

State of the art report

“The Effects of Marital Instability on Children’s Well-being and Intergenerational Relations”

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1 Why is research on the effects of parental divorce relevant?

The increase in divorce rates is one of the most visible changes in Western family life. It is seen—together with increases in cohabitation and unwed parenthood, and declines in marriage and fertility—as part of a broader change, the “second demographic transition” (e.g., Lesthaeghe 1995). These changes have brought about various concerns, some of which focusing on their economic implications, others on the effects on child development, and still others that see them as moral problems related to a breakdown of the family institution (Ellwood and Jencks 2004).

In this report, we focus on the second concern, that is, in the effects of parental divorce on child development and various children’s outcomes. Several studies have reported how children living in divorced and other lone parent families tend to have lower levels of economic well-being, and how the cross-national variation in these gaps is closely related to support from the welfare state (e.g., Vleminckx and Smeeding 2000; Aassve et al. 2007; Heuveline and Weinschenker 2008). Although these gaps provide an explanation to some of the outcomes we focus on, we do not provide a comprehensive overview of the literature on the short-term economic consequences of divorce.

There is a large research literature analyzing the effects of divorce. Several studies from various countries have tried to estimate the economic, social, health, and psychological consequences of divorces on adults, and generally found that divorce is associated with some negative outcomes on, at least, the other party (although it may have positive psychological effects on some).

There is no general theory of divorce, but marriage is mostly seen as an arrangement in which expressive and instrumental goods and services are exchanged between husbands and wives (Teachman 2002). According to this approach, marriages are contracted because they provide men and women with economic and psychological well-being exceeding what they could gain outside the marriage. In the same vein, marriages are dissolved when the value of the outside options exceed that of marriage for at least one of the spouses. What is notable in these theories is that they mainly hold that spouses decide on whether to continue their marriages based on calculations of their personal utilities. Therefore, while the well-being of other parties involved in the marriage—particularly, the other spouse and the children—may be taken into account when deciding on the continuation of the marriage, it does not necessarily play a role.

An implication of this argument is that although children are centrally involved in divorce, they may not have a powerful say on the parents' decision of whether to divorce or not. Thus, what might be an optimal solution to at least one of the parents (regardless of whether the decision is to divorce or to remain married) might not be as good for the children (e.g., Ellwood and Jencks 2004). This, as well as the usual concern most people feel for children's well-being and life chances, is a relevant reason to analyse what kind of effects (if any) parental divorce has on children's lives.

Not surprisingly, the literature on the short- and long-term effects of parental divorce on children is possibly even larger than that devoted to the effects of divorce on the divorcing adults. The objective of this report is to review the former. We particularly focus on the effects on psychological wellbeing, the offspring's schooling, family formation and dissolution, and intergenerational relations. We also restrict our review to divorce (as opposed to dissolution of both marital and non-marital unions), as most of the research is on the former. Sufficient to say here, however, that the literature on the dissolution of parents' non-marital unions generally finds similar results (Amato 2000).

The report is organized as follows. First, we discuss the evolution of the literature on divorce. Next, we move on to reviewing the empirical literature on the intergenerational effects of divorce and provide an overview of general approaches and hypotheses, later to address the empirical evidence of the effects of divorce on four specific outcomes. Finally, we provide a discussion of what needs to be done in the future research on the topic.

2 Evolution of the divorce literature

The academic and political discussion about the effects of divorce has often been highly controversial. Academic research on this topic has followed four phases. Following McLahanan and Sandefur (1994) we can define these stages taking into account: 1- the relationship between the scientific and the political debate; 2- the methods and techniques applied by the researchers. During the 1960s, the literature on this topic and the public debate largely agreed that parental divorce and single motherhood had negative consequences on children's wellbeing. In 1973, however, this finding was challenged by Elisabeth Herzog and Cecilia Sudia in their lengthy review of the

research on single motherhood: “Children in fatherless families”. Their analysis pointed out that the scientific basis for concern over single parent families was quite weak. In fact, they demonstrated that most studies showing the negative effects of single parenthood were based on small and convenience samples (children in treatment of psychological disorders or wards of court) and could not be generalized to the population. On the other hand, they noted that father absence did appear to have some negative consequences for children but that most of these consequences were probably due to differences in socioeconomic status.

