INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF DIVORCE – THE SWEDISH TREND

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ABSTRACT

We analyze cohort patterns in the intergenerational transmission of divorce and family dissolution in Sweden. It is well known that parental separation is associated with a higher risk of own divorce, but less is known whether these associations have changed or remained stable over time. There are strong theoretical reasons to expect changes in this pattern, but few empirical studies, partly due to lack of appropriate data. Furthermore, the studies that exist yield contradictory conclusions (McLanahan and Bumpass 1988; Wolfinger 1999; Li and Wu 2008). We use population register data from six cohorts (born 1950-75) of Swedish men and women to study cohort patterns in the intergenerational transmission of divorce and family dissolution during a time of rapid family and social change. Our preliminary findings show no trend over the cohorts.

INTRODUCTION

During the 20th century, divorce rates have increased substantially in most societies in the Western world. In Sweden, recent estimates predict that nearly half of today's marriages will end in divorce (Statistics Sweden 2005a) and the risk for experiencing a parental divorce or separation during childhood (up to 16 years of age) has almost tripled between individuals born in the 1950s (7 percent) and the 1970s (20 percent) (own calculations from the Swedish Level of Living Survey; also see Bygren, Gähler & Nermo 2004). This proportion seems to increase even further among later born cohorts (Statistics Sweden 2003).

Studies from a number of countries consistently reveal that increasing divorce and separation rates are partly due to a self-generating process, i.e. intergenerational transmission of divorce (see Amato & Keith 1991a for a meta-analysis on American studies and Diekmann & Schmidheiny 2006 and Dronkers & Härkönen 2008 for comparative studies). In other words, a growing proportion of the population has experienced a divorce in their childhood family, and parental divorce, in turn, is a strong predictor for offspring divorce.

Although the finding of intergenerational transmission of divorce is well established, less is known about the possible change in this correlation over time. As divorce has become more common, its meaning and impact on the lives of those involved, as well as people's attitudes toward divorce may have changed. Only a handful of studies have dealt with this issue. Wolfinger (1999) finds an attenuation in the intergenerational transmission of divorce over time in the United States, while other studies find no such trend (Li & Wu 2008; McLanahan & Bumpass 1988; Teachman 2002; Dronkers and Härkönen 2008).

Thus, this issue remains largely unresolved. We also have very few results from other countries than the United States. Proper event history analysis of these questions also place heavy demands on data, which are not met with most data (cf. Li and Wu (2008)).

The objective of this study is to contribute to this literature by analyzing whether the intergenerational transmission of divorce and family dissolution have changed over cohorts (born 1950-75). We use high-quality register data that cover the whole Swedish population.

WHY INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF DIVORCE?

Amato (1996) has developed a model for analysing the mechanisms through which parental divorce can be assumed to influence the likelihood for offspring divorce or union dissolution. The model postulates three mediating mechanisms: 1) life course and socio-economic variables, 2) marital commitment and attitudes toward divorce, and 3) patterns of interpersonal behavior. The idea underlying such an explanatory model is that when young adults, who have experienced their parents' divorce, make their own life course decisions about family formation, they are likely to make choices that have detrimental effects on future union stability, i.e. partnering and having children early, cohabit rather than marry directly etc. They are also likely to bring into their co-residential relationship attitudes, levels of commitment, and patterns of interpersonal behavior that increase the risk of union dissolution.

Life course and socio-economic variables. Children from non-intact families start their sexual lives, quit school, leave their parental home, initiate marital and non-marital unions, and become parents earlier than their peers from intact homes (Goldscheider & Goldscheider 1998; Kiernan 1997; Kiernan & Hobcraft 1997; McLanahan & Bumpass 1988; McLanahan & Sandefur 1994; Thornton 1991). This life course choice has implications for future union stability as young age at family formation is a strong predictor for divorce (Amato 1996 [United States]; Andersson 1995; 1997 [Sweden]; Diekmann & Engelhardt 1999 [Germany]) and union dissolution in general (Hoem & Hoem 1992). Children in single-parent families are also exposed to lower incomes and economic difficulties to a higher extent than children in two-parent families (Gähler 2001; Wong, Garfinkel & McLanahan 1993) and low education and income, in turn, is associated with increased marital conflict, separation and divorce.

Marital commitment and attitudes toward divorce. Many young adults from divorced families of origin have direct experience of the drawbacks of their parents' relationship. Hence these individuals may hold a less idealized and romantic view of marriage than their peers from intact families (Amato 1988). Furthermore, they may see less advantage with marriage, be more cautious about entering a conjugal union, view divorce as a reasonable solution to marital problems, and feel less restrained to stay in an unsatisfying marriage (Amato 1996). As a consequence, children with different family backgrounds may differ in their commitment to marriage and their attitudes toward divorce. In fact, individuals from dissolved families are commonly found to have less negative attitudes toward divorce (Statistics Sweden 1994, 1995; Thornton 1985).

Patterns of interpersonal behavior. Swedish divorcees commonly claim different types of conflict, over household duties, work and family, child-rearing, money, and leisure, as grounds for divorce (Wadsby & Svedin 1992). Divorce, then, is often caused by spouses not being able or willing to solve marital conflict and interpersonal problems. Studies indicate that spouses who grew up in a family characterized by respect, empathy, tolerance, confirmation and acceptance between its members are likely to view their own marriage as more intimate and report less marital complaints than spouses who experienced negative family-of-origin interaction. In other words, interpersonal behavior and interaction patterns seem to be transmitted across generations (Sabatelli & Bartle-Haring 2003; also see Amato & DeBoer 2001; Webster et al. 1995). In accordance, spouses from divorced families of origin consistently report less marital satisfaction and more marital disagreements in their own marriages than individuals who grew up with both their parents (Amato & Keith 1991a).

