

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

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Background

The paper looks at the educational chances of children in step-families across birth cohorts in 25 European countries. It is well known that step-children have lower chances to obtain higher education in comparison to children from intact families (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994; Pong 1997). This disadvantage may result from patterns of parental investment into step-children, patterns of interactions and attachment, stress, and selection into step-family on parenting ability (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994; Pong 1997). Much less is known, however, about variations in this negative effect, since there has not been much work concerning cross-country comparison of stepfamilies (Berger 2000). Most of the research into stepfamilies comes from USA (Pryor 2008). In other cases, it mostly concentrates on individual countries or the authors work with a selection of small number of countries (e. g. Berger 2000; Kreyenfeld and Martin 2011).

Research question and motivation

We ask the following question in this paper: Is the negative step-family effect on education larger or smaller in recent cohorts, when step-families are more prevalent?

Theory is inconclusive. High incidence of stepfamilies could lessen the observed negative effect. This expectation is mostly based on the notions of the negative effect being a result of stigma, incomplete institutionalization, and selection. If stepfamilies are more common, their members should be a less select group. They should also suffer less stigmatization. Existence of some guidelines to stepfamily life could also be expected, with individual family members having clearer roles. High incidence of stepfamily living could also mean its legal recognition which could bring further order into this type of family composition. All of this could make stepfamily more institutionalized, more similar to intact families (with stepparents being both

legally obliged and more willing to invest into stepchildren), and possibly more stable – if indeed the instability is at large caused by stepfamily’s lack of institutionalization, as argued by Cherlin (1978, 1981). In such instance, the effect on child’s outcomes could be expected to be less negative (if any) in countries/cohorts where incidence of stepfamilies is high and more negative in context where the incidence is low.

On the other hand, one can hypothesize that the step-family effect would grow as a result of step-families more often following after divorce (rather than after the death of a parent). Since divorce is often caused and accompanied by conflict and the conflict may extend well into the post-divorce lives, increasing divorce and step-family entry rates may result in a stronger negative step-family effect.

Data and method

We carry out a comparative analysis using data from the 2005 EU-SILC module on the intergenerational transmission of poverty. We can use data from 25 countries with a total of 222662 cases (individuals respondents with nonmissing information).

We model educational attainment (at least upper secondary education vs. less than upper secondary education) using binary logistic regression. Family structure during childhood (two biological parents, stepfamily, other) is our key predictor. We control for gender, parental education, number of siblings, country, and birth cohort. We add an interaction between cohort and family structure as the key test of the stability of the step-family effect.

We find that the interaction between family structure and cohort is both statistically and substantively significant. The effect of growing-up in a step-family is negative in all cohorts and it tends to become more negative in more recent cohorts.

Conclusion

We conclude that this increasingly negative step-family effect results from step-families following more and more often after divorce (with its related and persistent stress) rather than after widowhood. Post-divorce stress may have a stronger and lasting effect on the school outcomes of children than the death of a parent.

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