

Divorce divide, educational divide? The complex interaction between the educational level of parents and the family trajectories and educational attainment of children: testing the selection, stress and differential coping and resource hypotheses.

Introduction

Educational level is associated with the chance on experiencing a marital break-up and subsequent post-divorce family transitions. Although it was reverse in the past, children with lower educated parents nowadays have a higher chance on experiencing a parental divorce than children with higher educated parents. Due to different coping mechanisms and resources, the association between parental divorce and the educational attainment of children could expect to be higher for children with lower educated parents. If specific family trajectories during childhood and youth affect educational outcomes of children differently in different social groups, family history functions as an important engine of social inequality. Educational disadvantages have longterm consequences on the chances on the labor market during adulthood (Amato & Keith, 1991) and consequently on life development in general.

In sum, educational level and divorce experience are associated in a complex way, in which divorce can be a primary factor in the maintenance or even reinforcement of social inequality. In this paper, we focus on the question whether specific post-divorce family trajectories affect the educational attainment of children with respectively lower, middle and highly educated parents differently.

A life course perspective

Using a life course perspective, we assume that the complete family history during childhood and youth is important when studying the relationship between the family system of children and their educational achievement. Only a life course perspective can grasp crucial differences in the family contexts of children as family histories can unfold in many ways following parental divorce (Cavanagh, Schiller & Riegle-Crumb, 2006; Tillman, 2007). Post divorce family life can be either stable or unstable, with more or less additional post divorce family transitions (Sun & Li, 2009). For example, one child can live permanently with mother and stepfather until leaving the parental home, another child can experience two or more additional family separations when the new partner relationship of mother and/or father ends. The custody arrangement following parental divorce is also very determining within this context and can therefore not be ignored: joint custody arrangements increase the chance of children to live together with stepparents and father-child and mother-child relationships develop differently in sole custody and joint custody arrangements.

The timing of specific family transitions within the life course of children is also important: parental divorce, specific custody arrangements, single parenthood or remarriage can be experienced differently by e.g. toddlers, primary school children or adolescents. Fisher (2004) and Spruijt (2009) for example report a bigger impact of parental divorce in primary or secondary school than in kindergarten and in higher education. Using a life course perspective therefore implies looking at both the nature and duration of specific family configurations and the nature and timing of specific family transitions.

A selection into specific family trajectories

Divorce and specific subsequent post-divorce family trajectories are not proportionally distributed across different social groups within society. In other words, there is a kind of selection into divorce, remarriage, ... which cannot be ignored when studying the association between family histories and the educational outcomes of children.

In times of high legal, social, economic and cultural barriers to divorce, divorce can be seen as innovative behavior. Social class and divorce chance were therefore positively related within this context (Härkönen & Dronkers, 2006). In recent times, this association reversed within many countries, also in Flanders (Belgium). This negative association runs indirectly by more frequent stress factors related to financial problems (e.g. Poortman, 2005), less communication skills (e.g. Amato 1996),... Martin (2004) even speaks of a growing evidence for a divorce divide relating this association between socioeconomic disadvantages and family instability.

Not much is known on the educational selection into remarriage or post-marital cohabitation. We could expect a selection effect in both the formation and instability of higher-order relationships. Educational level can be positively associated with stepfamily formation (e.g. Amato, 2000; Montalto & Gerner, 1998) and negatively with stepfamily instability.

Parental divorce and educational achievement

Many authors have reported on the negative association between parental divorce and the educational attainment of children (e.g. Albertini & Dronkers, 2009; Cavanagh, Schiller & Riegle-Crumb, 2006; Tillman, 2007). Some have even found that divorce has become more damaging in recent cohorts (Evans, Kelley, Wanner, 2001).

The *resource deprivation perspective* is one of the most cited theoretical explanation regarding the impact of parental divorce and educational achievement (Sun & Li, 2009). Many studies rely on Bourdieu's theory on social, cultural and economical capital (1986) and focus on the changes in the family structure and family functioning following divorce and on the consequences of these changes for the available capital in the family (e.g. Fisher, 2004; Manning & Lamb, 2003; Schriener, Mullis & Schlee, 2009). Less social and financial resources (e.g. Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Fisher, 2004; Pong, Dronkers & Hampden-Thompson, 2003; Pong & Ju, 2000; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994), less parental involvement and lower parental expectations (e.g. Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Pong, Dronkers & Hampden-Thompson, 2003) and changes in housing or school (e.g. Amato, 2005; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994) can lead to lower educational attainment.

