

Emotional well-being among adolescents in Swedish stepfamilies 2000-2003

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This paper studies child well-being in Swedish stepfamilies. It focuses on adolescents' experience of emotional well-being and their self-reported psychological and psychosomatic complaints.

Both Swedish and international literature on children's psychological well-being show an association between low well-being and living in single-parent and stepfamily households. The reasons for children's well-being in stepfamilies may however differ from those in single-parent households. In this paper I will examine two of the main theoretical explanations behind children's low well-being in these family types; economic deprivation and parenting/socialization. Since it has been argued that the relationship between low well-being and family structure may be spuriously produced and due to pre-existing parental characteristics I will also control for characteristics that might influence the selection of people into single-parenthood and stepfamily formation.

The economic deprivation theory highlights the importance of family income for children's well-being. If stepfamily formation is associated with increased family income, due to another income-earning adult in the household, this theory predicts that it also is associated with higher emotional well-being for the child compared to living with a single parent. It also predicts that family structure should have a lesser effect on well-being in welfare states like Sweden with a high income redistribution compared to liberal welfare states like the US.

The socialization theory highlights the importance of parenting for understanding children's emotional well-being. It predicts that stepfamily formation improves child well-being since a new adult in the household can take over responsibilities and help the parent with everyday tasks thus giving the parent more time to interact with the child. It can however also be argued that a new adult in the household may produce

stress for the child and competition for the parent's affection and attention thus reducing the emotional well-being of the child.

Data: The data for this study comes from the child supplement to the Swedish Level of Living survey (LNU) from 2000 and the Surveys of Living Conditions from 2001, 2002 and 2003. Both children and their parents have been interviewed in these surveys providing unusually rich data from two perspectives. The children were between 10 and 18 years of age and the interviews with them were conducted by having them fill in a self administered questionnaire while listening to the interview questions on headphones but the children's parents

Modeling and method: The method used is logistic regression. The two dependent variables are psychological complaints and psycho-somatic complaints reported by the child itself. The independent variable family structure includes original two-parent family as reference category and single mother-, single father-, mother/stepfather- and father/stepmother households.

To test the economic deprivation theory I have controlled for the parent's cash margin, or his/her ability to quickly raise 12,000 Swedish crowns (roughly \$1,700). To test the parenting/socialization theory I have used two variables; one for whether the child thinks the parent has time for him/her and one for whether the child talks to his/her parent when feeling worried or anxious. In order to account for other parental characteristics that might affect child well-being or the selection into divorce or stepfamily formation I have controlled for the household's socioeconomic status, parents' health status, drinking behavior and employment status.

Results: In the accordance with earlier research the results show a significant increase in the relative risk of both psychological and psycho-somatic complaints for children living in single mother- and stepfamily households. Children living in single father households have no, or a small, increased risk but this is non-significant. Girls have some 90% higher risk of both kinds of complaints compared to boys and remain unaffected when adding new control variables.

For single mother households the risk of child psychological and psycho-somatic complaints are reduced when we control for parents' cash margin but remain significantly higher than for children in original two-parent families. Controlling for parenting behavior reduces the risk of both psychological and psycho-somatic complaints for stepfamily households but remain on the same level for single parent households.

Controlling for household socio-economic status, parents' health status, drinking behavior and employment status does not change the relative risk of psychological or psychosomatic complaints.

Thus we can conclude that even though some factors influencing children's well-being remain unobserved there are no socio-economic differences when it comes to children's psychological well-being in single-mother and stepfamily households in Sweden. We also see that economic factors account for a larger part of the children's complaints in single mother families than in stepfamilies where economic factors only affect the relative risk marginally but parenting behavior is more important.