, union dissolution, and multiple-partner fertility, a large proportion of parents are likely to repartner subsequent to having one or more births in a previous union. For British couples who split up in the 1990s, 70% of separated and 43% of divorced individuals are estimated to have found a new partner within 5 years (Ermisch 2002).

However, it is generally observed that women, especially mothers, are much less likely than men to form a new partnership after union dissolution (deGraaf and Kalmijn 2003, Ermisch 2002). One hypothesis that has been advanced to explain this phenomenon is that, following divorce or separation, women most frequently become the primary custodial parent—they are more likely than men to have physical custody of children and spend more time than men in childrearing activities—which can increase the difficulty of finding a new romantic partner for several reasons (Goldsheider and Sassler 2006). To begin with, children are time consuming and having co-residential children diminishes the likelihood of having “leisure time” and, therefore, time to meet potential partners and build a new relationship. In addition, mothers with primary custody of their children may be penalized on the remarriage market relative to childless women or mothers with part-time custody; that is, the former may be less attractive to potential partners. Conversely, however, it is also possible that higher levels of father involvement (and/or child support payment) may deter mothers from seeking a new partner and potential co-parent.

Traditionally, laws regarding legal responsibility for children after a separation or divorce have evolved from a maternal-preference regime to a presumption of joint custody in the 70’s and 80’s in many industrialized countries (Nunley and Seals 2011). Linked to joint legal responsibility, joint physical custody has also been on the rise. While, in practice, there still exists a preference for awarding primary physical custody to mothers following parental union dissolution, shared physical custody has become increasingly common (Brinig and Buckley 1998). Moreover, the development of equally shared (fifty-fifty) custody arrangements which are now allowed in most countries (and explicitly encouraged in some cases; Fehlberg et al 2011) further suggest a trend toward increased equity between mothers and fathers with regard to childrearing responsibilities and time spent with children subsequent to union dissolution.

This paper adds to a small but growing literature on the determinants of maternal repartnering by using data from the British Millennium Cohort Study and discrete-time event history analyses to investigate the extent to which childrearing responsibilities and children’s characteristics influence the likelihood that a mother forms a new union subsequent to the dissolution of her union with a child’s father. Specifically, we examine the prevalence and predictors of maternal repartnering into marriage or cohabitation during the first 7 years of a child’s life, focusing on: (1) whether single mothers whose former partners share physical custody of their child(ren) are more likely to find new partners than single mothers who have sole or primary physical custody, and (2) how child characteristics such as age, gender, behavior, and disability may affect mothers’ chances of repartnering. We examine repartnering behaviors for mothers who were married or cohabiting as well as those who were single at the time of the child’s birth.
Background

From the mothers’ points of view, incentives for repartnering should be high. To begin with, repartnering may assist single mothers overcoming the adverse financial consequences associated with union dissolution and single parenthood (Dewilde and Uunk 2008; Poortman 2000). Maternal repartnering is also associated with decreased psychological distress and increased socio-emotional wellbeing and access to social resources (Osborne et al., 2012; Williams, Sassler, & Nicholson, 2008). Each of these factors may be beneficial for child development and well-being to the extent that they are associated with higher quality parenting behaviors and home environments. Therefore, from a policy perspective, maternal repartnering has the potential to benefit mothers, children, and their communities. For this reason public policy in many countries has been designed to promote romantic unions through marriage and, to a somewhat lesser extent, cohabitation (Dion 2005).

Yet, childrearing activities are time-consuming. As such, having children from a previous partnership in one’s household is likely to reduce the probability of repartnering by restricting adult social integration (Graaf and Kalmijn, 2003). That is, parents who take on considerable amounts of childrearing responsibility are likely to have less time for leisure activities or to participate in adult social activities, decreasing their chances of meeting prospective partners. Furthermore, once a parent meets a prospective partner, the amount of time the potential couple will have “to itself” (without children present) will also depend on physical custody commitments, and difficulty negotiating such time may impede relationship progression. This, too, suggests an expected inverse association between the amount of time a parent allocates to childrearing activities and the likelihood that he or she repartners (Bzosteck et al., 2011). However, at the same time, as joint custody implies maintaining relations with one’s ex-partner, joint custody may also be inversely associated with repartnering relative to primary custody. That is, mothers may not seek a new partner because they do not wish to jeopardize the quality of their (coparenting or other) relationship with the nonresident biological father, as they worry that repartnering may adversely influence the nonresident father’s payment of child support (which is correlated with father involvement), and/or because they have lesser incentive to seek a co-parent when the biological father is more highly involved with the child. Thus, whereas most theory and prior evidence suggest a primary custody “penalty” with regard to the likelihood of repartnering, these expectations are not fully unambiguous.