During the seventies, the conventional wisdom about this topic changed completely. In fact, the literature review itself was taken as evidence that no consequences existed. Despite the fact that Herzog and Sudia (1973) did not examine new empirical evidence on that topic, their review did not stimulate a large scale effort to test the hypothesis that living in one parent family has no negative consequences for children. Therefore, during the seventies there were few studies addressing this topic.

Consequently, at the beginning of the eighties, the common wisdom and the research hypothesis about that topic were the following:

- 1- In terms of children’s well-being, there are no differences between those who live in an intact family and those who live in a divorced family. Even if it was the case, the negative association between parental divorce and children’s outcomes would be not causal.
- 2- Moreover, even if the association was causal, the negative effects of parental divorce are only short term, rather than long term. Children only experience the negative effects of parental divorce during the first two years after divorce (Simmons, et al. 1996).
- 3- Parental divorce could have only an impact on children’s emotional stress. This event does not affect other domains of children well-being (Simmons, et al. 1996).
- 4- There are no differences between children from conflict-free intact families and children from divorced families that do not experienced parental conflict.
- 5- There are no differences between children from intact families and children from divorced families with stepparents.

- 6- The impact of parental divorce on children decrease over time, as this new phenomenon becomes more common and society increasingly adapts to it. Therefore, there are cross-national and cross-generational differences in the intergenerational effects of divorce.
- 7- Parental divorce has no negative consequences for children that experience this event when they are teenagers or early adults.

This common wisdom has been critically assessed from the 1980s onwards with a new line of research that addressed the question of divorce in a less controversial way (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994). This new generation of research was centrally based on improved research methods and techniques, including longitudinal instead of merely cross-sectional data, and large and representative samples instead of small convenience ones.

Did this new generation of research change the common understanding of the effects of divorce on children's well-being and life chances? We turn to this question in the following section, where we review research on this question in the past three decades.

3 What do we know after three decades of research?

In this section, we discuss what is known after three decades of research. During this time, researchers have tried to answer the main questions that were in place in the early 1980's. We first focus on some common themes featured in much of the literature, namely the question of causality; whether effects are short-term or long-term and whether age at which parental divorce is experienced matters; whether there are differences between parental death and parental divorce and whether step-parenthood can ameliorate the effects of parental divorce; and whether there are cross-national and cross-cohort differences in the effects of parental divorce and whether institutions and policies can shape these effects. We then turn to reviewing the literature on the four specific outcomes.

3.1 Are the effects of parental divorce causal?

Literature reviews –see for example Amato and Keith (1991a); Amato and Keith (1991b); Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan (2004)- have well established that children from intact families have better outcomes and a higher well-being than children from divorced families. However, we cannot be sure that the outcomes associated with divorce actually result from separation *per se* as opposed to another factor that is more common among people who divorce. The selection perspective considers that the negative outcomes observed among children who grow up without one of the biological parents are due to differences between the kinds of people who divorce and the kinds of people who remain married (Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan, 2004). In fact, it has been well demonstrated that, before family break-up, divorced families are different from intact families in several characteristics influencing both parental divorce and children's outcomes. Nevertheless, testing the selection theory is methodologically difficult. Indeed, as Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan (2004) note, in absence of an experiment where children were randomly assigned to different kinds of families, it is impossible to say precisely how children in divorced families would have fared, had they lived with two biological parents. In spite of this limitation, several second best solutions have been developed in order to rule out the selection effects.

