

Parental divorce and gender equality in Sweden

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Theoretical background

During recent decades the proportion of children experiencing a parental divorce or separation has increased dramatically. Recent estimates for Sweden show that only 60 percent of all 16-year old Swedish children live with both their biological parents (Statistics Sweden, 2007, Table 4:2b). This is mainly due to family dissolution; as very few children were born into a single-parent family or experienced parental death. This development is viewed as problematic, because there is much evidence that parental divorce is linked with negative short- and long-term outcomes for children, e.g. psychological adjustment, social relations, marital quality, own divorce, and educational attainment (Amato & Keith, 1991a, 1991b; see Amato, 2001 for meta-analyses; Jonsson & Gähler, 1997; Gähler, 1998).

Much more rarely discussed or studied, however, is how parental divorce might affect children's views on gender equality, as well as their actual gender-related behaviour. This is surprising, given that there are theoretical reasons to assume such a link. According to social learning theory, children acquire sex-typed behaviour by imitating role models (Stevenson & Black, 1996). One salient model is the same-sex parent. Children, then, learn that mothers and fathers perform different tasks. Consequently, when these children grow up and form couples they "tend to replicate the families that they experienced as children" (Goldscheider & Waite, 1991:114).

Two theories suggest why this might be. According to "role-restructuring" theory, specialization by gender is more difficult in single-parent families, as parents must perform a wide range of tasks, including ones that are non-traditional for their gender. Hence, children in one-parent families, irrespective of parent's gender, should be less likely than children in two-parent families to "learn" to distribute household chores by gender. According to the "father-absence" theory, in contrast, the impact of growing up in a single-parent family depends on the parent's gender. Fathers are more likely than mothers to stress conformity to traditional gender roles. Hence, the single father family should instil more traditional gender attitudes and behaviour in children than growing up with a single mother, with children from intact families in an intermediate position (Kiecolt & Acock, 1988).

There are few empirical studies of the association between childhood family structure and gender attitudes: Kiecolt & Acock (1988) find that whereas men and women who grew up with divorced single mothers have more liberal attitudes toward women in politics than their counterparts growing up in intact families, no difference is found when attitudes toward female employment and views on 'proper' gender role behaviour among boys and girls are considered.

A more recent study finds no childhood family structure difference in gender attitudes for men (Wright & Young, 1998). For women, however, differences according to family structure are

substantial. Women growing up with single mothers report significantly less traditional gender attitudes than women from intact families whereas women growing up with single fathers report significantly more traditional gender attitudes. These findings, for women, support the father-absence hypothesis. Wright and Young also find support for the role-restructuring hypothesis, because having grown up with an employed mother, i.e. a non-traditional female role model, reinforces gender equal attitudes, in particular for men and women who grew up in single mother families.

Data

In this paper, we analyze data extracted from the second wave of the Swedish Young Adult Panel Study (YAPS) conducted in 2003, combined with some background information from the first wave in 1999. YAPS is a mail questionnaire survey with the Survey Unit of Statistics Sweden in charge of all field work. The study is augmented with register data on vital events, currently up to the end of 2006. A third wave was conducted in the spring 2009, and further register data will be added to the study.

With an overall response rate of 70 per cent, the second round provides information on 2816 persons, 1588 women and 1228 men born in Sweden in 1968, 1972, 1976 and 1980, including a small sample of young women and men (347 respondents) with at least one parent born in either Poland or Turkey. YAPS has been designed to enable studies, like ours, of the complex relationship between attitudes and demographic behavior. It provides information on plans, expectations and attitudes regarding family and working life, including gender-role orientation, histories of childbearing and partnerships, as well as information about current situation and background characteristics, especially childhood family situation.

Measures

In our models we have used three dependent variables, namely: (i) gender equality in the public sphere, (ii) gender equality in the private sphere, i.e. the family, and (iii) a combined-sphere indicator addressing the ideal situation regarding the division of tasks among the parents, vis-à-vis economic provision and care for families with pre-school children.

The first two indices have been created based on the results of factor analysis. We have analyzed responses of agreement/disagreement recorded on the five-grade Likert scale (where 1 corresponds to strong disagreement, 5 to strong agreement, and don't know responses were recoded to 3) with the following statements:

- a) A society where men and women are equal is a good society
- b) Men can do as well as women in caring jobs
- c) Women can do as well as men in technical jobs
- d) It is as important for a woman as for a man to support herself
- e) The woman should take the main responsibility for housework
- f) The man should be the main supporter of the family

Given the high level of support for equal gender roles in Sweden, the public-sphere index is based on strong agreement or else regarding statements *a-d*. Those who strongly agreed with all four statements are considered as 'egalitarian', with any other responses coded '0'. The private-sphere index is built on items *e* and *f*. Those who strongly disagreed with the statements are considered as 'egalitarian', with other responses coded '0'.

The combined-sphere indicator addresses ideal situation regarding the division of provider and domestic responsibilities between parents with young children, based on the question:

What do you think would be the best arrangement for a family with preschool children?

- Only the man works and the woman takes the main responsibility for home and children
- Both work, but the woman works part-time and takes the main responsibility for home and children
- Both work, but the man works part-time and takes the main responsibility for home and children
- Both parents work roughly the same hours and share the responsibility for home and children equally

Those choosing either of the last two statements are considered as 'egalitarian', with other responses coded '0'.

Thus, our three outcome variables are dichotomous distinguishing between (semi-)traditional and egalitarian attitudes.

Our two main explanatory variables are *childhood family structure* and *maternal employment*. For childhood family structure, we distinguish between growing up with: both parents, mother only, father primary parent (including father only, and father & stepmother), mother & stepfather, 'equally both', other (including neither, missing and other). We have also run the models using all the nine categories for childhood family structure, and the results were very robust.

For the maternal employment variable, we have created a dummy variable: 'full-time' (if the mother worked full time either during the pre-school years or school years of the respondent), 'otherwise' (for all other cases).

Further independent variables included in the models are: *gender*, *cohort* (1968, 1972, 1976 and 1980), *ethnicity* (Swedish-, Polish-, and Turkish-origin), *partnership status* in 2003 (single, cohabiting, married), *parental status* (having a child living in the household, or not), *own education*, *economic activity* and *income*. The models are fitted both separately for women and men, and jointly (including gender and tests for gender interactions). The analytical tool used is binary logit.

Preliminary results

Overall, our results seem to support the 'role restructuring' theory with greater egalitarianism among those who grew up in any of the non-2biological parents households. However, the results differ depending on sphere and on gender. Also, they are not consistently stronger for a given sphere for either men or women.

Some specific findings: those who grew up with a single mother, or who spent time equally with each parent after the parents' break-up, are consistently the most egalitarian. Also, significant gender

differences appear for those who grew up with a father as primary parent or with mother and stepfather. For the former family structure, young men are egalitarian in both spheres, but young women are only egalitarian in the private sphere. For the latter family structure, young women are more egalitarian than young men for both the public and the private sphere measures.

The gender differences seem to indicate that gender dynamics within non-traditional households have consequences for the young men and women who grow up in them. Perhaps the 'father absent' theory only works for women?

We will explore our indices more fully, and refine some other measurements to better understand the mechanisms at work.

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