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Does death really make us equal? Educational attainment and resource compensation after paternal death in Finland

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ABSTRACT

Attempts to explain the persistent importance of family background for children's educational attainment typically highlight the ways in which parents pass down educational, economic and social resources to their children. However, parental resources may also play a crucial role for preventing family crises from spiraling into cumulative disadvantage. To study such compensation processes, we examine the consequences of a father's death on children's educational trajectories, using a Finnish register-based sample of children born between 1982 and 1987. The results based on multilevel linear probability models both support and contradict our compensation hypothesis. Children who lost their father were not more likely to drop out of upper secondary school, as long as their surviving mother had high levels of socioeconomic resources. Similar compensation processes were visible in the case of entering polytechnic higher education. However, with regard to university attendance, bereavement noticeably reduced the traditional advantage of children with high-resource parents.

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1. Introduction

The persistent positive association between children's educational and socioeconomic outcomes and their parents' educational, cultural and economic resources is one of the best established sociological findings across time and national contexts (Blau and Duncan, 1967; Breen and Jonsson, 2005; Van de Werfhorst and Mijns, 2010). This should make family a central concept in social stratification and social mobility research. But despite this centrality, it is only fairly recently that social mobility research has begun to pay more attention to the variety of family forms and the ways in which the transition between different types of family may affect intergenerational social inheritance (Biblarz and Raftery, 1993; McLanahan and Percheski, 2008). By changing children's relationships with their non-residential parent (Albertini and Garriga, 2011; Kalmijn, 2015), family transitions may attenuate the influence of this parent's social, economic and cultural resources on the child's later attainment (e.g., Biblarz and Raftery, 1993). In this respect, some forms of family transitions, in particular, the death of a parent, are more final than others. However, compared to parents' separation, the death of a parent has received much less attention in the social stratification literature, possibly due to the small number of children experiencing this event in typical survey data sets. The few sociological studies that exist on the topic have usually found a weak negative effect on children's educational and socioeconomic outcomes (Amato and Anthony, 2014; Berg et al., 2014; Biblarz and Gottainer, 2000; Jonsson and Gähler, 1997; Steele et al., 2009).

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Using Finnish data, we contribute to this literature by focusing on the way in which a father's death may affect his children's educational outcomes as young adults. In contrast to parental separation, the death of a father may be regarded as a more clear-cut case of parental loss. This should also make it more suitable as a test case for analyzing the consequences of losing parental resources for children's later outcomes. Our motivation to focus only on paternal deaths stems mainly from the fact that losing one's father is a dramatically more common bereavement experience for children in Finland than the death of one's mother. Whereas 4% of children in our data have experienced the death of a parent by the time they turn 16 years old, in 75% of these cases, the deceased parent was their father rather than their mother.

While prior research on the consequences of bereavement has focused predominately on average effects, our key interest lies with examining the extent to which both the deceased father's as well as the surviving mother's resources moderate the impact of bereavement on children's subsequent educational outcomes. Recent research on parental separation has indicated that family disruption does not entail equally negative outcomes for all children, but it differentially affects children of advantaged and disadvantaged social backgrounds. However, there is no consensus in the research literature as to which group of children face more negative consequences (Albertini and Dronkers, 2009; Bernardi and Radl, 2014; Grätz, 2015). These equivocal findings may, in part, reflect the contradictory nature of the possible mechanisms at work. On the one hand, children from affluent family backgrounds may have more to lose in terms of advantages and resources compared to children who start out from already disadvantaged social positions (Bernardi et al., 2014). In other words, the personal losses of these advantaged children may at the same time level the playing field for disadvantaged children. However, one could also argue that parents with a higher level of resources will be in a better position than parents with less resources to compensate the losses and buffer the strains that family disruptions entail for their children (Erola and Jalovaara, 2015; Mandemakers and Kalmijn, 2014).

In order to disentangle these compensating and equalizing mechanisms potentially at play, our analyses in this article consider the role of both the deceased father's as well as the surviving mother's resources for moderating the impact of bereavement on children's subsequent educational outcomes. As a consequence, our study contributes a new perspective on the consequences of bereavement for children's later educational trajectories. Our analyses are based on extensive register-based Finnish panel data on the educational trajectories of children born between 1982 and 1987. We follow these children, a sample of over 66,000 individuals, until they turn 23 years old. At the centre of our investigations are three types of educational outcomes. As a short-term outcome, we model drop-out from upper secondary education by the time a child reaches age 18. Next, we focus on entry into higher education by age 23, distinguishing between the two types of higher education available in Finland: the vocationally oriented polytechnics (*ammattikorkeakoulu*) and the academically more selective universities. Our analyses in this article are guided by the following three research questions:

- 1) Do bereaved children on average end up with lower educational qualifications compared to their peers?
- 2) Is the impact of bereavement on children's outcomes greater if their deceased father's resources were low or high?
- 3) To what extent can the surviving mother's educational, occupational and economic resources compensate or buffer the negative effects of father's death on children's educational outcomes?

2. Background and hypotheses

Previous research has frequently reported a weak negative effect of parental death on a variety of children's outcomes, including their achievement in mathematics (Amato and Anthony, 2014), their mean grades (Amato and Keith, 1991; Berg et al., 2014), their probability to enter (Jonsson and Gähler, 1997; Steele et al., 2009) and complete upper secondary education (Berg et al., 2014; Biblarz and Gottainer, 2000; Steele et al., 2009), as well as their economic position as young adults (Corak, 2001; Lang and Zagorsky, 2001). The psychological upheaval connected to losing a parent in childhood may have a role to play in producing these lower educational outcomes and their subsequent socioeconomic repercussions in adulthood. For instance, bereaved children have been found to suffer from lower self-esteem (Amato and Keith, 1991; Worden and Silverman, 1996) and run a greater risk of developing depression (Brent et al., 2009; Cerel et al., 2006). Through their effects on children's educational achievement, such psychological consequences of bereavement may subsequently also alter children's educational trajectories and adult educational attainment. Moreover, there are some indications that bereaved children score lower in their educational aspirations and academic self-perception (Brent et al., 2012; Worden and Silverman, 1996), which could be thought to affect their risk assessment when deciding on future educational pathways (Breen and Goldthorpe, 1997).

However, drawing on recent research on parental separation (e.g., Bernardi et al., 2014; Mandemakers and Kalmijn, 2014), we argue that part of the negative consequences of bereavement may also stem from the fact that the death of a father constitutes not only an emotional crisis for his child, but at the same time entails the loss of his socializing and cultural influence and financial support. Although even a deceased father may continue to serve as a role model and affect his children's assessment about realistic future educational or occupational pathways, this effect is likely to be significantly weakened due to his lack of physical presence, continuous interaction and educational guidance in his children's lives. In this respect, children of fathers with high levels of educational and socioeconomic resources could be thought to have more to lose through their father's death than children bereaved of disadvantaged fathers. Hence, the death of a father with high

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