On the Rebound: Time to Remarriage and Subsequent Union Stability

ABSTRACT

Self-help books frequently advise readers to avoid rushing into new relationships after a break-up. To date, there has been little evidence supporting this recommendation. This paper tests the effects of rebound time, measured as time elapsed between marital dissolution and the formation of a new union, on remarriage stability. Data from the first wave of the National Survey of Families and Households and generalized additive models reveal no evidence of a rebound effect on remarriage stability. This finding remains unchanged after adjusting for various demographic differences between respondents.

Running head: On the Rebound

INTRODUCTION

Many self-help books offer a piece of advice that is simple and familiar: after a relationship ends, wait before starting a new one. The following recommendations are typical:

> "Rebound" relationships can also pose a problem. Some persons, after the breakup of a long-standing relationship, are tempted to rush into a new relationship. . . . They commit to a serious relationship prematurely. Their "rebound" union will work for awhile, but in time overlooked and unresolved difficulties will have to be faced and settled (Snyder, 1993, p. 122).

> You can avoid the pain of a rebound relationship by following one simple rule: stay away from new relationships until you know you are good and ready. . . . There's no harm in rebound relationships if you take them for what they are—temporary and not particularly meaningful (Forrester, 2005).

This paper analyzes National Survey of Families and Households data to determine whether rebound time, defined as months elapsed between an initial divorce and subsequent remarriage, affects that remarriage's stability.

No studies have tested the rebound hypothesis since Aguirre and Parr in 1982. Analyzing data from the National Survey of Family Growth, they found no evidence of a rebound effect. However, above and beyond its antiquity their study suffers from three shortcomings: 1) They only examine time to remarriage, failing to take new unions begun via nonmarital cohabitation into account. Cohabitation is especially common among divorced people; by extension, many individuals in second marriages first live together (Bumpass & Lu, 2000). 2) Aguirre and Parr (1982) did not employ event

history methods, nowadays considered indispensable for studying marital stability (e.g., Allison, 1995). 3) Potential rebound effects were constrained to linearity. As I suggest in the follow paragraphs, various plausible explanations for rebound effects posit nonlinear relationships to divorce risk. The current study overcomes all of these limitations.

The self-help and research literatures offer several reasons why hasty remarriage might be correlated with higher rates of divorce (there are no arguments to suggest lower dissolution rates for second marriages quickly following first divorces). These will now be considered. Two of these arguments suggest specific functional forms in the relationship between rebound time and divorce risk, so the data may allow me to adjudicate between them.

Inadequate Search Times

Remarrying quickly may represent an inadequate search process: overly eager divorcées may choose second husbands or wives who are not good bets for lasting unions. But research by South (1995) casts doubt on this hypothesis. He shows that marriage market characteristics like the availability of marriage-appropriate singles cannot account for the well-known relationship between youthful marriage and divorce. This finding suggests that premature marriage does not reflect the failure to consider spousal alternatives, potential mates that might otherwise provide inducements to divorce. Since South analyzed National Longitudinal Survey of Youth data, his respondents were young and therefore mainly in first marriages. Accordingly, his findings may not hold for higher order unions.

Adultery, Selection, and Divorce Proneness

It has been suggested that second marriages have high divorce rates because they draw on a population that has already demonstrated its willingness to dissolve marriages (Martin & Bumpass, 1989). Put another way, people in second marriages are disproportionately divorce prone. Why is this the case? Some may have married the adulterous partners involved in the break-up of their initial marriages, which would naturally produce short rebound times. These marriages are comprised of people who have already demonstrated their willingness to commit adultery, so they may do so in their second marriages as well. Although it is not known how many second marriages involve adulterous partners, extramarital affairs may have occurred in over 40% of dissolved marriages (South & Lloyd, 1995; Stewart et al., 1997). Perhaps a meaningful number of remarriages therefore result from adultery in first marriages. In turn, the willingness to philander may ultimately sabotage second marriages. If this line of reasoning holds, it implies a selection mechanism to account for the relationship between short rebound times and high divorce rates in remarriages. This would cause the likelihood of divorce to spike at short rebound times, reflecting adulterously divorce-prone individuals who rush into second marriages, then decrease monotonically.

