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Do nonresident fathers compensate for a lack of household resources? The associations between paternal involvement and children's cognitive and educational assessments in the UK

Antti O. Tanskanen*, Jani Erola

University of Turku, Assistentinkatu 7, 20014, Finland

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ABSTRACT

This article investigated the associations between nonresident fathers' involvement and cognitive and educational achievements in children. In particular, we tested the resource compensation model, which predicts that the involvement of nonresident fathers should compensate for the lack of household resources and that the effect should be strong, particularly in families with low resources. We use the British Millennium Cohort Study (n = 3445), in which 11-year-old children's cognitive and educational assessments were measured using the British Ability Scale and household resources were measured using maternal education and occupation, family income, and number of books in the home (i.e., cultural capital). We found that the involvement of nonresident fathers was associated with higher scores more strongly in families with the lowest level of cultural capital, compared with others. However, nonresident fathers' involvement was not associated with child scores more strongly in lower resource households than in higher resource households, when the resources were measured by maternal education and occupation and by family income. The results showed that, although the involvement of nonresident fathers might compensate for a lack of household resources, the effect tends to vary between resource types.

1. Introduction

As a part of great social and demographic changes, the number of divorces has grown rapidly in many Western countries (Lesthaeghe, 2014). Currently, one of the highest divorce rates in Europe exists in the UK (OECD, 2014), where more than one third of children have been reported to experience parental separation by the age of 11 (Connelly, Joshi & Rosenberg, 2014). Because children usually stay with their mothers if their parents separate, there are an increasing number of children with nonresident fathers (Sobotka & Toulemon, 2008). Studies have shown that children who live in single-mother families or families with stepfathers have, for instance, higher risk of academic failures, distress and emotional and behavioral problems than children who reside in intact families. Because research on social mobility and stratification has shown that educational achievements in childhood predict socioeconomic success in adulthood (e.g., Duncan, Yeung, Brooks-Gunn & Smith, 1998; Heckman, 2006; Schneider, 2008), the absence of fathers could have detrimental effects on children, not only in the short term but also in the long term.

The question how to dampen the negative effects of parental separation (i.e., how to deal with losses in household resources) has been the focus of several previous studies (e.g., Augustine, 2014; Mandemakers & Kalmijn, 2014; Martin, 2012). However, in the present study we investigate how involvement of nonresident fathers can compensate for current low levels of resources among single mother and stepfather households. Thus, we analyse whether an extra unit of resources received from nonresident fathers has more benefits for the outcomes of children in low-resource families compared to children in high-resource families. By investigating these questions, we test the predictions based on the resource compensation model, which assumes that the lack of a certain resource in a household (e.g., lack of socioeconomic or cultural capital) can be compensated for by some other resource (e.g., involvement received from nonresident father).

2. Resource compensation and paternal involvement

Previous studies have indicated that parental separation may have negative effects on educational achievements in children (e.g., Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Biblarz & Gottainer, 2000; Sun & Li,

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: antti.tanskanen@utu.fi (A.O. Tanskanen).

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2008). This effect has been explained by the resource deprivation model (e.g., Coleman, 1988; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994), which starts from the prediction that high levels of parental resources help children to achieve educational success. Because parental separation tends to result in a decrease in household resources, it can have harmful effects for children. For instance, after parental separation, the financial resources and living standards of the family often decrease (Downey, 1995a, 1995b). In addition, when one parent (usually the father) leaves the household, the parent who leaves may also take away immaterial resources, e.g., cultural capital. Thus, after parental separation, children might lose these resources, which otherwise (i.e., in cases in which parents stay together) would be available to them.

However, in current societies, parental separation does not mean that nonresident fathers totally lose contact with their children or stop invest resources in them. In fact, in Western nations, the level of nonresident fathers' involvement has increased substantially in the last decades, and it is currently increasingly common for nonresident fathers to remain in touch with their children after parental separation (Amato, Mayers & Emery, 2009; Westphal, Poortman & van der Lippe, 2014). Many nonresident fathers regularly see their children, as well as provide financial and non-financial support to their children and their families (Modecki, Hagan, Sandler & Wolchik, 2015; Skinner & Davidson, 2009). This involvement of nonresidential fathers might also help to prevent the potential detrimental effects of parental separation and thus compensate the lack of the current household resources in single mother and stepfather households.

In general, the resource compensation model predicts that missing household resources can be replaced with other resources (e.g., Bernardi, 2014; Bernardi & Radl, 2014). The model has been tested before in the context of parental divorce. The findings of Grätz (2015), based on the German data, suggested that fathers' substantial resources might compensate for the negative long-term intergenerational effects of parental separation. However, there has been a lack of studies investigating whether the involvement of nonresident fathers has different effects on child outcomes according to the different levels of household resources. Based on the compensation model the involvement on nonresident fathers should compensate the lack of household resources more in low-resource families compared to high-resource families.

