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Do mother's and father's education condition the impact of parental divorce on child well-being?



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ABSTRACT

We use the British Cohort Study to investigate to what extent parental resources moderate the association between parental divorce in childhood and lowered child well-being as indicated by maternal reports of child psychological well-being and by academic test scores (reading and math tests). We argue that children of mothers with more years of education suffer less when their parents split up because better educated mothers may be better able to provide a safe and stable environment for their children after divorce. In addition, we argue that having a better educated father could either aggravate or reduce the effects of parental divorce. This is one of the first studies to simultaneously investigate the role of maternal, and paternal resources, and pre-divorce shared resources. Our analyses indicate that the effect of parental divorce on psychological well-being is reduced for better educated mothers and for families with more pre-divorce economic resources, but increased for better educated fathers. For academic test scores we find a protective effect of having a better educated father and higher pre-divorce social resources.

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1. Introduction

There is a large body of research showing that children with divorced parents experience more unfavorable developmental outcomes than children of intact families. Negative effects are found for a range of outcomes in childhood and adulthood, including well-being, behavioral problems, school grades, delinquency, and educational attainment (Amato, 2000, 2010). Increasingly, research focuses on factors that may increase or reduce the effects of parental divorce, i.e., questions about moderator (interaction) effects. For example, studies have examined whether the effects of parental divorce depend on the quality of the parents' marriage (Hanson, 1999; Morrison and Coiro, 1999; Strohschein, 2005b), the number of siblings (Sun and Li, 2009), race and ethnicity (Fomby and Cherlin, 2007; Kalmijn, 2010; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994; Osborne and McLanahan, 2007; Wu and Thomson, 2001), and socio-economic resources of the parents (Albertini and Dronkers, 2009; Biblarz and Raftery, 1993; Cavanagh and Huston, 2006; Elliott and Richards, 1991; Fischer, 2007; Jonsson and Gahler, 1997; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994). A review by Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan (Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan, 1999) calls for more research into diversity in outcomes and possible protective factors. This call is echoed about 10 years later in a recent review by Amato (2010) who argues that "researchers should focus less attention on mean differences (...) and more attention on the factors that produce variability" (p. 658) (2010). The present study contributes to this literature by examining whether the impact of parental divorce on child well-being depends on the educational level of mother and father. We investigate two child outcomes psychological well-being and academic test scores (reading and math tests).

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Researchers have since long recognized that parental resources (social and economic) play a key role in understanding the impact of parental divorce on child well-being (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994). Most of these studies are studies of mediation; they posit that parental divorce causes a decline in child well-being because a divorce leads to a decline in parental resources available to the child (e.g., Sun and Li, 2002; Thomson et al., 1994). However, the loss of resources may depend on the pre-divorce levels. Parents with more pre-divorce resources may be better able to provide a safe and stable environment for children even despite a divorce. One mechanism could be that better educated parents may be more aware of the potential negative effects of divorce for the children. As a result they may be more likely to put their grievances aside for the sake of the children and to actively attempt to reduce the negative effects of the divorce. Another mechanism could be that people with more resources may be able to retain the house they were living in, so that the children can stay at their school and can keep their neighborhood friends (Hagan et al., 1996).

A few studies have examined such interaction effects, although all of these have focused on the child's socio-economic outcomes, not on well-being. In Italy, for example, Albertini and Dronkers (2009) found that divorce had a large negative impact on children's educational attainment for those with less educated mothers while there was no difference in educational attainment between children from divorced and intact families when the mother was better educated. Findings from the National Child Development Study in Britain showed that the effect of parental divorce on children's reading test scores was stronger for manual class fathers than for non-manual class fathers (Elliott and Richards, 1991). Biblarz and Raftery (1993), however, found the opposite results. Using data for the US, they found that at the high end of the socio-economic spectrum the negative impact of parental divorce on the child's socio-economic attainment is greater.

These mixed findings may be attributed to country differences, but could also be explained by the fact that these studies took the resources of only one parent into account. Following divorce the mother usually remains with the children and the father leaves the household. A mother with high resources may be quite beneficial to the child, but the father's resources may not have such favorable effects, as these are often lost to the child following divorce. As father's and mother's resources are highly correlated, studies that use information on only one parent may give an incomplete picture as mother's and father's resources could have opposite effects. The loss of a high resource father may overshadow the benefits of having a high resource mother in such studies. We are aware of only two studies that examine effects of parental divorce while incorporating information about the resources of both the parents. Using Swedish registry data, Jonsson and Gahler (1997) found that the effect of parental divorce on the child's educational career was most unfavorable if a high resource father and a low resource mother broke up. In the Netherlands, Fischer showed that the impact of parental divorce on the child's educational level is lower when levels of mother's education are higher whereas the impact is larger when father's education is higher (Fischer, 2007). Clearly, these studies illustrate the importance of looking at the resources of the mother and father simultaneously.

Little research has examined the interaction between parental socio-economic resources and parental divorce for child well-being. To our knowledge, only two studies shed some light on this issue. The study of Elliott and Richards (1991) in the UK also investigated child behavioral problems, but they did not find significant interactions between parental divorce and socio-economic resources. In a study of family instability and children's early problem behavior, Cavanagh and Huston (2006) found that a greater "HOME score," a measure of child toys and other commodities in the home, decreased the effect of family instability on negative behaviors towards teachers and a higher income reduced negative behaviors towards peers.

The present paper contributes to this literature by examining whether the impact of parental divorce on child well-being (as indicated by maternal reports of psychological well-being and by academic test scores) depends on the educational level of mother and father. We focus on these aspects of child well-being because they have been widely used in this literature and they also allow us to test our hypotheses across different domains of children's lives (i.e., at home and at school). We use educational level as our indicator of parental socio-economic resources, as educational level is the best indicator of the social, economic, and cognitive resources a person possesses in modern societies. Moreover, educational level is the most comparable socio-economic indicator for men and women and is relatively fixed over time, which makes it ideal when studying the impact of divorce (i.e., a parent's education is not affected by his or her divorce). However, mother's and father's educational level are not exhaustive indicators of parental economic and social resources. We therefore, additionally examine whether other parental shared resources, such as economic hardship, moderate the impact of divorce beyond that of parental educational level. To our knowledge, this is one of the first studies to simultaneously investigate the moderating influence of maternal, paternal and shared pre-divorce resources. The data we use come from the British Cohort Study (BCS). This panel dataset makes it possible to investigate the impact of parental divorce between age 5 and 10 on the well-being of children at age 10. The BCS has the advantage that it is a very large dataset, so that we observe sufficient parental divorces in order to be able to detect variability in the impact of divorce. We only investigate children living with their mothers before and after the marital split because the number of children living in other arrangements was too small and would blur the results. An additional advantage is that the predictions regarding the effects of mother's and father's resources are less ambiguous in these cases.

2. Background and hypotheses

The effects of divorce on children's outcomes have often been explained in terms of a decline or loss of parental resources after divorce (McLanahan, 1985). Usually, a distinction here is made between economic and social resources. Following

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