Inadequate Postdivorce Recovery

Many of the major real-world transitions associated with marital disruption, such as residential mobility, take place within a year or two (McLanahan, 1983). On the other hand, the clinical literature does not offer precise insight into how long the emotional recovery from divorce takes. The best-known account, from Judith Wallerstein and her colleagues, is typical in its vagueness:

> The average woman was well into her third post-separation year before life assumed a new coherence and stability; the average man accomplished this

> restabilization earlier, within the second year. . . . One sobering finding was that almost five years post-separation, 31 percent of the men and 42 percent of the women had not yet achieved psychological or social stability (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980, pp. 190, 191).

It can more reasonably be claimed that different components of emotional well-being recover at different rates (Stewart et al., 1997; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). The upshot is a theme expressed by nearly all self-help books addressing rebound relationships: "A new relationship cannot begin until you have grieved the last relationship (Mellody & Freundlich, 2003, p. 139)." Therefore, a longer wait after marital disruption may produce greater emotional health, and potentially more stable remarriages. But how long? The ambiguity and conflicting results characterizing the extant literature makes it difficult to offer a single, precise estimate. It is safer to say that different people recover at different rates, so the likelihood of divorce should decrease gradually and monotonically as rebound time increases.

METHODS

Data

This research uses data from the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), a national sample survey of American adults 19 and over (Sweet, Bumpass, & Call, 1988). Thirteen thousand and seven respondents were interviewed in 1987 and 1988. These include a main sample of 9,643 plus an oversample of minorities, newlyweds, single parents, individual parents in stepparent families, and individuals in cohabiting unions. Although many NSFH respondents participated in two follow-up interviews, only the Wave 1 data are analyzed. Prospective data from two or three

waves offer no great advantage and would yield a prohibitively small sample.

Analysis is limited to female respondents who remarried after an initial divorce (N = 1,171). Men (N = 740) are omitted for two reasons. First, men's marital histories have long been known to be comparably unreliable (Bumpass, Martin, & Sweet, 1991). This appears to be the case here, given that the NSFH data contain far fewer remarried men despite the fact that they remarry at a higher rate than do women. Second, analyzing only women makes it probable that respondents are living with any minor children they have adopted or given birth to; 90% of divorced mothers have at least partial physical custody (Cancian & Meyer, 1998). This is important due to data limitations discussed below.

NSFH case weights are used so the data comprise a nationally representative sample. A common strategy for weighted data is to include the variables used to calculate the weights as independent variables in regression analyses (Winship & Radbill, 1994), but this is not feasible given the complexity of the NSFH weighting scheme. Unfortunately sample weights can adversely affect standard errors, resulting in artificially inflated test statistics. One response is to estimate Huber-White standard errors, but these are not available for the generalized additive models employed in this paper. Accordingly, the computed t-ratios should be viewed as biased upwards.

I delete listwise any cases with missing or invalid data on when respondents' first marriages ended (N = 57), event histories of second marriages (N = 28), and cohabitation (N = 13). The paucity of missing data on the independent variables minimizes the potential utility of strategies like imputation.

Variables

The dependent variable for this paper is second marriage duration. Marriage start times are measured in two ways: 1) The month of legal marriage; 2) The month

spouses began living together, either by marriage or cohabitation. Second marriages ending in spousal death or intact at the time of the interview are considered censored. Couples that have been separated for a year or more from their second spouses are treated as divorced; Bumpass, Martin, & Sweet (1991) show that the chance of reconciliation at this point is slight. Data on marriage duration, measured in months, are derived from retrospective marital histories. Summary statistics for this and other variables are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Here

I choose not to analyze cohabiting relationships that do not end in marriage. Cohabiting unions are notoriously unstable, with very high dissolution rates (Bumpass & Lu, 2000). Perhaps as a result, almost no sociodemographic characteristics affect union stability. Even age at union formation (Ruf & Qian, 1999) and parental divorce (Wolfinger, 2001), two of the strongest predictors of marital stability, make no difference. Taken together, these findings suggest that attempting to predict cohabitation stability is not a tenable proposition.

The primary independent variable is rebound time, the number of months elapsed between the end of respondents' first marriages and when new unions are formed. Marriage end time is measured when respondents stopped living together; new union formation is alternately measured as the beginning of their remarriages or the point at which respondents begin cohabiting with their remarriage partners. All analyses include one control variable, the century month respondents' first marriages ended in separation. This is vital given secular trends in both remarriage (Martinson, 1994) and divorce (Cherlin, 1992).

