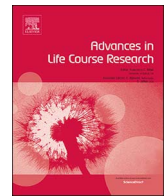




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Advances in Life Course Research

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/alcr

Cross-sibling effects on divorce in the Netherlands

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Divorce
 Cross-sibling effects
 Event history analyses
 Register data
 The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

Parental divorce has repeatedly been shown to increase the risk of divorce for offspring, but research on the influence of other social ties is scarce. This study examines the association of divorce between siblings and whether such an association varies under specific sibship characteristics. Hypotheses were tested using event history models on five complete Dutch birth cohorts (1970–1974), derived from register data. Married individuals (N = 64677) and their sibling were followed from 2000 up to 2012. Results show that individuals with a divorced sibling had a higher risk of divorce even after correcting for a number of shared background factors, including parental divorce. The divorce of a younger sibling had a weaker association with an individual's divorce risk than the divorce of an older sibling, and the effect of sibling divorce weakened over time.

1. Introduction

The rate of divorce has rapidly increased over the past few decades. Recent American figures show that around half of the marriages in the US end within their first 15 years (National Vital Statistics Report, 2008). Other Western countries, including the Netherlands, show similar upsurges in divorce rates of up to 30 to 40% of marriages over the life course (Eurostat, 2012). This begs the question whether personal divorce decisions are in fact part of a larger social phenomenon or trend. Up until now, most research on divorce decisions has focused on the role of partners' individual characteristics and the strength of their relationship (Axinn & Thornton 1992; Bumpass & Mburugu, 1977; Keith & Finlay, 1988; White 1990). Research that did focus on the larger social environment mostly emphasised intergenerational transmission: a parent-to-child transfer of union dissolution (Amato & Booth, 1991; Amato, 1996; Bumpass, Martin, & Sweet, 1991; Conger et al., 1990; Davies and Cummings, 1994). As parental divorce has been shown to be strongly related to children's divorce risk, it is worthwhile to consider the possible influence of other social ties. South and Lloyd (1995) analysed the extent to which the availability of spousal alternatives influenced the risk of divorce in rather broadly defined labour market areas. Aberg (2009) investigated the so-called *social contagiousness* of divorce and focused on the effects of the demographic characteristics within firms, like the proportion of single or divorced colleagues. In our study, we elaborate on the idea of social contagiousness of divorce, not focusing on average characteristics of the social environment but on

contagiousness within one specific and highly significant social tie: the sibling.

A wide range of research has identified the sibling bond as a unique and intimate peer connection, highly influential to all manner of personal choices (Bernardi, 2003; Lyngstad & Prskawetz, 2010; Voorpostel, 2007). An individual is usually closely familiar with their siblings' experiences, and siblings often function as behavioural examples throughout life. Previous sibship research on this role model mechanism suggests that family formation is 'contagious': when a person marries or gives birth, siblings are more likely to display similar behaviour themselves (Bernardi, 2003; Bloom, Canning, Gunther, & Linnemayr, 2008; Kuziemko, 2006; Lyngstad & Prskawetz, 2010). A divorce constitutes a major and disruptive life course transition. Literature strongly suggests that an individual's susceptibility to external social influences increases when dealing with decisions on substantial lifestyle alterations (Cicirelli, 1995; Lamb & Sutton-Smith, 2014[1982]; Lyngstad & Prskawetz, 2010). Moreover, it is argued that the more one can relate to one's social ties, and the stronger the relationship is, the more likely it will be that some level of communication will take place about important life choices (ibid.). A divorced sibling, therefore, could become a role model on divorce, and provide their sibling with a frame of reference on its possible consequences.

To our knowledge, only one study has truly focused on possible network effects on divorce. Using a longitudinal survey sample, McDermott, Fowler and Christakis (2013) found evidence to suggest transmission of divorce among friends in the American town of

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Framingham. The same study also found a significant association between siblings' divorce status, and between divorce status of co-workers in small firms (McDermott et al., 2013). However, as discussed by the authors, this study had a limited demographic range (i.e. practically all survey participants were white, came from one specific town, and the majority belonged to older cohorts). Therefore, the results cannot be generalised to the larger American population, and may not be representative for contemporary divorce rates, or across countries. Our study adds to previous findings and literature on divorce in a number of ways. First of all, we too examine the main effect of a sibling's divorce event on an individual's divorce risk, using unique information on a nation-wide population subgroup in the Netherlands between 2000 and 2012. We include individuals from all manner of cultural backgrounds, from younger cohorts aged thirty onwards, among whom divorce is more prevalent. Second of all, this study is the first to investigate whether a cross-sibling effect on divorce differs depending on relationship characteristics of the sibship – focusing specifically on characteristics that may affect the strength of the sibling's role model position.