A second important and frequently used theoretical explanation for the association between family life and wellbeing is *stress theory*: new partner relationships and relationship dissolutions of parents can be stressful life events in the lives of children and induce additional changes such as moving houses, financial downturns,... (e.g. Amato, 2010; Lamb, Sternberg & Thompson, 1997; Tillman, 2007). The *cumulative effects hypothesis* or *multiple risk-model* argues that the effects of such transitions are cumulative: every transition leading to more stress and a lower well-being (e.g. Kurdek, 1994; Wu & Thomson, 2001), demonstrating the importance of looking at complete family histories when studying outcomes for children (Amato, 2010).

Remarriage and educational achievement

A new partner or stepparent can be beneficial for the social, cultural and financial capital within the family (e.g. Spruijt, 2007; Wagmiller, Gershoff, Veliz & Clements, 2010) with positive effects for the wellbeing and educational achievements of the child. This idea of recompensation of parental divorce by repartnering is however often negated within the literature (e.g. Amato & Keith, 1991; Jeynes, 2006; Manning & Lamb, 2003; Raley, Frisco & Wildsmith, 2005; Tillman, 2007). The arrival of a new stepparent can induce stress within the family, negatively affecting the wellbeing of the child. Children can see the stepparent for example as a competitor for the time and love of the biological parent (Jonsson & Gahler, 1997).

Next to the presence of stepparents, stepfamilies are often characterized by the presence of step and/or half siblings. Their presence can have specific influences on the educational attainment of children as well. In so-called complex stepfamilies, children differ in the relatedness to (step)parents (Hetherington & Jodl, 1994; Ganong & Coleman, 2004). There is however not much research available on the impact of these specific family configurations on educational outcomes of children.

Differentials in the impact of divorce

Many factors moderate the association between the family histories of children and their outcomes (Amato, 2010). Education would be an important moderating or protective factor in the adjustment to divorce, with higher educated people more easily adjusting to divorce than lower educated people (Amato, 2000). Different coping mechanisms and strategies and lower financial, social and cultural resources could therefore reinforce the negative impact of divorce and subsequent post-divorce family transitions on educational attainment for children with lower educated parents. A recent study of Albertini & Dronkers (2009) shows support for this hypothesis by finding only a negative effect of divorce on the education of children within the group with lower educated mothers and not within the group of children with higher educated mothers.

In addition of social class differences, we could also expect gender differences. For example, some argue that girls function less in stepfamilies than boys (Ganong & Coleman, 2004), while boys would suffer more from the divorce itself (Amato, 2010). Others found no gender differences in adaptation to parental divorce, single parenthood or stepfamily formation (e.g. Hetherington, 2006).

Present study

The objective of this study is to give new insights in how the educational level of parents, childhood trajectories and the educational attainment of children are interrelated by using a life course perspective. The research question can be divided into two subquestions:

1. How are specific family trajectories during childhood related to the educational outcomes of children, before and after controlling for the educational level of their parents?

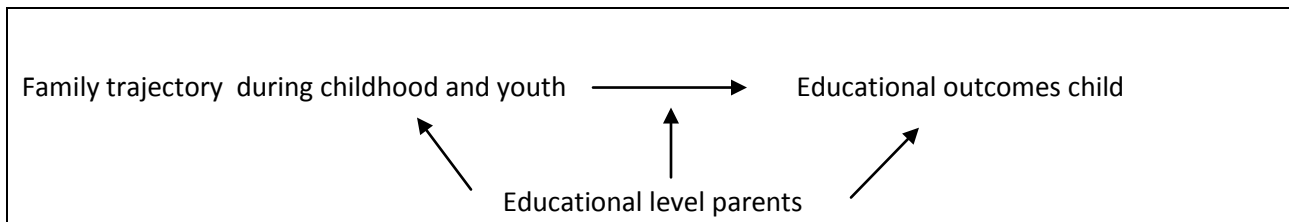
→ We expect that children of lower educated parents experience more frequent the dissolution of the parental marriage and of subsequent stepfamilies, which may partially explain the association between family trajectories and educational attainment of children (*selection hypothesis*)

→After controlling for the educational level of parents, we still expect a negative association between the educational attainment of children and their family trajectories (*resource deprivation and stress hypothesis*)

2. Is the association between family history and educational outcomes of children different according to the educational level of the parents?