Additional variables are added to rule out the possibility that any observed effects of rebound time on divorce risk are the product of sociodemographic differences between respondents. With one exception, each of these items is correlated both with time to remarriage and subsequent marital stability. Although the list does not contain

every known predictor of marital stability, it accounts for most of the important differences that might produce spurious correlations between rebound time and the stability of second marriages. Little additional information about former second spouses is available in the NSFH.

Ethnicity, related both to remarriage and divorce (Bramlett & Mosher, 2001), is coded as white, Black, and other; white is the reference category. Sample size considerations preclude more than three categories. Parental divorce decreases the likelihood of remarriage (McLanahan & Bumpass, 1988) and increases the likelihood that second marriages will dissolve (Amato & Booth, 1991; Wolfinger, 2000), so it is measured with a dummy variable. Older divorcées have both lower remarriage rates and lower divorce rates in remarriages (Bramlett & Mosher, 2001); age at the end of first marriage is highly correlated with first marriage length (r = .91), so any argument for using one in lieu of the other is moot. Children decrease the likelihood of remarriage (Martinson, 1994) and increase divorce rates in second marriages (White & Booth, 1985), so the presence of minor children at the end of respondents' initial marriages is measured with a dummy variable. This is constructed with information on fertility, adoption timing, and childhood mortality; unfortunately, it is not possible to verify that children are actually living with respondents. However, this is likely given high levels of female custody. The final independent variable used is education, measured at the time respondents end their initial marriages. Unfortunately the data are not of adequate quality to treat education as a time-varying covariate. Although education does not appear to be related to women's remarriage rates (Martinson, 1994), educated women report lower divorce rates in second marriages (Bramlett & Mosher, 2001). More generally, education is such a broad marker of social well-being that it should be taken into account.

Analysis

Rebound time may well have nonlinear effects on the stability of second marriages. The explanations considered here suggest that the likelihood of divorce probably decreases as rebound time increases, but it is not known whether this decline is especially precipitous in the first months after marital dissolution. Perhaps down the road the likelihood of divorce increases, as the pool of still-single divorcées shrinks to include only those ill-equipped to succeed at remarriage. These and other mechanisms may produce otherwise unobserved heterogeneity among remarried people. With this in mind, there is little way of knowing ahead of time what the functional form of the relationship between rebound time and remarriage stability will resemble.

The solution is a generalized additive model (Hastie & Tibshirani, 1990; for overviews see Hastie, 1993; Beck & Jackman, 1998), hereafter referred to as a GAM. The relationship of each independent variable in a GAM can be specified to have a traditional linear relationship to the dependent variable, as in the generalized linear model, or a nonparametric, potentially nonlinear relationship. I use the implementation developed by Royston and Ambler (2002), where nonparametric relationships are optimized via cubic smoothing splines; lowess local regression is the alternative. The effect of each independent variable, whether linear or nonparametric, is net of all other independent variables as for the generalized linear model. For nonparametric terms, a likelihood ratio test can determine whether the fitted relationship to the dependent variable departs significantly from linearity. Since marriage duration is a time-dependent phenomenon, event history analysis is appropriate. I therefore estimate GAMs where the link function is the Cox proportional hazard model. This accounts for differential exposure to the risk of marital dissolution, as well as right censoring.

The three temporal predictors in my analyses, rebound time, century month of

initial separation, and age at separation, are all treated as nonparametric. Estimates for these terms are based on four degrees of freedom; preliminary analyses employing between three and five degrees of freedom did not produce substantially different results. All other independent variables are categorical and are therefore entered into analyses as linear predictors.

RESULTS

Table 2 shows the effects of rebound time and other factors on the stability of second marriages, excluding premarital cohabitation. Model 1 shows that rebound time has no relationship to divorce risk. The linear coefficient, half the size of its standard error, is nonsignificant; so too is the likelihood ratio test measuring departure from linearity (The nonparametric results of GAMs are sometimes shown as plots; I do not do so since rebound time has no relationship, linear or otherwise, to divorce risk.) In contrast, the century month of respondents' initial separation has a statistically significant and nonlinear association with marital stability. This result is predictable given that divorce rates rose throughout most of the twentieth century, and particularly rapidly during the 1965-1979 boom.