One solution uses longitudinal data, explicitly aimed at controlling for observed pre-disruption characteristics of the families. When pre-divorce circumstances are taken into account, the association between parental divorce and children's well-being becomes smaller and, in some studies, not statistically significant (Amato and Keith, 1991b). Nevertheless, even taking into account pre-disruption differences in family characteristics and children well-being, other studies continue to find a negative association between parental divorce and children's wellbeing (Frosting, Greenberg and Robins, 2001; Cherlin, Chase-Lansdale and McRae, 1998; Cherlin, Kiernan and Chase-Lansale, 1995; Sigle-Rushton, Hobcraft and Kiernan, 2005; Ni Brochalain et al 2000).

However, the main problem of this second best solution is that even if the model includes a long list of pre-divorce characteristics, it is still possible to argue that some unobserved characteristics are responsible for both dissolution and negative child outcomes. For this reason, another approach for dealing with the selection problem has been developed. Sibling models are based on the fact that siblings share the same

parents but the amount of the time that they live in a divorced family is different -if parents divorce when the one child is 15 and the other 10, the oldest sibling has lived 15 years in a intact family and the youngest only 10- and assumes that the longer children live in an intact family, the higher the negative effect (Ermish and Francesconi, 2001; Yeung, Duncan and Hill, 1995; Hao and Xie, 2002; Ermish, Francesconi and Pevalin, 2004; Björklund and Sundström, 2006). Therefore, the lack of differences between the oldest and the youngest child means that the selection hypothesis is true, that is, parental divorce does not produce a negative effect on children. However, research on parental divorce has not demonstrated that the negative effect of parental divorce is lower when this event occurs during adolescence than during childhood (Woodward, Fergusson and Belsky, 2000). Moreover, sibling models assume that parents treat their children exactly the same way and that children respond similarly to divorce, two highly unlikely premises (Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan, 2004). Evidence for sibling models is mixed: in some cases, the differences between children in various types of family structure become smaller and insignificant when siblings are compared while, in others, differences remain statistically significant (Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan, 2004).

A third method used by the researchers in order to test the selection theory consists of including measures of child well-being in the model (Cherlin et al. 1991; Painter and Levine 2000; Sigle-Rushton, Hobcraft and Kiernan, 2005). However, even if these measures are included, it is still possible to argue that some unobserved family characteristics are not controlled for. Therefore, some researchers have developed this approach and used longitudinal data and difference-in-difference estimators that help in controlling for some of the unobserved factors, by comparing the outcomes and trends in them before and after the event of divorce (e.g., Sanz-de-Galdeano and Vuri 2007). Sanz-de-Galdeano and Vuri (2007) reported that, with this approach, the negative effects of divorce were greatly reduced and often statistically not significant. However, while otherwise compelling, a problem of an approach comparing children rather immediately before and after divorce lies in its implicit assumption that divorce is one-shot event, the timing of which can be accurately measured. It is easy to offer the counter-argument that divorce is instead a process that has usually started well before the divorce papers are signed (cf. Amato 2000). Consequently, from this point of view, the divorce process itself may start having effects on children's well-being already

before the event of divorce itself. This, of course, also puts pressure on the measurement of divorce, as divorce can be hard to discern from a merely dysfunctional marriage.

All in all, despite progress in the development and adoption of improved measures, there is a continuous need for further research building on methods that take into account the problems of causal inference while recognizing the often messy nature of the divorce process.