→We expect a bigger impact of parental divorce and stepfamily dissolution on the educational attainment for children with lower educated parents than for children with higher educated parents) (*differential coping and resource hypothesis*)

Figure 1: Conceptual scheme



Dependent variables:

*Final educational track in high school: general vocational track, arts educational track, technical educational track, vocational educational track

*Highest educational level obtained : primary school, secondary school , non-universitary higher education, university degree

Key independent variables

**Family history during childhood/youth*: using the technique of sequence analysis (Abbott & Hrycak, 1990 & Billari, Fürnkranz & Prskawetz, 2006), different measures of childhood family trajectories are constructed, allowing to compare their predictive power regarding educational outcomes of children:

- Typology of typical childhood family trajectories (so-called sequence patterns):
 - o Combining information on parental divorce experience, and, in case of parental divorce, custody arrangement, presence of stepparents, stepsiblings and halfsiblings
 - o Including information on timing of specific family transitions and duration of specific family statuses of structure
- Measures of dispersion: entropy ('variation') and turbulence (measure of complexity)
- Measure of stability: number of transitions

**Educational level parents*

**Gender*

Data

We use data from the project Divorce in Flanders (DiF), a high-standard large-scale database containing information on 1025 intact and 3525 dissolved marriages. Using a multi-actor perspective, both (ex-) partners, a child and a parent of both (ex-)partners, and the new partner of the divorced partners were questioned. The data contains very detailed information on all pre and post marriage family transitions of both (ex-)partners: timing and duration of partner relationships, remarriage, fertility transitions,...

According to the educational outcome that is studied, different research samples will be used of respectively all children that finished secondary school and all children that finished their educational career. The number of observations will vary between 500 and 1000 children according to the applied condition on the status of the educational career. Information was collected from 1582 children in total, from which approximately two third with divorced parents.

As the data of non-resident children is only released in November 2011, no preliminary analyses are available

References

- Abbott, A. & Hrycak, A. (1990). Measuring resemblance in sequence data: An optimal matching analysis of musicians careers. *American Journal of Sociology*, 96, pp. 144-185.
- Albertini, M., & Dronkers, J. (2009). Effects of Divorce on Children's Educational Attainment in a Mediterranean and Catholic Society. *European Societies*, 11(1), 137-159.
- Amato, P. R., & Keith, B. (1991). Parental divorce and the well-being of children: a meta-analysis. *Psychological bulletin*, 110(1), 26-46.
- Amato, P. R. (1996). Explaining the Intergenerational Transmission of Divorce. *Family Relations*, 58(3), 628-640.
- Amato, P. R. (2000). The Consequences of Divorce for Adults and Children. *Family Relations*, 62(4), 1269-1287.
- Amato, P.R. (2005). The impact of family formation change on the cognitive, social and emotional well-being of the next generation. *The future of children*, 15 (2), 75-96.
- Amato, P. R. (2010). Research on Divorce: Continuing Trends and New Developments. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72, 650 - 666.
- Astone, N.M. & McLanahan, S.S. (1991). Family structure, parental practices and high school completion. *American Sociological Review*, 56 (3), 309-320.
- Billari, F.C., Fürnkranz, J. & Prskawetz, A. (2006). Timing, sequencing and quantum of life course events: A machine learning approach. *European Journal of Population*, 22, pp. 37-65.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The Forms of Capital. In John G. Richardson (eds.), *Handbook of Theory and Research in the Sociology of Education*, New York, Greenwood Press.
- Cavanagh, S. E., Schiller, K., S., & Riegle-crumb, C. (2006). Marital Transitions, Parenting, and Schooling: Exploring the Link Between Family-Structure History and Adolescents' Academic Status. *New York*, 79(4), 329-354.
- Evans, M. D. R., Kelley, J., & Wanner, R. a. (2001). Educational attainment of the children of divorce: Australia, 1940-90. *Journal of Sociology*, 37(3), 275-297.