Table 2 Here

Model 2 adds other independent variables, including age at initial separation, history of parental divorce, presence of children, race, and education. Rebound time continues to have no effect on divorce rates. The other independent variables have effects generally consistent with the divorce literature. Older respondents have more successful second marriages, although the relationship of this variable to divorce risk does not depart significantly from linearity. In contrast, people from divorced families and people who did not graduate from high school have higher divorce rates. African-Americans have higher divorce rates than do members of other population groups.

Finally, children make divorce more likely, given the difficulties inherent to stepfamilies. The predictable effects of these independent variables on remarriage stability bolster confidence that the data are reliable, which in turn provides support for the absence of a rebound effect.

Model 3 extends the question of rebound effects to union duration measured by either marriage itself or the start of premarital cohabitation; Model 4 adds all control variables to Model 3. As for Models 1 and 2, there is no evidence of a rebound effect. In other respects the results are similar. Respondents from divorced families, respondents with children, older respondents, less educated respondents, and respondents ending their first marriages more recently all have higher divorce rates.

CONCLUSION

This paper has a single straightforward finding: there is no rebound effect. People quickly entering new relationships after an initial divorce, whether by remarriage or cohabitation followed by remarriage, do not have higher divorce rates. This finding persists after controlling for key demographic differences between respondents. The advice offered by many self-help books ("Don't get into a new relationship too quickly!") therefore has no basis in reality.

I have examined the rebound hypothesis only as it pertains to marriage. Perhaps it does hold for dating relationships. Future research might explore this issue should adequate data become available. The rebound effect may also exist within remarriage only for certain kinds of people, so analyses employing detailed psychometric measures might prove fruitful.

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Table 1. Percentages or means for variables.

Length of second marriage in months	123 (123)
Second marriage ended in divorce	
No	68%
Yes	32
Rebound: Time to remarriage (months)	60 (58)
Rebound: Time to cohabitation (months)	52 (55)
Century month first marriage ended	822 (152)
Age at end of first marriage in months	303 (80)
Children at end of first marriage	
No	32%
Yes	68
Grew up in divorced family	
No	15%
Yes	85
Education	
Less than H. S.	32%
High school graduate	34
Some college	23
College graduate	10
Race	
White	79%
Black	15
Other	6

Notes: Numbers in parentheses are standard deviations

Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding error

Table 2. Generalized Additive Model Estimates of Remarriage Stability on Rebound Time and Other Factors.

	Marriage Only				Marriage and Cohabitation			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
Variables	Linear Linear	Departure from linearity	Linear estimate	Departure from linearity	Linear estimate	Departure from linearity	Linear estimate	Departure from linearity
Rebound time	.0005 (.0010)	n.s.	.0005 (.0010)	n.s.	.0013 (.0011)	n.s.	.0014 (.0011)	n.s.
Century month of initial separation	.0027*** (.0004)	**	.0032*** (.0010)	*	.0026*** (.0004)	**	.0031*** (.0004)	*
Age at initial separation	--	--	-.0027*** (.0006)	n.s.	--	--	-.0027*** (.0006)	n.s.
Respondent from divorced family	--	--	.2609* (.1255)	--	--	--	.2467* (.1255)	--
Education								
Less than H.S.	--	--	.2349* (.1134)	--	--	--	.1891+ (.1134)	--
H.S. graduate	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Junior college graduate	--	--	.0145 (.1302)	--	--	--	.0194 (.1301)	--
College graduate	--	--	.0912 (.1728)	--	--	--	.0961 (.1728)	--
Race								
White	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Black	--	--	.2444+ (.1267)	--	--	--	.1848 (.1256)	--
Other	--	--	.0954 (.1828)	--	--	--	.0241 (.1833)	--
Children at initial separation	--	--	.2431* (.1042)	--	--	--	.2408* (.1044)	--
Log likelihood	-3034.89		-3011.88		-3048.5		-3029.45	

Notes: **N** for all models is 1,171; numbers in parentheses are standard error

+p < .10; *p < .05; ** p < .01; ***p < .001