3.2 Types of selection effects

Identifying whether the association between parental divorce and children's well-being is causal or spurious is clearly important. However, it is also relevant to identify the sources of selectivity. Literature has shown three main selection effects: socio-economic (Jonsson and Gähler, 1997), conflict (Amato, 2001) and genetic selection. The genetic selection perspective focuses on the transmission of genetically inherited personality traits from parents to children. The genetic influence on divorce is not direct but arises from the genetic influence on personality and the correlation between personality traits and propensity to divorce (Jockin, McGue, and Lykken, 1996). Several studies have demonstrated the genetical influences on children's adjustment (McGuire et al. 1994; Rutter et al. 1999). Taken together, the above sets of findings lead to the hypothesis that inherent characteristics of parents, such as antisocial personality traits, are direct causes of dysfunctional family patterns and divorce, as well as child problems (Amato, 2000). Studies of biological families are unable to disentangle genetic and environment sources of influence because parents provide both the genes and the environment for their biological children. Studies with adopted children are more appropriate. Brodzinsky, Hitt, and Smith (1993) find that the association between parental divorce and child problems was similar for adopted and biological children. Amato and Cheadle (2008) obtain the same results for behavioural problems. O'Connor et al. (2000) find that this association is similar for behavioural problems and substance abuse but not for academic achievement and social adjustment.

The socio-economic selection perspective considers that the effect of parental divorce is explained by socioeconomic characteristics of the family before this event. Since a long time ago, research has demonstrated that the socioeconomic characteristics of families influence children's outcomes (Coleman, 1966), and the effect of one's family background continues to play a prominent role in determining life chances (Breen,

2005) Furthermore, it is well-known that the socioeconomic characteristics of the family are good predictors of parental divorce (Härkönen and Dronkers, 2006; Lyngstad, 2006). If socioeconomic factors affect both parental divorce and children's outcomes, then the association between them is spurious. However, even if most studies include socioeconomic controls prior to marital break-up, they find parental divorce has a negative effect (Jonsson and Gahler, 1997; Sandefur and McLanahan, 1994).

The conflict selection explanation stresses that it is parental conflict prior to divorce and not marital break-up *per se* is what explains why children of divorced families fare worse on several domains when compared to children of intact families. This argument is supported by the literature that shows that children tend to be drawn into conflict between parents —resulting in a deterioration of parent-child relationship and general family cohesiveness (Amato, 1986; Johnston, Kline and Tschann, 1989). Moreover, it has been shown that early experiences of parental conflict, i.e. during childhood, have lasting consequences on the quality of the relationship between children and their parents (Amato and Afifi, 2006; Sobolewski and Amato, 2007). As Amato (1993) argued, according to this theory, differences between children from divorced families and intact families should appear before parental divorce. Nevertheless, some studies find that parental divorce and parental conflict have direct and different effects on children's outcomes (Emery, 1998; Jekielek, 1998; Hanson, 1999). In addition, Hanson (1999) demonstrated that, in the United States, less than half of divorces are preceded by periods of high conflict. Contrary to one of early eighties main hypothesis, some studies showed that dissolution of low-conflict marriages has also negative effects on offspring's lives (Amato, Loomis and Booth, 1995; Duran-Aydintug, 1997; Hanson, 1999). Moreover, they also found that parental divorce has positive effects on children that have experienced a high level of parental conflict before separation.

Taking into account all these findings, some researchers have argued that there is enough evidence to consider that part of the negative effects of parental divorce on children are causal (Amato, 2007). Conversely, others have stated that the existing evidence does not rule out the selection hypothesis (Furstenberg, 2007). Clearly, more research on this theoretically and socially important topic is needed.

3.3 Does time matter? Short- and long-term effects, and age at parental divorce

As mentioned previously, at the beginning of the eighties most researchers, as well as the public debate, concluded that even if the association was causal, the negative effects of parental divorce were only short term as opposed to than long term. Therefore, from a policy point of view, the increase of parental divorce should not be seen as a problem because its negative effects would disappear over time.

Some research shows that the negative consequences of divorce are stronger during the first two years and decrease over time (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980), thus supporting the thesis of short-term effects. However, during the last three decades, other scholars have shown that the negative effects of parental divorce can remain after long time. In fact, the literature has thoroughly demonstrated the t negative effect of parental divorce on several adult outcomes such as educational attainment (Sigle-Rushton, Hobcraft and Kiernan, 2005; Jonsson and Gähler, 1997; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1997; Koivusita et al., 2003; Riala et al, 2003), adult psychological well-being (Amato and Booth, 1997; Amato and Sobolewski 2001; Cherlin, Chase-Lanslade and McRae, 1998; Gähler and Garriga, 2009), the frequency and quality of parent adult-child relations (Albertini and Garriga, 2009; Sobolewski and Amato, 2007) and divorce (Amato, 1996; Bumpas, Martin and Sweet, 1991; Wolfinger, 1999).

