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Gender gaps in the effects of childhood family environment: Do they persist into adulthood?

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ABSTRACT

We examine the differential effects of family disadvantage on the education and adult labor market outcomes of men and women using high-quality administrative data on the entire population of Denmark born between 1966 and 1995. We link parental education and family structure during childhood to male–female and brother–sister differences in adolescent outcomes, educational attainment, and adult earnings and employment. Our results are consistent with U.S. findings that boys benefit more from an advantageous family environment than do girls in terms of grade-school outcomes. Father's education, which has not been examined in previous studies, is particularly important for sons. However, we find a very different pattern of parental influence on adult outcomes. Gender gaps in educational attainment, employment, and earnings are increasing in maternal education, benefiting daughters. Paternal education decreases the gender gaps in educational attainment (favoring sons) and labor market outcomes (favoring daughters). We conclude that differences in the behavior of school-aged boys and girls may be poor proxies for differences in skills that drive longer-term outcomes.

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1. Introduction

Over the past century, barriers to women's educational and employment opportunities have been dramatically lowered in most of the developed world. Women continue to have lower rates of labor force participation and earn lower pay than men, but new gender gaps that favor women have opened up in education. Young men lag behind young women in academic achievement and contributing factors include less engagement in school, a gap in homework hours and the substitution of time spent playing video games for time spent reading (OECD, 2015). Women are now more likely than men to complete secondary education and to graduate from college in almost all OECD countries. In the United States, 39 percent of women aged 25 to 29 have a Bachelor's degree or more, compared to 32 percent of men (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015).

Recent studies have focused on the behavioral differences between school-aged boys and girls, arguing that a gender gap in “non-cognitive skills” contributes to the scholastic underperformance of boys by increasing the costs of school persistence and performance (Becker et al., 2010; Goldin et al., 2006). Family disadvantage is strongly negatively associated with early social and behavioral skills for both boys and girls, and it has been suggested that trends in family structure, and in partic-

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ular the increasing prevalence of single parent families, may have a particularly deleterious effect on the skill development of boys (Autor and Wasserman, 2013; Bertrand and Pan, 2013).

Autor et al. (2016) examine this hypothesis using sibling fixed-effects models and a sample of students in Florida, and find that early family structure and mother's education do have significantly larger effects on a variety of school outcomes for boys than for their sisters. However, there is also evidence that the greater impact of family background on boys is most relevant for school-age behavior in the United States, and does not extend to longer-term outcomes such as educational attainment (Lundberg, 2017). With our analysis, we contribute to this literature in three important ways. First, we re-examine and confirm gender differences in the impacts of family environment on school-age outcomes for Denmark, another OECD country with different social institutions and lower poverty prevalence, especially among single-parent families. Second, our main contribution is to examine a broad range of adult outcomes for the total population as well as for large samples of full siblings. Third, the richness of the data makes it possible to study potential differences in family environment effects across cohorts. Administrative data on the entire population of Denmark from 1980 to 2015 with cohorts born from 1966 to 1995 enables us to link parental education and family structure during childhood to male–female differences in adolescent outcomes, educational attainment, and adult earnings and employment. A significant advantage of the Danish administrative data is that we are able to add paternal education, which is not available for large subsets of the American samples, to our indicators of family background.

We find, as do Autor et al. (2016) and Lundberg (2017), that adolescent boys appear to be more sensitive than girls to family environment on several observable dimensions. However, we find a very different pattern of parental influence on adult outcomes such as educational attainment, college graduation, employment, and earnings. Maternal education consistently has a greater impact on the education and employment of daughters relative to sons and this effect is stable across cohorts. Paternal education has some significant, though smaller, effects on the gender education gap that favor sons (and that decline over time). These positive effects of same-sex parental education may reflect role-modeling. Father's education has larger positive effects, however, on the employment and earnings of daughters, which seems to indicate that female labor market behavior in Denmark in general is more elastic than men's with respect to early influences. The effects of family structure on adult outcomes vary, and are both small and less consistent across samples than the impacts of parental education. Having married parents at birth tends to increase the relative education and earnings of men, but to reduce their relative probability of college graduation.

Estimates based on the total population are similar to those obtained from a sample of full siblings controlling for family fixed effects. This suggests that the selection of boys and girls across different family types is not biasing our estimates of the gender gap in the effects of family environment in the full sample.

We conclude that, although there are gender differences in responses to parental resources and family structure, they do not conform to the simple story that the skill development of boys is particularly vulnerable to family disadvantage. Our results are consistent with an alternative hypothesis in which maternal education and other family resources have a moderating effect on the outcomes of behavioral and developmental problems in school that are much more typical of boys than girls. These parental influences become less important as the children become adults, and we find little support for the hypothesis that these early behavior gaps imply less long-term skill acquisition by boys, relative to girls.

2. Family background and child outcomes: is there a gender dimension?

Boys begin school with less-developed social and behavioral skills than girls, and these gaps persist through elementary school and explain much of the gender differential in early academic outcomes (DiPrete and Jennings, 2012). Girls consistently receive higher grades, are less likely to repeat grades or to be placed in special education classes, and are less likely to get in trouble at school. There are clear behavioral patterns underlying these disparate outcomes—girls spend more time on homework, are more likely to read for pleasure, and exhibit a greater degree of self-discipline in school.¹ Attempts to explain the emergence of a gender gap favoring women in college attendance and completion have appealed to these gender differences in academic achievement and school discipline as evidence of a “non-cognitive skill” deficit that increases the effective costs of attending and succeeding in school for boys (Becker et al., 2010; Goldin et al., 2006).²

In addition to this gender skill gap, there are also strong socioeconomic gradients in early social skills, attention, and school engagement. These skill differences can explain a portion of the socioeconomic differences in young adult outcomes such as arrests and high school completion (Duncan and Magnuson, 2011). Autor and Wasserman (2013) suggest a new explanation for the trend in the relative educational attainment of men and women based on these socioeconomic skill differentials and trends in family structure. They hypothesize that, as the prevalence of single parent families has increased in the U.S. (and elsewhere), economic stresses have increased for children in lower income households and their access to paternal time and attention has decreased. If the skill development of boys is affected more by father absence or family disadvantage than the skill development of girls, then changes in the living arrangements of children over time may play

¹ Duckworth and Seligman (2006) use several measures of self-discipline to document this gender difference, including self-reports, teacher and parent reports, and a delay of gratification test.

² Other studies have investigated possible gender gaps in the benefits of education. Becker et al. (2010) conclude that the monetary returns to education are still lower for women than for men. However, Browning et al. (2014) suggest that women may benefit more from education through returns in the marriage market, or through a gender wage gap that declines in education. In the latter case, women may invest more in formal schooling to escape from labor market discrimination.

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