We theorise that there is a direct association between siblings' decisions on divorce because of the role model function that siblings have. However, establishing such a causal link is difficult in this type of study. Siblings share genes, a family background, and life events. Any association between behaviours of siblings could, in theory, be due to these endogenous factors rather than to 'contagion' of the behaviour itself (Manski 1993). We aim to disentangle clear endogenous factors from social influence among siblings by addressing this issue in several ways. First, we correct for shared background factors as much as possible, although we cannot control for all of them. Second, we fit additional models on both same-sex and opposite-sex twins in our dataset, in an attempt to further parse out possible genetic influences on divorce events among siblings. Third, we investigate whether the influence of the sibling's divorce wanes over time, consistent with a causal explanation. Fourth, we investigate moderators of the 'sibling effect'. We expect the cross sibling divorce association to be stronger when the sibling is more likely to function as a role model. If this is indeed the case, then this provides support for the role model theory, and for at least some causality in the relationship. Therefore, the research questions read: (1) *Does the divorce of one's sibling increase an individual's own risk of divorce?* And (2) *Does a cross-sibling effect on divorce vary according to specific sibship characteristics?*

2. Theory

The relationship between siblings is potentially one of the most intimate and long-lasting peer connections, even in adulthood (Voorpostel, 2007). While physical distance after leaving the parental home could weaken a sibling connection, brothers and sisters continue to experience important life transitions that reinforce family bonds. Family rituals associated with births, marriages or deaths, for example, encourage shared celebration and mourning and can emotionally strengthen interpersonal relationships (Lyngstad & Prskawetz, 2010). Furthermore, a sibling's experiences are usually well known to an individual, perhaps more so than those of other close ties (Bernardi, 2003). For these reasons, the importance of the sibling bond is stressed throughout ample sociological and psychological studies (Cicirelli, 1995; Lamb & Sutton-Smith, 2014[1982]; Lyngstad and Prskawetz, 2010; McDermott et al., 2013; Minnett, Vandell, & Santrock, 1983; Stoneman, Brody, & MacKinnon, 1986).

There are three main explanations for a likely correlation between siblings' divorce decisions. First of all, siblings share a family, and a history. Parents' cultural capital and attitudes, the family's socio-economic position, and life events such as parental conflicts, parental divorce and other family crises will likely have shaped their attitudes towards relationship behaviour and divorce from a young age onwards (Amato, 1996; McDermott et al., 2013). For instance, a wide range of

literature suggests that children from divorced parents have a higher risk of divorce later in life themselves (Amato 2010, 1996; Amato and Booth, 1991; Bumpass et al., 1991; Conger et al., 1990; Davies and Cummings, 1994). Having grown up under comparable social circumstances, siblings further tend to share early socioeconomic characteristics and certain environmental factors associated with schooling, friendship networks, and possible neighbourhood influences (Axinn, Clarkberg, & Thornton, 1994). These common background characteristics can thus constitute a spurious cross-sibling effect on divorce; a continuation of a shared background effect.

Second of all, underlying the similar upbringing and socialisation, siblings resemble their parents, and each other, genetically (Amato, 2000). Next to potential unmeasured characteristics of the shared family background, therefore, shared genes may play a role in explaining sibling associations in divorce behaviour. Many human traits are highly heritable, i.e. influenced by our DNA. This is not only true for physical traits, but also for behavioural traits such as temperament, personality, and cognitive and social traits. A recent meta-analysis of over 2700 publications estimated heritability across all complex traits and across cultural contexts at 49%. A heritability of 47% was found for traits in the cognitive domain, 46% across psychiatric traits and 31% across the domain of social values (Polderman et al., 2015). If divorce behaviour is partly driven by genetic factors, this should lead to a resemblance between full siblings, who share 50% of their genetic material on average. Studies indeed suggest a genetic effect on risk of divorce (McGue & Lykken, 1992) that is mediated for a large part by personality factors, especially negative emotionality (Jocklin, McGue, & Lykken, 1996) and possibly also the inclination to internalise problems (D'Onofrio et al., 2007). In line with the genetic influence on divorce, studies also found a genetic influence on marital satisfaction (Spotts et al., 2004). Again, this influence was in part mediated by personality (Spotts et al., 2005).

Third of all, and of particular interest in this study, siblings can serve as role models to their brothers and sisters by providing behavioural examples on major transitions in the life course (Axinn et al., 1994; Bernardi, 2003; Cicirelli, 1995; East, 1998; Lamb & Sutton-Smith, 2014[1982]; Lyngstad and Prskawetz, 2010; Minnett et al., 1983). One dominant notion in research on role model effects emphasises the importance of direct exposure to behavioural examples. It has been put forward that the mere occurrence of an event or behaviour in the social environment makes it more likely for this behaviour to be displayed by others (Booth, Edwards, & Johnson, 1991; Lyngstad and Prskawetz, 2010; McDermott et al., 2013). With regard to divorce, prior findings indeed indicate that an individual is more likely to divorce when they are exposed to divorced individuals (McDermott et al., 2013). The literature does not, however, identify a single most important causal mechanism behind such a role model effect on personal decisions. The transfer of divorce among siblings may be due to several possible processes, for instance behavioural imitation; an alteration of one's norms on relationship behaviour and divorce when witnessing a sibling go through union dissolution; or perhaps the divorce event of the sibling makes one think about their own relationship and the options available to them. Additionally, a divorce may lead to the partners' family, including siblings and their spouses, choosing sides, thus setting off wider strife. Regardless of the precise process, these possible socio-interactive mechanisms all suggest that the role model function of siblings can constitute a direct association between siblings' decisions on divorce. In this study, we derive our main hypothesis on sibling effects from the role model mechanism. Our core hypothesis reads: (H1) *Having a divorced sibling will increase the likelihood of having a divorce oneself.* Subsequently, we take an in-depth look into possible moderating factors of a cross-sibling influence on divorce. Testing these factors gives us more insight in the plausibility of the role model mechanism and thus also in the possible causality of the 'sibling effect'. To get even more insight in the underlying causality we include several observed common background characteristics into our models, investigate the influence of time

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