An additional time-related—and contentious—issue concerns the question of whether the effects of parental divorce depend on the age at which the child experiences it (Woodward, Fergusson and Belsky, 2000). A first group of studies suggest that marital dissolution may be more harmful for younger children than for older ones (Allison and Furstenberg 1989; Emery 1988; Wallerstein and Kelly 1980; Zaslow 1989; Steele, Sigle-Rushton and Kravdal 2009). Thus, for example, based on their results, Allison and Furstenberg suggested that younger children are less resilient to the effects of parental divorce due to their relatively immature social and cognitive development, and their greater dependence on parents. Conversely, other researchers have suggested that it is adolescent children that are particularly vulnerable to marriage break-ups (Chase-Lansdale, Cherlin and Kiernan, 1995; Fergusson, Horwood and Lynskey 1994). In fact, it is argued that, as time passes after the event, children who were infants or preschoolers at the time of the event have much less memories of their parents' conflicts and their own break-up related sufferings than older children, (Wallerstein, Corbin and Lewis, 1988). Finally, a third group of studies found that the effects of divorce do not

vary by children's age at the time of the event (Acock and Demo 1994; Furstenberg and Teitler 1994).

One major problem in dealing with this topic is the high probability that the relation between the negative effects of divorce and children's age at the time of the event varies notably depending on the specific type of outcome considered (Hetherington et al. 1989). Some scholars, however, tend to derive a general conclusion on this relation, and do not pay enough attention to potential differences in specific outcomes (e.g. Woodward, Fergusson and Belsky, 2000; Furstenberg and Teitler, 1994; for an exception, Amato 2001). Therefore, future research should address these questions taking specifically into account the possibility that the effect of the age at which parental divorce is experienced depends on the outcome under consideration.

3.4 Divorce, parental death, and step-parent families

In the early eighties, most researchers considered that children's well-being increased if divorced mothers remarried and there were no differences between children living in stepparent families and those in fully biological families (Amato and Keith, 1991a). This hypothesis is based in two main assumptions. On the one hand, the level of family's income is higher in stepparent than in lone parent families (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994). Moreover, lone mothers often have to work long hours, suffer from task overload and, as a consequence, they are constrained in the number of hours they can devote to the supervision, attention and control of their children (Astone and McLanahan, 1991). In contrast, in step-parent families there are two adults that can supervise and control children.

However, three decades of research have demonstrated that children's well-being in stepparent families is lower than in two parent families and, in most cases, they do not perform better than children in single parent families (Amato and Keith, 1991b; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994; Amato, 2000; Amato, 2001; Jonsson and Gähler, 1997). As McLanahan and Sandefur (1994) noted, there are good theoretical reasons to think that a new partner at home is not beneficial for children. In fact, a parent's new partner can also be a new source of stress for children. A new adult at home implies a new household organization, while the child can reject the new parent's partner, since sometimes children are reluctant to share their parent with an person (Visher and

Visher, 1983). Moreover, the fact that a new spouse could increase family welfare does not imply that income available for children will increase, as it is possible that he or she also has to maintain children from a previous relationship, or does not want to share his or her income with his or her stepchildren (Thompson, McLanahan and Curtin 1992).

Moreover, in the early eighties, most researchers considered that, in terms of children's well-being, there were no differences between children that experienced parental death and those that suffered parental divorce. Most literature reviews showed that parental divorce is more harmful for children than parental death even after controlling for family income (Amato and Keith, 1991a; 1991b;; Hetherington, Bridges, Insabella, 1998; Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan, 2004). However, in a recent study Steele, Sigle-Rushton and Kravdal (2009) found that once controls are introduced for unobserved differences between mothers, the differences in the effects of parental divorce and parental bereavement on educational attainment disappear.