WHY (NO) TREND OVER TIME IN THE INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF DIVORCE?

There are several reasons to assume that the differences in living conditions, between individuals growing up in intact and disrupted families, have decreased over time. First, studies show that people's attitudes toward divorce are less negative than they used to be (Thornton & Young-De Marco 2001). As divorce rates increase, alternative family structures have become more widely accepted and divorce has come to be accompanied by less stigma (Sigle-Rushton, Hobcraft & Kiernan 2005).

Second, during recent decades in Sweden, a number of family and social policy programs have been introduced to reduce income dispersion between family types (Gähler 2001). Although these differences are by no means eliminated, they are still smaller than in other countries (Bradbury & Jäntti 1999).

Third, recent empirical research suggests that as divorce becomes more prevalent, the nature of marital dissolution changes. De Graaf and Kalmijn (2006) show that when parental divorce is rare, severe divorce motives (e.g., violence and infidelity) are more frequent, but when this event is more common, and less select, relational and psychological motives are the norm. When social and economic barriers to divorce are low, even couples who have not experienced severe conflict may decide to divorce.

Fourth, over time parents may have become more aware of children's needs and of how family dissolution affects children. Hence, today's parents might be better able to help their children alleviate any negative effects of parental divorce (Sigle-Rushton, Hobcraft & Kiernan 2005). In addition, an ever-increasing proportion of Swedish children remain in frequent contact with the non-custodial parent following family dissolution (Statistics Sweden 1995, 2003, 2007).

Previous arguments have in common that they imply a diminishing difference between offspring in intact and disrupted families. Thus, we would expect the strength of the intergenerational transmission of divorce to have weakened over time. However, there are arguments against a decreased effect of parental divorce. Goode (1962, 1970, 1993) argues that when social and economic barriers to divorce are high, and divorce is rare, then this event is more common in higher social strata. However, as these barriers diminish, marital instability becomes more frequent among lower classes. Following this line of reasoning, and given that financial hardship is detrimental to unions, the intergenerational transmission of divorce should have become stronger over time.

Moreover, studies have found that when the parents' divorce ended a low-conflict marriage, the divorce is likely to have a strong effect on the stability of the children's marriage. When the divorce ended a high-conflict marriage, however, the children's divorce risk is lower and similar to that of children from intact families (Amato & DeBoer 2001). Thus, parents who leave a low-conflict marriage may send a strong signal that doing so is an acceptable alternative to a seemingly well-functioning marriage, an alternative that their children are particularly likely to adopt if their own marriage shows a low level of happiness (cf. Wolfinger 2005, pp. 27-30). Thus, if low-level conflict divorce becomes more common over time this may increase the strength of the intergenerational transmission of divorce.

DATA AND METHODS

The analyses in this paper are based on a compilation of Swedish register data, consisting of the entire Swedish population during the period 1950-2007. Data from different sources were matched in the *Sweden in Time – Activities and Relations (STAR) database*. For the purpose of this paper we use census data, including information on parents' civil status, the multi-

generation register, including biological links between generations, and the register on changes in civil status, including civil status changes on a monthly basis.

Our analyses are based on six birth cohorts, 1950, 1955, 1960, 1965, 1970, and 1975. From census data we extracted the individual's family type at age 15 (birth cohort 1950, census data 1965; birth cohort 1955, census data 1970 and so on). By linking census data to the multi-generation register we were able to detect whether the adolescent was living with both her/his biological parents or not. If so, the individual was regarded living in an intact family. If not, we excluded those whose parent had died. All others were regarded as living in a dissolved family. In later analyses we will go into deeper detail to discern those who have experience of parental divorce/separation from those who were born into a single parent family.

Our outcome variable, own divorce, emanates from the register on changes in civil status. From 1968 and onwards all changes in civil status were registered on a monthly basis. Thus far we were only able to analyze formal divorce from first marriage (censored at 10 years of marriage; 167,774 marriages and 12,622 divorces for men; 185,931 marriages and 14535 divorces for women). In future versions of this study we will extend the analyses to also include separation between cohabitants with common children. We will also include control variables on parents' and children's demographic and socio-economic circumstances.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

In our first analyses we analyzed the relationships between parental family dissolution and own divorce across our six cohorts to detect cohort differences. The results (separately for men and for women) from the Cox-regression models that included interactions between cohorts and parental family dissolution are shown in Table 1. We find two significant interaction terms (both for men). However, these first results do not give any indication of a trend in the intergenerational transmission of divorce in Sweden.

Table 1. Cohort patterns in the intergenerational transmission of divorce, Cox regression models.

	Men	Women
Family dissolution	1.54***	1.79***
Cohort 1955 (Ref: 1950)	1.33**	1.43***
Cohort 1960	1.90***	1.69***
Cohort 1965	2.66***	2.51***
Cohort 1970	5.60***	3.71***
Cohort 1975	8.07***	5.09***
Family dissolution*1955	1.21**	1.09
Family dissolution*1960	1.06	1.05
Family dissolution*1965	1.06	1.05
Family dissolution*1970	1.21*	1.06
Family dissolution*1975	1.22	1.14
LL	-143653.82	-166695.76
Chi2	1936.71	3002.62
N	167,774	185,931

Note: Controlled for age at marriage, age at marriage squared, and their interactions with cohorts
Source: Sweden in Time – Activities and Relations (STAR) dataset.