

## **Parental Divorce and Union Disruption among Young Adults in Sweden**

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It is well established that the children of divorce are disproportionately likely to end their own marriages (Amato 1996, McLanahan and Bumpass 1988, Teachman 2002, Wolfinger 1999). Most studies of the intergenerational transmission of union dissolution deal with divorce, i.e. formal marriage disruptions, only, and focus on the situation in the United States. In our study, we include non-marital as well as marital unions, and we focus on Sweden, a country well-known as one of the forerunners in the so-called Second Demographic Transition, where it is since decades “mainstream behaviour to assert one’s independence and break up a relationship when its future seems bleak” (Hoem and Hoem 1992), and where cohabitation is prevalent, one could almost say normative, among young adults.

Studies of union disruption in contemporary Sweden are rare. Hoem and Hoem (1992), using data from the 1981 Swedish Family Survey, concentrated their analysis on first unions after entry into motherhood. Thus, they had information only about women, and parental divorce was not included among the explanatory variables. A recent comparative study of the intergenerational transmission of divorce, however, includes Sweden among the 15 countries analysed, together with the United States, Canada and thirteen other European countries (Diekmann and Schmidheiny 2004). The authors find that the divorce risk of children of divorced parents is on average about twice that of children of non-divorced parents, and the multiplier effect for Sweden is close to the average.

Our study will extend this analysis by including cohabiting unions, which seems especially important since we are analysing the behaviour of young adults. In addition, we will be able to take account of the level of conflict in the parental home, an often neglected but potentially very important factor in the analysis of union disruption. Amato (1996) has

developed a model for analysing the mechanisms through which parental divorce can be assumed to influence the likelihood of offspring divorce or union dissolution. The model postulates three mediating mechanisms: 1) life course and socio-economic variables, 2) commitment and attitudes toward divorce, and 3) patterns of interpersonal behaviour. 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 early, cohabit rather than marry directly etc. They are also likely to bring into their coresidential relationship attitudes, levels of commitment, and patterns of interpersonal behaviour, that increase the risk of union dissolution. Therefore, including the level of conflict in the parental home as an explanatory factor may be quite important (Amato and DeBoer 2001).

Teachman (2002) has found that children who were born out of wedlock are as likely, if not more, than children of divorce to see their own marriages dissolve. This indicates that the effect of not living with both your biological parents during childhood and adolescence may be more important than the effect of parental divorce, as such: "it appears that time spent away from both biological parents, for any number of reasons, is associated with a set of circumstances that are linked to an increased risk of divorce". Thus it may be important to take account of childhood living arrangements and parent histories when analysing the intergenerational transmission of union instability.

This paper analyses the impact of childhood family structure on the disruption of first and later unions among young adults in Sweden, using information from a mail questionnaire survey with about 2000 respondents, aged 22, 26, 30 and 34 in 2003. The survey contains complete union histories for the respondents, including month and year of the start of first union (as well as later unions), whether this union has been transformed into marriage, and whether it has been dissolved (and the dates for those events, if they have occurred before the time of the survey). We also have information on whether the parents lived together continuously up to the respondent's 16<sup>th</sup> birthday, and, if not, if parents have divorced/moved apart, died or never lived together, respondent's age at disruption, whether there was a stepparent, and whether the biological parents were married or not. In addition, the respondents have reported on the level of conflict in the childhood family, and on father's main occupation and the level of education of both parents. Earlier studies on this data set (Bernhardt, Gähler and Goldscheider 2005) showed that individuals from disrupted families leave their parental home earlier than other young adults. In this paper we analyse dissolution

risks by means of intensity regression, with months since start of the union as the time variable.

The results of preliminary analysis of our data give clear evidence that the effects of parental divorce or separation are strong and significant in contemporary Sweden. The highest risks were found among children whose parents were cohabiting (never-married) but separated before the respondent reached age 16; they had a 40 percent higher dissolution risk than those whose parents lived in intact marriages. Parental divorce also increased dissolution risks but less than if parents were never married (but separated). For women, it seems that when the parents get divorced after respondent's age 16, risks are higher than when divorce occurred before age 16. Marriage and joint children decrease dissolution risks among respondents; for both sexes together, the 'protecting effects' are about the same. Dissolution risks are higher for higher order unions, but lower with increasing age at start of the union.

Our continued analysis will include some additional information about the respondents' living conditions during childhood and adolescence, such as the conflict variable and the possible presence of a stepparent. We will also test a more refined measure of respondent's age at the time of divorce.

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