

Children of previously divorced parents and educational outcomes: How do they fare in comparison with children who have experienced parental divorce?

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1. Background

The last four decades Western family patterns have undergone dramatic changes characterised by increasing instability, a declining role of marriage, and an increase in single- and step-parent families. This has raised concern about the possible short- and long-term impacts of childhood family structures on child well-being. Educational outcomes are especially relevant, since they are associated with later life opportunities like attachment to the labour market, economic well-being, family formation, and the prospect of a long and healthy life.

Many investigations have shown that children from divorced families have poorer educational outcomes than those raised by both biological parents measured by for example grade point average, years of education, and educational level attained (e.g. Jonsson and Gähler 1997). Yet it is not clear whether this association is an expression of a causal relationship or whether this relationship is mainly confounded by factors that both increase the likelihood of a parental divorce and poor outcomes for the children. Various approaches have been used to address this issue. Some have examined the outcomes of children where one of the parents has died under the assumption that parental death is a more random event than parental divorce. Other studies have used sibling comparisons.

In this paper we take advantage of extraordinarily rich register data to pursue another approach. We study children who grow up in a married family with previously divorced parents. These children grow up in an intact family, but are exposed to parents similar to children in non-intact families. Both groups of parents share some characteristics that make them more divorce prone than never-divorced parents. We compare the educational outcomes (the odds of taking higher education) of children who have experienced parental divorce with those who have not experienced this. The latter group is grouped into two: children with never-divorced parents and children with previously divorced parent.

2. Theoretical framework

The observed relationship between parental divorce and child outcomes like education may have different explanations. The relationship may be causal, where parental divorce has a harmful effect on child outcomes. Crudely two main explanations are given for this negative effect. Firstly, the absence of a parent (usually the father) is associated with reduced household resources. This involves less time to supervise and help children with school-work, fewer economic resources spent on educational resources (e.g. computers, books and stimulating activities) and additional schooling, and the loss of human capital. Secondly, the turmoil, conflicts, and changes accompanying especially parental divorce may act as stressors that affect children negatively both indirectly through a temporary

reduction of the parents' care-giving capability and directly by causing anxiety and depression in children. Moreover, the consequences of family dissolution could be conditioned by the parents' remarriage, the child's age at the time of disruption, the child's gender and the parents combined educational resources.

Another possible explanation is that the relationship is confounded. This means that the observed relationship between family disruption and the children's educational outcome could be due to some unmeasured factors that affect both family structure and children's outcomes (e.g. socioeconomic resources, substance abuse, physical abuse, mental problems, and genes). Since it is not possible to observe how children with divorced parents would have fared if their parents had remained married, scholars have used various ways to deal with selection. Some have considered both children who have experienced divorce and those who have lost a parent through death (Lang and Zagorsky, 2001). This comparison is not unproblematic. Parental death is not a random event, although it may be more random than parental divorce. Another increasingly common approach is sibling models (e.g. Ermisch and Francesconi, 2001; Björklund and Sundström, 2006), where outcomes of siblings with different household family structure experiences are compared. This is either done by measuring time spent in a non-intact family (where the length in a non-intact family is assumed to negatively related to child outcomes) (e.g. Ermisch and Francesconi, 2001) or by comparing siblings where the youngest still lived in the family household at the time of the parents' divorce, while oldest sibling had moved out or turned 18 (e.g. Björklund and Sundström, 2006). Although sibling studies could be one viable way to address selection, these models are associated with several problems. For one, the assumption of a negative relationship between time spent in a non-intact family and child outcomes has weak empirical support. Further, in studies comparing siblings where the oldest one has moved out at the time of parental divorce, one has to assume that the non-resident child is not negatively affected by the divorce.

3 Data and methods

Data

Data covering the period up to 2003 is drawn from the Norwegian Population Register, the Population Censuses and Statistics Norway's Educational Registration System. By means of a unique personal identification number assigned to each Norwegian resident it is possible to link individual records from the different data sources and to link children to their parents.

While the data include all children born in 1974-79 (293 387 children), the analysis is restricted to the sub-group of children whose parents were married to each other 1 January the year after the child was born (269 165 children). Further, the data contain information about the parents' fertility and marital histories until 2003. The fertility histories include the dates of birth of all children for whom the person is registered as a father or mother. The marital histories include marital status for

the persons 1 January each year 1974-2003. In addition, there is information on both the child's and the parents' highest educational level attained.

Variables

Children's educational attainment is measured in 2003 when the children were aged 24-29 years. In the analysis it is only distinguished between the odds of taking (some) higher education and not doing that. The key independent variable is *family structure at age 16*. The main division is between those who were living with both natural parents and those who lived with only one natural parent. In the latter group a distinction is made according to whether the disruption was due to divorce or death. In the former group a distinction is made between those with never-divorced parents and those with previously divorced parents. Only those with no children from their previous marriage are included in the analyses. In addition, we include control for parents' education, parents' age at the birth of the child and the number of siblings.

Analysis

We estimate a set of logistic models to examine the relationship between various indicators of the effect of family structure and the odds of attaining higher education, with control variables such as just mentioned and a special eye for the conditional effect of the child's sex and age at disruption.

4. Innovations

Due to extraordinarily rich register data this study is an unique opportunity to study a interesting group of children: those growing up in an intact family where one or both parents are divorced from a previous marriage. These children have not themselves experienced parental divorce and the potential negative consequences of a parental break-up. Yet, in line with the selection idea, similar to children in non-intact families they grow up in a family with parents who inhibit some characteristics that may both increase the risk of divorce and negative child outcomes. This gives us an opportunity to compare children growing up in divorce prone families where one group is exposed to a parental break-up whereas the other group is not. Like the comparison between children of divorced parents and deceased parents, there are some limitations. The parents divorce experience may have affected the parents in a negative way with long-lasting consequences. This may for example affect their parenting/caring abilities. Still we think this group may provide useful comparison group.

References

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