Here the involvement of nonresident fathers is measured by three indicators, namely contact frequency, relationship closeness and paternal support. Although these are different measurements of involvement, they are not totally separate and thus can overlap with each other. It has been argued that those fathers who regularly see their children might be closer with them and also might be more likely to provide support to them (Dunn, Cheng, O'Connor, & Bridges, 2003). In agreement with this argument, Hawkins et al. (2007), for instance, showed that contact frequency was strongly correlated with other paternal involvement indicators.

From compensation perspective it is important to study different indicators of paternal involvement because all paternal involvement measures may not compensate the lack of household resources similarly. For instance, emotional support received from nonresident fathers could be more beneficial for children compared to contact frequencies (Adamsons & Johnson, 2013). One reason why pure contacts between fathers and children could be a poor measurement of paternal involvement is because the time that fathers and children share together can vary substantially in content (Dunn et al., 2003; Smith, Robertson, Dixon, Quigley, & Whitehead, 2001). If fathers have supportive relationships with their children, one might expect that contact frequency is positively associated with child outcomes. In contrast, if the relationship is conflictual, or the fathers harm their children, contact might be negatively associated with child outcomes (Amato & Rezac, 1994; Amato & Sobolewski, 2004; King & Heard, 1999). The third option is that the effect of paternal involvement is neutral. Terms such as "Disneyland dad" and "fun parent" are used to refer to those fathers who do not engage in activities that could improve child development but rather spend only leisure time with their children (Jenkins, 2009). Although shared leisure activities with nonresident fathers can benefit small children (Jia, Kotila, & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2012), more instrumental paternal involvement, including helping to pay for school-related issues and other financial support, still tends to matter more in cases of older children and adolescents.

3. Household resources

In addition to paternal involvement, household resources (i.e., the socioeconomic and cultural assets of families) have consistently been shown to correlate with academic achievements in children, meaning that when the rents (e.g., Duncan et al., 1998; Heckman, 2006; Hampden-Thompson, 2009). Moreover, several studies have shown that there are lower levels of resources in single-mother and stepfather families than in intact families (e.g., Downey, 1995a, 1995b; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Sun & Li, 2001), with potentially negative effects on children's educational attainments (Sun & Li, 2009; Bernardi & Radl, 2014; Mandemakers & Kalmijn, 2014).

Here, we measured household resources by four factors, which indicate somewhat different aspects of resources, namely maternal education, maternal occupation, household income and cultural capital. Parental education might indicate both cognitive skills and non-cognitive traits, whereas parental occupational position tends to indicate social status, and family income measures financial resources. Obviously, these socioeconomic factors overlap with each other because more highly educated individuals also tend to have, on average, higher incomes and occupational positions.

In addition to these socioeconomic resources, cultural capital is an important household resource type and might be particularly important in the academic environment investigated in the present study. In his hallmark studies, Bourdieu (1977), Bourdieu (1984), Bourdieu (1986) argued that cultural resources represent immaterial types of capital and should be considered similar to financial resources. Esping-Andersen (2006), pp. 14, defined cultural capital as "the ability of parents to transmit the proper 'middle class' cultural baggage – such as self-presentation or language skills – to their children" (see also Lamont & Lareau, 1988). Cultural capital can be transmitted from parents to children via involvement and socialization.

Based on Bourdieu (1977), cultural capital consists of three levels, namely embodied, objectified and institutionalized cultural capital. Embodied cultural capital represents itself, for instance, by linguistic skills, proper preferences and cultural knowledge. Embodied cultural capital can be measured by objectified cultural goods, such as the number of books or artworks in the home. According to Bourdieu, cultural capital is not only one form of capital, but it also represents currency that can be exchanged into other currencies. In the academic world, cultural capital can be converted into educational success and credentials, i.e., institutionalized cultural capital. Thus, based on Bourdieu's theory, higher cultural capital should be associated with greater educational success.

Previous studies have indeed found that children from homes with higher cultural capital also achieve greater success in the academic world (e.g., Andersen & Jaeger, 2014; Cheadle, 2008; Dumais, 2002; Xu & Hampden-Thompson, 2012). In this article, we measured cultural capital by the number of books in the home, a factor that has been shown to have stronger power to explain children's educational achievements compared with several other measurements of cultural capital (Esping-Andersen, 2009 De Graaf, 1986). The correlation between the number of books in the home and edu-