- Fisher, T. (2004). *Parental divorce, conflict and resources. The effects on children's behaviour problems, socioeconomic attainment, and transitions in the demographic career*. Nijmegen: Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen.
- Ganong, L.H. & Coleman, M. (2004). *Stepfamily relationships. Development, dynamics, and interventions*. New York: Kluwer academic/plenum publishers. 270 p.
- Harkonen, J., & Dronkers, J. (2006). Stability and Change in the Educational Gradient of Divorce. A Comparison of Seventeen Countries. *European Sociological Review*, 22(5), 501-517.
- Hetherington, E.M. & Jodl, K.M. (1994). Stepfamilies as settings for child development, pp. 55-79 in A. Booth & J. Dunn (Eds.), *Stepfamilies: Who benefits? Who does not?* Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Hetherington, E. M. (2006). The influence of conflict, marital problem solving and parenting on children's adjustment in nondivorced, divorced, and remarried families. In A. Clarke-Stewart & J. Dunn (Eds.), *Families count: Effect on child and adolescent development* (pp. 203 – 237). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Jeynes, W. H. (2006). The Impact of Parental Remarriage on Children. *Marriage & Family Review*, (October 2011), 37-41.
- Jonsson, J. O., & Gahler, M. (1997). Family dissolution, family reconstitution, and children's educational careers: recent evidence for Sweden. *Demography*, 34(2), 277.
doi:10.2307/2061705
- Kurdek, L.A. (1994). Remarriages and stepfamilies are not inherently problematic, pp. 37-44 in A. Booth & J. Dunn (Eds.), *Stepfamilies: Who benefits? Who does not?* Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Lamb, M. E., Sternberg, K. J., & Thompson, R. A. (1997). The effects of divorce and custody arrangements on children's behavior, development, and adjustment. *Family and Conciliations Courts Review*, 35(4), 393-404.
- Manning, W.D. & Lamb, K.A. (2003). Adolescent well-being in cohabiting, married and single-parent families. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 65 (4), 876-893.
- Martin, S. P. (2004). *Growing Evidence for a "Divorce Divide"? Education and Marital Dissolution Rates in the U.S. since the 1970s*. Russell Sage Foundation Working Papers
- McLanahan, S. & Sandefur, G. (1994). *Growing up with a single parent: What hurts, what helps*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Montalto, C. P., & Gerner, J. L. (1998). The effect of expected changes in marital status on labor supply decisions of women and men. *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, 28, 25-51.
- Pong, S.L., Dronkers, J. & Hampden-Thompson, G. (2003). Family policies and children's school achievement in single- versus two-parent families. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 65, 681-699.
- Pong, S.L. & Ju, D.-B. (2000). The effects of change in family structure and income on dropping out of middle and high school. *Journal of Family Issues*, 21, 147-169.

- Poortman, A.-R. (2005). How Work affects Divorce: The Mediating Role of Financial and Time Pressures. *Journal of Family Issues*, 26, 168-195
- Raley, R.K., Frisco M.L. & Wildsmith, E. (2005). Maternal cohabitation and educational success. *Sociology of Education*, 78 (2), 144-164.
- Shriner, M., Mullis, R., Schlee, B. (2009). The usefulness of social capital theory for understanding the academic improvement of young children in stepfamilies over two points in time. *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, 50 (7), 445-458.
- Spruijt, E. (2007). *Scheidingskinderen. Overzicht van recent sociaal-wetenschappelijk onderzoek naar de gevolgen van ouderlijke scheiding voor jongeren en kinderen*. Amsterdam: Uitgeverij SWP.
- Spruijt, E. (2009). *State-of-the-art 2009: Kinderen en Echtscheiding*. Utrecht: Universiteit Utrecht, Faculteit Sociale Wetenschappen, Onderzoeksgroep Adolescentie.
- Sun, Y., & Li, Y. (2009). Postdivorce Family Stability and Changes in Adolescents' Academic Performance: A Growth-Curve Model. *Journal of Family Issues*, 30(11), 1527-1555.
- Tillman, K. H. (2007). Family Structure Pathways and Academic Disadvantage among Adolescents in Stepfamilies *. *Sociological Inquiry*, 77(3), 383-424.
- Wagmiller, R.L., Gershoff, E., Veliz, P. & Clements, M. (2010). Does children's academic achievement improve when single mothers marry? *Sociology of Education*, 83 (3), 201-226.
- Wu, Z. & Thomson, E. (2001). Race differences in family experience and early sexual initiation: Dynamic models of family structure and family change. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 63, pp. 682-696.