

Is the step-family disadvantage in education stable over cohorts?

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Why to study the stratification of step-families?

1. Changing demography -> growing heterogeneity of family forms
 - Blau&Duncan (1967): intact families vs. broken homes
2. Growing sensitivity to “new families”
3. A dynamic phenomenon
 - We know relatively little of the consequences of these family forms for children’s schooling (little/no international comparisons)

Stratification of step-families

- Step-families are typically compared to two-biological-parent families
 - much less frequently to single-parent families
- Children from step-families appear **disadvantaged**
 - Academic performance (test scores, grades)
 - School completion/drop-out rates
 - Behavioral problems
 - Emotional outcomes

Why are step-families different?

- 1. Parental investment** – less investment, less obligation (there may be other children elsewhere, ...)
- 2. Involvement** (both the parent and the step-parent): less time, less supervision
- 3. Stress:** both breakup and step-family formation are potentially stressful (the more transitions, the worse outcomes)
- 4. Selection on third variables:** incompetence in parenting and interpersonal relations

International comparisons of stepfamilies

- Almost non-existent (Berger 2000, Pryor 2008)
- Most studies use US data
- Comparative studies are not inter-generational (e.g. Kreyenfeld and Martin 2011)
 - Russia, East/West Germany, France
 - Indicate significant difference in step-family effects on *economic well-being*
 - No step-family effect in Russia and Eastern Germany
 - Net effect in West Germany
 - Step-family effect is explained away when controlling for family size (France)

Comparative hypotheses I.

- Related to changing prevalence of step-families over time
 1. More step-families -> **less negative consequences**
 - a. changing levels of institutionalization-> more stability
 - b. less selection on poor parenting skills

Comparative hypotheses II.

2. More step-families -> **more negative consequences**

- a. increasingly follow after divorce rather than widowhood (hence increasingly unstable)
- b. levels of pre-divorce conflict change with CDR (higher CDR -> lower average pre-divorce conflict->more negative consequences for the child)

Goal of this paper

- To show if the step-family disadvantage in education changes over cohorts (in response to changing prevalence of step-families)

Data

- **EU-SILC 2005** module on poverty
- respondents aged 25-65 (born 1936-1985) reporting retrospectively on parental education, activity status, occupation, and family structure during their teenage years
- Combination of survey and register data
- Database contains all European countries
 - Some can not be used in this paper due to various data quality/availability problems

Data, variables

- **25** countries, **N=294,063** cases
- **Dependent** variable – dichotomous (achieved higher secondary education, ISCED 3 or higher)
- **Independent** variables – parental education (measured in years), birth cohorts (categorical), country dummies, gender, # of sibs
- **Family structure:** based on respondents report (1- two-parent family, 2-parent+step-parent, 3-other)
 - Mother's new partner may be defined as parent or step-parent by the respondent

Method

- Binary logistic regression
- **Key test:** interaction between growing up in a step-family and birth cohort

Tests

Model	LR	d.f.	p	BIC
M1: FS+COH+COUNTRY	54358.06	29	<0.00005	-53980.8
M2: M1+FS*COH	54372.71	33	<0.00005	-53945.2
M3: M1+gender+education +siblings	68798.12	32	<0.00005	-68404.7
M4: M2+gender+education +siblings	68810.53	36	<0.00005	-68367.9
Contrasts				
M2-M1	14.65	4	0.0055	34.6
M4-M3	12.41	4	0.0145	36.8

Estimated effects – M4

	Coefficient	Z-stat
Step-family (1936-45 cohort)	-0.195	2.14
Interaction		
SF*Cohort 1946-1955	-0.148	1.19
SF*Cohort 1956-1965	-0.080	0.63
SF*Cohort 1966-1975	-0.340	2.75
SF*Cohort 1976-1985	-0.450	2.68
<i>NOTE: main effects of cohort, country, gender, education, # of siblings not shown</i>		

Summary

- The negative effect of growing up in a step-family on one's education **increased** over birth cohorts
- The change occurs with the 1966-1975 birth cohort and persists thereafter

Interpretation

- Changes in the **composition** of step-families
 - Divorce > widowhood
 - less stability, more & more detrimental transitions
 - Continued effects of divorce, which harms children more when more widespread
 - changing **levels of pre-divorce conflict**: even low conflict marriages now divorce, children experience more stress after a low-conflict marriage splits

Next steps

- Multi-level design: CDR, out-of-wedlock fertility, educational expansion as macro-level variables
 - More directly linking step-family effects with macro-level variables
- Other data – more explicit distinction of biological and non-biological parents/adults in the household