

Changing impacts of parental divorce

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Parental divorce tends to have negative outcomes for children's life outcomes (e.g., Amato, 2000, 2010), but there are reasons to suspect that the negative impact of parental divorce on children's outcomes has declined over time. One is a weaker stigma, given that divorce is increasingly common. Another is less selectivity connected with lower barriers to divorce. The assumption is that the parental marriage which has ended in divorce is not especially destructive, and that the children have therefore not suffered strongly. Yet another reason for a declining negative impact is that parents are better prepared for divorce and aim to protect their children from possible negative consequences. Finally, increasing interference by practitioners and policy makers might reduce harmful effects of parental divorce. According to Wagner and Weiß (2006), the rise in divorce rates has created a 'divorce culture' that facilitates parenthood after a separation.

Empirical studies do not unequivocally reveal a declining negative impact of divorce over time. A meta analysis carried out by Amato and Keith in 1991 showed smaller differences in well-being outcomes between children of divorce and children from intact families in publications from the 1970s than in those in the 1980s, suggesting a decline in negative impacts. In a subsequent meta analysis, Amato (2001) found—contrary to expectations—no changes in well-being outcomes for children in the 1990s compared to the 1980s. Sigle-Rushton, Hobcraft, and Kiernan (2005) contrasted the 1958 UK birth cohort and the 1970 UK birth cohort, following them up to the age of 30. In both birth cohorts, children of divorce had higher levels of problem behaviour than children from intact families, but the differences before and after the divorce were the same in both birth cohorts. Using the 1988/9 Survey of Retirement and Retirement Plans and the 2001/2 British Household Panel Survey, Glaser and colleagues (Glaser, Tomassini, & Stuchbury (2008) examined the intergenerational transfers between 61-69 year old parents and their adult children. Disruption of the parental marriage was associated with lower transfer levels, but a comparison of the two points in time showed little change in the effects of disruption. Wolfinger's (1991) examination of trends in the intergenerational transmission of divorce using US General Social Surveys carried out between 1974 and 1996 showed a decline in the propensity of children of divorce to end their own marriages.

Aim of the study

We suggest that offsetting effects might be responsible for the failure to unequivocally establish a declining impact of parental divorce. We examine two contrasting hypotheses (*selectivity* versus

protection) that have the observed reversal of divorce risks by level of educational attainment as their point of departure.

Up until two or three decades ago, the likelihood of divorce was greater among the highly educated than among those with lower levels of education. Divorce was more common among the most educated because they could better afford to maintain separate households, had easier access to lawyers who could arrange the divorce, and could better withstand the stigma of divorce. Nowadays, divorce is primarily happening in the least educated groups, a pattern that has been typical for the US (McLanahan, 2004). The change from a positive educational gradient of divorce risks to negative gradient has been reported for the UK (Chan & Halpin, 2008), Sweden (Hoem, 1997), the Netherlands (De Graaf & Kalmijn, 2006; Dykstra & Komter, 2006) and a range of European countries (Härkönen & Dronkers, 2006).

Contrasting hypotheses

Assuming greater *selectivity*, one might expect that the shift in the composition of the group of divorcees from primarily most educated to primarily least educated has increasingly negative implications for the children of divorce. The underlying argument is that the highly educated divorce only under exceptional circumstances: a very poor marriage. In these circumstances, children are exposed to intense conflicts, less effective parenting, and so forth. Assuming that the effects endure after divorce (at least temporarily), results should show poorer well-being and more problem behaviour among children of highly educated divorced parents than among children of less well educated divorced parents.

An alternative hypothesis is that the highly educated are better aware of the consequences of divorce than are the less well educated. They strive to protect their children from negative consequences (and have the financial, cognitive and social resources to do so). Assuming *protection* by parents, the negative impact of divorce on the well-being of children is likely to be smaller among those with well-educated parents whose marriage ended in divorce than among those with less well educated parents.

Data

A novel feature of our study is that we have taken the offspring rather than the parent perspective. Our data are from 15 waves (1994-2009) of the youth sample of the British Household Panel Study (BHPS), which is composed of children of primary respondents who reach the age of 11 and are followed until they are 16 after which they become primary BHPS respondents themselves. We restricted the parental household sample to parents who were both in a first marriage; as a result 25% of the parental households were excluded (e.g., step-parents, and single parents). We have reports from 3882 adolescents in 2830 two-parent households. Information on parental divorce was obtained from the primary respondents of the BHPS. A five-item self-esteem scale is our outcome measure. Examples of items are: "I feel I have a number good qualities", and "I certainly feel useless at times". Cronbach's alpha is around .75 in each wave. Scale scores range from 0 to 5.

