The timing of parental divorce and filial obligations to care for parents later in life

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Introduction

In the UK, the majority of care for older people is provided by adult children or spouses (Pickard et al., 2000; Arber and Ginn, 1991), with the role of adult children being particularly important in the care of people aged 85 and over – the fastest growing age group in the UK (Tomassini, 2005). It has been conjectured that demographic changes (increasing life expectancies and reduced fertility) are reducing the availability of mid-life cohorts to provide this care, creating an ‘informal care gap’ which has been projected to result in a short-fall of 250,000 kin care-providers in the UK by 2041 (Pickard, 2008). More than this, there are a number of other social trends that are expected to contribute to the decline in availability of informal care, the scale and impact of which are not well understood. These include the focus of this study - weakened intergenerational solidarity due to the detachment of adult children from their parents in families where parental marital disruption has occurred (Wells and Johnson, 2001; Bulcroft and Bulcroft, 1991); increasing childlessness (Evandrou, 1998); increased female participation in the workforce (Mooney et al., 2002); and the changing nature of filial obligations (Dans and Silverstein, 2006; Finch and Mason, 1991). Consequently there is rising concern about the provision of informal care for older people over the next 30 years, since social care policy in the UK makes strong assumptions that the future short-fall in formal care services will be met by adult children, who are expected to be available and willing to care for their ageing parents.

Literature review

Although a number of quantitative studies from the USA, UK, Norway and the Netherlands have conjectured that parental divorce weakens child-parent bonds, and the obligations adult children feel to care for their parents later in life, the processes by which this occurs are not well understood (Cooney et al., 1995; Furstenburg et al., 1983). The majority of these and other related studies have focused on experiences of parental marital disruption that occur before a child reaches young adulthood. This is underpinned by the perceived importance of the early phases of socialisation that occur during childhood, and the attachment that forms between children and parents during this time (Woodward and Ferguson, 2000). Where divorce results in reduced contact with one parent during childhood (because they leave the family home following separation or divorce), it is thought that the child’s attachment to the non-custodial parent (which in approximately 90% of divorces is the father – Seltzer, 1991) will deteriorate. Less contact and attachment to non-custodial fathers is repeatedly cited in studies that find divorce during childhood has a more detrimental effect on father-child bonds later in life compared to divorce occurring later in a child’s life (Booth and Amato, 1994).

Crucially, these literatures rarely follow up on children beyond young adulthood (Shapiro, 2003). Indeed, it is broadly assumed that “the quality of [child-parent] relationships soon after off-spring reach adulthood is likely to set the tone for relations throughout the life course” (Booth and Amato, 1994: p.21). Statements such as this overlook the effects of experiences and events that unfold from young adulthood onwards, such as child bearing – or from the older parent’s perspective, the arrival of grandchildren - and the potential for these events to moderate the negative effects of earlier experiences of parental divorce. Furthermore, these literatures do not consider the effects of parental divorce that occurs during an adult child’s mid-life. Divorce rates in older age groups are increasing in the UK, which suggests more adult children are likely to experience parental divorce during mid-life.

Methods

As noted in the section above, a lifecourse perspective on parental divorce and filial obligations remains notably absent from pre-existing research – one reason for this is the absence of quantitative data tracing adult children from childhood through to mid-life, with sufficient information about child-parent relations and parental marital disruption. We achieved a lifecourse perspective on these issues through the collection
of retrospective qualitative data about 42 participants’ lives (aged 36-64) from birth to the time of interview. A multi method approach using life history calendar, life narrative and semi-structured interview methods was adopted, enabling participants to triangulate information from each stage, providing the necessary structure to support their recollection of events over long periods of time.

**Findings**

The findings of the present study highlight the preoccupation of pre-existing research with experiences of parental divorce that occur before the child reaches adulthood. Instead our findings foreground experiences of parental divorce that occurred relatively recently in participants’ lives, during mid-life. It is demonstrated that the emotional distress of these experiences, and involvement in the divorce process, has detrimentally affected the obligations participants feel to care for their parents, just as their parents reach an age when care becomes increasingly necessary. This is represented in Figure 1 as the second of two pathways to weakened filial obligations to care for parents in later life, and suggests that the postponement of divorce may not represent an optimal strategy for minimising the negative outcomes for ‘the family’ – despite commonly being seen as such.