3.5 Cross-national and cohort differences

Although most research on the effects of parental divorce comes from the United States, a rich body of research has been developed in other countries. Given the well-known differences in welfare states, family institutions, and legislative practices, even between Western countries, many researchers have analysed whether there are systematic cross-national differences in the effects of parental divorce and whether these could be linked to institutional and policy differences. Cross-national comparative research can thus be very useful to identify macro-level societal factors that mediate the effects of parental divorce. In particular, it can point to specific policies that can be used to ameliorate any unwanted consequences of parental divorce on the offspring.

In a similar vein, many researchers have also been interested in examining if the effects of divorce become weaker across time, as divorce becomes increasingly common (Wolfinger 1999; Sigle-Rushton, Hobcraft and Kiernan 2005; Albertini and Garriga 2008; Dronkers and Härkönen 2008). This hypothesis often relies on the “declining stigma” hypothesis, according to which, as divorces become more common, the stigma associated with marital breakup declines, which, in turn reduces the negative effects of divorce. Another explanation points to the changing composition of divorcees. When divorce was rare and difficult to get, it was mainly limited to extremely

dissatisfied and conflictual couples. When divorce rates increased, other motivations such as relational and psychological dissatisfaction became the norm (de Graaf and Kalmijn 2006). Therefore, divorces not only became more heterogeneous in their backgrounds and motivations, but these changes could also have had effects on the way children experienced the dissolution of their parents' marriage. However, the changing composition of divorcees may also have caused an increase of the intergenerational effects of divorce. For example, Härkönen and Dronkers (2006) found that the educational gradient of divorce had changed in many countries, so that while highly educated women were previously more likely to divorce, less educated women are now the ones with the higher divorce rates. If less educated women have fewer resources to cope with the consequences of divorce, the implications of divorce at the population level may become more severe.

As a general conclusion, one could say that results from many countries point in a similar direction (to negative effects of parental divorce). Due to the relative scarcity of explicitly comparative studies, it is often more difficult to make claims on the differences in the strength of these effects. However, the studies that exist do point to some degree of variation (e.g., Pong, Dronkers and Hampdem Thompson, 2003; Wagner and Weiß 2006; Dronkers and Härkönen 2008), which in some cases can be linked to explicit measures by countries' institutions related to family systems. We will discuss these cases below in the subsections for the different outcomes.

Regarding the "declining effect hypothesis", the results are somewhat conflicting, as will be discussed in more detail below. Some studies do find a weakening of the effect of divorce, as hypothesized (e.g. Wolfinger 1999), whereas others show no difference (Sigle-Rushton, Hobcraft and Kiernan, 2005). Again, the changes in the effect are likely to vary by outcome. However, it is worth pointing out that to our knowledge no studies have reported a widening of the gap between children who grew up in divorced versus intact families.

It is also important to take into consideration that institutional arrangements that are thought to affect divorce and the effects of divorce can affect intact marriages as well. For example, Wolfers (2004) reported that adults who grew up in a unilateral divorce law environment were faring worse. Even though the author argued that making divorcing easier did actually raise divorce rates, a change in divorce legislation can also have an effect on children who did not experience parental divorce. This is because a

change in divorce laws also changes intrahousehold behaviour, regardless of whether the couple divorces or not (Stevenson and Wolfers 2006). Similarly, Dronkers and Härkönen (2008) argued that the effect on an individual's own divorce of his or her parents break-up could be weaker in countries with high divorce rates, also because those whose parents did not divorce live in an environment that is generally more accepting of divorce.

