Children of previously divorced parents and education

What can it tell us about the effect of parental divorce ?

Anne Reneflot, Norwegian Institute of Public Health
Svenn-Erik Mamelund, Work Research Institute

1. Point of departure

- Parental divorce is associated with poorer educational outcomes for the children (e.g. MacLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Jonsson & Gähler, 1997; Steele et al, 2010)

- A long debate question whether this relationship is mainly causal or mainly due to selection

2. A brief review of some strategies

- **Parental deaths:** to the extent that parental death is random it can tell us something about the causal effect of parental loss (e.g. Corak, 2001; Steele, et al, 2010; Lang & Zagorsky, 2001)

  - Most studies find a negative association

  - BUT premature death is to a large extent non-random (e.g. external causes)

2. A brief review of some strategies (cont)

- **Sibling approaches**
  - Comparing biological siblings with different family structure experiences (e.g. Ermisch & Francesconi, 2001; Björklund & Sundström, 2006)
    - Mixed results – a small negative effect or no effect
    - Little empirical support for the negative effect of length of exposure/divorce may also affect non-resident children
  - Comparing half-siblings in blended families (e.g. Gennetian, 2005; Ginther & Pollak, 2004)
    - Mixed results
    - BUT is the benefit of living with two biological parents the same in a blended family as in a non-blended family?

3. Using a novel approach

- We propose to study children raised in an intact family with previously divorced parents. The parents have no children from their previous marriage.

- The children have not themselves experienced parental divorce and the potential negative consequences of family disruption

- BUT similar to children who experience divorce they are raised by parents who may inhibit some characteristics that both increase the likelihood of divorce and negative child outcomes

- This means that we can compare children of divorce prone parents where one group is exposed to parental divorce whereas the other is not.

4. Data & methods

- Data: Norwegian register data covering children born in 1974-1976 (293 387). Followed up until 2003.

- Restricted to children whose parents were married to each other 1 january the year after the child was born

- Dropped: individuals who had either died or emigrated before 2003

- Information about the parents fertility and marital histories, and both parents and children's education

Variables and analysis

- Outcome: some higher education or not (measured in 2003)

- Key independent variable: family structure at age 16 (children raised by both biological parents in their first marriage as the reference category)

- Controls: parents education, paternal and maternal age, number of children and gender

- Logistic regression analysis

Table 1 Some descriptive information about the parents and the children

	N	Parent high education	Maternal age	Child high education
Married	221 400	13.5 %	26.8	37.2%
Previously divorced	5 137	14.8%	28.9	29.4%
Divorced	36 057	8.1%	24.9	23.2%

Table 2 Relative odds (with 95% confidence intervals) of taking higher education by family structure

Variables	OR	95% CI	% diff
Married	1.00		
Previously divorced	0.71	0.67-0.79	29%
Divorced	0.60	0.57-0.62	40%

Adjusted for birth year, maternal age, paternal age, number of children, parents education and gender.

Table 3 Relative odds (with 95% confidence intervals) of taking higher education by family structure

Variables	n	OR	95% CI
Married	221 400	1	
Mother prev married	2 181	0.72	0.58-0.89
Father prev married	2 653	0.72	0.64-0.80
Both prev married	476	0.63	0.41-0.98
Divorced	36 057	0.60	0.57-0.62

Adjusted for birth year, maternal age, paternal age, number of children, parents education and gender.

Table 4 Log regression estimates for the odds of attaining higher education by family structure and gender (logit)

Variables	logit	Variables	logit
Married	0.00	**Married**	0.00
Previously div	-0.26**	**Mother prev div**	-0.19
Divorced	-0.43***	**Father prev div**	-0.29**
Prev div*female	-013	**Both prev div**	0.02
Divorced*female	**-0.13****	**Divorced**	-0.43**
		Mother prev*female	-0.24
		Father prev*female	-0.05
		Both prev*female	**0.89***
		Divorced*female	**-0.13****

Adjusted for birth year, maternal age, paternal age, number of children, parents education

* p< 0.05, ** p< 0.01, *** p< 0.001

Conclusions (1)

- Children raised in an intact family by previously divorced parents are:
  - less likely to attain higher education than children raised in an intact family by parents in their first marriage
  - slightly more likely to attain higher education than children who experience parental divorce during childhood

- Suggests that selection is mainly responsible for the negative association between parental divorce and educational outcomes while the causal effect appear to be smaller.

Conclusions (2)

- The educational disadvantage of children raised in an intact family by previously divorced parents do not vary according to whether it was the mother, the father or both who are previously divorced

Limitations

- Childless adults who divorce may differ systematically from parents who divorce

- Unable to account for potential negative effects of the previous divorce on adult well-being that in turn may affect child well-being