Results

The findings are based on multi-level models, where time is nested in children, and children are nested in households. The degree of variation is greater at the level of children than at the level of households.

As Model 1 of Table 1 shows, we find no support for a declining effect of divorce on the self-esteem of children. Of the three periods distinguished in the analyses (1994-1999, 2000-2004, 2005-2009), the second time period shows the most serious effects of parental divorce.

Table 2 shows a higher rate of divorce among those with lower levels of education (as measured by mothers' level of educational attainment) than among those with higher levels of education (*idem*). Four percent of the marriages of the most educated ended in divorce whereas six percent of the marriage of the least educated ended in divorce.

Relationship quality was measured at baseline. Table 2 shows that the quality of marriage prior to divorce is poorer among the most educated than among the least educated, which is consistent with notions of greater selectivity.

Model 2 of Table 1 reveals that girls tend to have lower self-esteem than boys, a finding that was also reported by Chan and Koo (2011).

Note that Models 3, 4 and 5 are based on a smaller sample size. The reason is that relationship quality was not measured from the start, but in 1996 for the first time.

Divorce has a negative impact on adolescents' self-esteem, as shown in Model 3 of Table 4. Model 4 shows, however, that this negative effect is weaker if the mother is highly educated. The impact of parental divorce is less detrimental for the most educated than for the least educated. Thus our findings yield support for the protection hypothesis.

As Model 5 shows, we find no support for the selection hypothesis. Findings fail to show that children of highly educated do more poorly after divorce than children of less well educated parents—on the contrary. Model 5 does show a main effect of the quality of the parental marriage prior to divorce. Adolescents have poorer self-esteem if their parents reported lower relationship quality at baseline. The impact of relationship quality is independent of that of mothers' level of educational attainment.

Conclusion

Our study provides evidence suggesting that highly educated mothers protect their adolescents from the harm of divorce. We find no evidence suggesting additional harm linked with very poor quality marriages of the highly educated. Thus there is no support for the selectivity hypothesis.

Caution is advised. Only a relatively small number of divorces occurred. Moreover, the findings are based on a single outcome. In future we would like to repeat analyses with a wider range of outcomes.

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Tabel 1. Predictors of children's self-esteem

	Unstandardized regression coefficients				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Age of child in years - mean centered	0.001	-0.003	-0.000	-0.001	-0.005
Parents divorced	-0.012		-0.120 ^{***}	-0.151 ^{***}	-0.153 ^{***}
Mother high education (ISCED > 4)				0.030 ^{**}	0.033 [†]
Mother high education * Parents divorced				0.085	0.103 [†]
Daughter		-0.167 ^{***}	-0.168 ^{***}	-0.146 ^{***}	-0.147 ^{***}
Quality relationship parents at baseline					0.025 ^{**}
First time period (waves 1 (d) -5)	Ref.				
Second time period (waves 6-10)	-0.042 ^{**}				
Third time period (11-15 (r))	0.037 [*]				
Time 1 * divorce	Ref.				
Time 2 * divorce	-0.157 [*]				
Time 3 * divorce	-0.130 [†]				
Constant	0.099	0.171	0.176	0.177	0.024
Random components:					
Household:					
sd(Cons)	0.192	0.188	0.187	0.160	0.158
Child:					
sd(Age)	0.098	0.099	0.098	0.091	0.091
sd(Divorced)	0.198		0.197	0.237	0.241
sd(Cons)	0.334	0.264	0.263	0.282	0.324
sd(Residual)	0.357	0.358	0.357	0.359	0.359
corr(agechild,divorced)	0.184		0.231	0.042	0.045
corr(agechild,_cons)	0.194	0.183	0.165	0.167	0.150
corr(divorced,_cons)	-0.198		-0.150	-0.401	-0.411
Observations	12892	12892	8058	8058	12892

† $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 2. Characteristics of the marriages of parents with high and those with low levels of education

	High level education (ISCED > 4)	Low level education (ISCED ≤ 4)
Proportion divorced	4%	6%
Quality marital relationship (no divorce) (1 - 7)		
As rated by mothers	6.0	6.2
As rated by fathers	6.3	6.3
Quality marital relationship (divorce) (1 – 7)		
As rated by mothers	2.9	3.8
As rated by fathers	5.2	4.7

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