The paper has contrasted these narratives with the experiences of participants who encountered parental divorce during childhood - for some, the passing of time after these childhood experiences had ‘healed’ relationships with their parents. It is also demonstrated that the continued downward flow of support from parent to child throughout participants’ adulthoods, and the reciprocal return of this support (i.e. intergenerational exchange), has helped to reconstruct and nurture child-parent relations during this period of the adult child’s life. Furthermore, the research illustrates how participants’ child bearing (the arrival of grandchildren for the older parent generation) has in some cases mediated the harmful effects of parental divorce that occurred during childhood, by effectively bringing the adult child and parent closer together, and re-introducing intergenerational solidarity. Thus, the parochial focus on the harmful effects of *childhood* experiences of divorce, and the assumption that child-parent relations remain unchanged once a child reaches adulthood have been disrupted, while the deterioration of adult child-parent relations following mid-life experiences of parental divorce has been revealed.

When considering the effects of parental divorce early in a child’s life, our findings show that it is important to distinguish between children who lose contact with one parent, and those who retain some contact with both. This is reflected in the conceptual diagram in Figure 1, which shows that the permanent severing of the tie between a child and their non-custodial parent results in the first of two pathways to weakened filial obligations to care for older parents. Furstenberg *et al.*’s (1983) research has rightly focused attention on the importance of the permanent ruptures in child-parent ties that can occur after childhood divorce. However, this noted, the present study has shown for the first time that there is significant potential where these ties are not permanently severed to re-strengthen child-parent relationships later in an (adult) child’s life. Indeed, we found considerable evidence that this had occurred, usually once participants had reached the latter stages of young adulthood or later.

This study also indicates that parental marital break-down in older couples where divorce was rejected in favour of ‘living together apart’ has detrimental consequences for filial obligations, although since parents remain co-resident it is possible that spouse care may still be available. There was some sense that parents had rejected divorce perhaps due to the social norms of marriage in this cohort or the fear of being alone during old age, instead forming an alternative living arrangement with limited mutual interaction. The significant implication of this was the damage inflicted on relations between fathers and their adult children. Several participants spoke of becoming detached from their fathers as a result of them becoming socially withdrawn and disinterested in nurturing family relations following the break-down of their marriage.

In contrast to the notion of older parents tolerating deteriorating marital relations and opting to remain married and residing with their spouse, we also found evidence of the older parent generation becoming more anxious to seize new opportunities during retirement, illustrated by the following quote:
“I think they just got bored of each other to be honest! They got married when they were 20, and they’d done all that travelling together, had all that excitement. And then they were just here, in Southampton, just the two of them…sort of thinking, is this it? I think people look at retirement differently now – it’s not about slippers, arm chair, telly anymore” (Janet, 46).

Therefore, where other studies have highlighted the potential for individualisation in the adult child generation to destabilise family solidarity, our research suggests that the individualisation of older populations may be equally as important. Indeed, recent statistics published by the Office for National Statistics show that the divorce rate in men aged over 60 has increased by 0.3 per 1000 married population over the last decade, and the divorce rate in men aged 50-59 has increased by 1.3 per 1000 married population during the same period. These increases occurred at a time when the all ages divorce rate (for men) decreased by 1.7 per 1000 married population (these patterns were similar for women). These data may reflect that changing norms of retirement and expectations of marriage and partnership in later life (such as those hinted at in the quote above) are gathering pace. The significant implication of these patterns is that a larger proportion of older people’s marriages are dissolving as they approach the stage in their lifecourse where they are more likely to develop care needs. Our findings suggest that these marital dissolutions are disrupting the bonds between older people and their adult children, and since spouses and adult children provide the majority of care for older people in the UK, these groups are entering old age in a more vulnerable position.

**Conclusion**

Currently, adult social care policy in the UK assumes that adult children and spouses will be available and willing to fill the care gap created by an ageing population and the deficiencies of formal care services for coping with this need – our findings run counter to this assumption. There is undoubtedly political recognition that social support systems for older people are in need of transformation, and some significant investment has been made in consultations to develop a framework for policy reform (for example the Dilnot Report, 2011). This report and others like it, however, have failed to recognise that adult children may be unavailable to provide care for their parents where they have lost contact with a non-custodial parent, or unwilling where relationships with one or both parents have deteriorated due to their divorce. Since divorce rates in older age groups in the UK are rising, our findings could become increasingly salient over the coming years. Of particular concern is evidence in this study of the intensified vulnerability of fathers.
This implies that older divorced male cohorts are more at risk than previously thought, and social care policy makers should be mindful of this.

References