Child custody arrangements have received scant attention in the existing literature on parental repartnering following union dissolution (divorce or break-up). Here, we are particularly interested in the role of child physical custody,1 which represents the amount of time a child spends in the care of (and generally residing with) a parent, and may be determined formally, by court order, or informally by explicit or implicit parental agreement. The role of physical custody

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1 Child physical custody differs from joint legal custody, which refers to the authority of a parent, as granted by law or court order, to make major childrearing decisions (e.g., in areas such as education, medical care, religion, etc.). Physical custody specifically refers to time spent in the care of a parent. It could be shared equally (half of the time) or unequally. In general, shared physical custody suggests that each parent cares for a child more than 30% and less than 70% of the time, and equal shared custody suggest approximately a 50-50 split (sometimes operationalized as falling between 45% and 55% time with each parent); primary custody generally suggests that one parent cares for the child 70% of the time or more (Berger et al., 2008).
merits additional consideration in the parental repartnering literature because the influence of the presence of children from a prior relationship on the probability of repartnering for both mothers and fathers may vary substantially by physical custody status or, more precisely, by the de facto amount of time a parent spends with a child in his or her care. Indeed, that primary physical custody following union dissolution in the advanced industrialized countries has traditionally been the responsibility of mothers may be a key factor for understanding historical gender disparities in parental repartnering. Although both legal and de facto maternal primary custody has traditionally been, and continues to be, the dominant arrangement, the proportion of families engaging in equal joint physical custody is increasing throughout the industrialized countries.

To date, the studies on joint physical custody have mainly focused on child well-being in terms of behavior and psychological development (Berger et al., 2008; Bauserman 2002). Few studies have focused on the role of physical custody in influencing parental repartnering. We begin to fill this gap by using data from a large UK birth cohort to estimate associations of de facto physical custody arrangements with the likelihood that a mother repartners into marriage or cohabitation following the dissolution of her (marital or non marital) relationship with a child’s father during the first 7 years of the child’s life.

Our primary research question is whether single mothers whose former partners’ share de facto physical custody are more likely to find new partners than those who have their children full-time (or on a primary basis). We pay special attention to the path through which the mother becomes a lone mother (either at birth or after a separation/divorce), as well as whether there are differences by socioeconomic status. Moreover, we also investigate the extent to which child characteristics (age, gender, behavior, disability) may affect mothers’ chances of repartnering.

**Data and Methods**

Our data are drawn from the Millennium Cohort Study, a recent, nationally representative birth cohort study in the UK. These data are well suited to our analyses given the high prevalence of nonmarital births and high rate of marital dissolution in the UK. As such, parental repartnering is becoming an increasingly common event in a child’s life. Current estimates suggest that 19% of children born in the UK are born to a “lone parent” family and that almost 19% will experience parental union dissolution during the first five years of life (Panico and al. 2010).

The initial Millennium Cohort Study sample includes more than 19,000 households who had an infant born in the UK during a 12-month period from 2000 to 2001. This paper uses data from the first four sweeps of interviews, which were carried out through home visits when the cohort member was approximately age 9 months and 3, 5 and 7 years. The overall sample size for households that were both interviewed in each sweep and in which biological mother was always the main survey respondent is 10,651. The Study provides information on de facto child custody and the involvement of the non-resident parent from birth on. The date of parental separation and the date of entry into the household of a new partner are also reported at each sweep, as is detailed information on the socioeconomic circumstances of the household. Finally, whereas

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2 The main respondent is usually the mother (98%); co-resident partners were also interviewed, separately. Non-resident parents were not directly interviewed.
very rich information is available about focal children’s characteristics and behaviors, less information is available about their siblings.

Our analyses focus on 3,386 children (32%) who experienced parental union dissolution (defined as non-coreidence of their biological parents) at any point between birth and age 7. This therefore includes both single mothers at birth and those who were in a co-resident relationship at the birth of the child which subsequently dissolved. We use a series of discrete time event history models (logit regressions) to estimate associations of lagged measures of de facto child physical custody arrangements (how often the father sees the child: frequent – several times a week; standard – once or twice a week; infrequent – less often; never visits) with the likelihood of maternal repartnering in the subsequent period. We sequentially add to these models the following sets of covariates: (1) child support receipt (regular, irregular, none); (2) child characteristics (age, gender, ethnicity, limiting condition, behavior problems); and (3) sociodemographic controls (whether the mother’s parents separated during her childhood, the mother’s age, education, whether she and the father were coresident at the focal child’s birth, weekly parental equivalized income, whether the mother had a limiting condition, grandparent presence in the household, full and half sibling presence in the household, father’s co-residence at birth, and the mother’s work status at the 9-month interview). Finally, we test for moderation by estimating separate models by marital status at birth and poverty status at the 9-month interview. Future analyses will test these models with the weekly number of overnight stays with the non-resident father; this information was collected at the age 5 and 7-year interviews.

**Preliminary Results and Implications**

Preliminary results suggest that, contrary to much of the existing theory, higher levels of visitation by the non-resident father was linked to lower maternal repartnering rates in the following period. This finding was robust to all of the model specifications. We find little evidence linking either child support receipt (with or without accounting for physical custody) or child characteristics (limiting longstanding illness, gender, socio-emotional problems) to maternal repartnering, except for the child’s ethnicity (mothers of white children were more likely to repartner than mothers of non-white children). There was little evidence that these associations are moderated by poverty status (at the 9-month interview), although an interaction with marital status at birth was detected. Our results therefore suggest that recent trends toward increased shared (50-50) physical child custody in industrialized countries are likely to diminish the likelihood of mothers repartnering, at least during the first 7 years of a child’s life.
Bibliography