4 Offspring outcomes

In this section, we separately discuss four outcomes of parental divorce on children's lives: psychological outcomes, educational outcomes, partnership formation and dissolution, and intergenerational social relations. As discussed in previous sections of this report, it is usually worthwhile and necessary to consider the intergenerational effects of parental divorce separately by outcome, since the relevant mechanisms linking parental divorce to the different outcomes can be very different.

We begin by reviewing the effects of parental divorce on children's psychological well-being, since this is an obvious outcome that is also seen as a crucial mechanism linking parental divorce to other outcomes of interest. We then cover the literature on educational outcomes, and the suggested mechanisms behind the mainly negative effects of parental divorce on children's schooling. Since educational outcomes have been of interest to many researchers, a lengthy space is devoted to this outcome. Finally, we discuss the effects of parental divorce on partnership and family formation and dissolution, as well as on intergenerational social relations.

4.1 Parental divorce and offspring psychological well-being

Literature on the impact of parental divorce on children's psychological well-being is mainly American—exceptions include Sigle-Rushton, Hobcraft and Kiernan (2004), Cherlin, Chase-Lansdale & McRae (1998), and Chase-Lansdale, Cherlin and Kiernan (1995) for United Kingdom and Gähler and Garriga (2009) for Sweden. A common conclusion is that parental divorce has the potential to cause a lot of stress to children

and adults alike, even though there is major individual heterogeneity in the effects, with some benefiting, others experiencing short-term drops in well-being, and others entering a longer term negative trajectory (Amato 2000). This variation is linked to the quality of the marriage prior to divorce, the rate of conflict in the divorce process, personal adjustment skills, and social support (ibid.). Some children whose parents put an end to a particularly conflicting or abusive marriage may benefit from parental divorce, but the average outcome seems to be negative, with more children suffering from it, although according to many reviews the effects are not very strong (Amato and Booth 1991; Amato 2001).

Several causal mechanisms have been suggested that might explain this negative association. We distinguish between those that focus on the psychological well-being during the childhood and those that concentrate on this outcome during the adulthood. Among the childhood explanations, as for educational outcomes, one of the main arguments stresses the decline of children's standard of living after divorce, since it is well-demonstrated that economic difficulties affect negatively children's psychological well-being during childhood (Conger, Conger, & Elder, 1997; Conger et al. 1992; Takeuchi et al. 1991). A second explanation derives from attachment theory (Bowlby 1969, 1973, 1980), which postulates that children have a need for a secure relationship with adult caregivers, in absence of which psychological development will not take place. Waters et al. (2000) showed that parental divorce can provoke an insecure attachment between a child and his or her parents. Therefore, children from divorced families have a higher probability to experience a lower psychological well-being. A third line of argument focuses on parents' psychological well-being. Divorce is also a difficult experience for adults (Ross, 1995; Ruiz Becerril, 1997) and children who have parents with psychological distress have a higher risk of experiencing psychological problems than other children (Abela et al. 2009).

Turning to findings on the effects of parental divorce on psychological well-being in adulthood, most adult offspring, both from divorced and intact families, show generally good levels of well-being (Cherlin 1999). Nevertheless, children of divorce have a higher probability of showing psychological problems in adulthood. For example, Amato and Sobolewski (2001) found that parental divorce weakens the emotional bonds between parents and children in adulthood, and weak parent-child bonds, in turn, place adult offsprings at risk for distress, low self-esteem, and general unhappiness. McLeod (1991) and Ross and Mirowsky (1999) showed that this

association is partly due to lower socioeconomic and interpersonal statuses among the children of divorce. Moreover, Cherlin, Chase-Lansdale, and Kiernan (1998) reported that the gap in emotional well-being between the children of divorce and children from intact families tends to grow along the life course.

4.1.1 Cross-national and Cross-generational changes

There are few cross-national or cross-generational studies about the effect of parental divorce on children's psychological well-being. Amato and Keith's (1991a) comprehensive meta-analysis on studies conducted between the 1950s and 1980s showed that the effect size of divorce had decreased when early and later studies were compared. For this reason, they predicted that the effect size of parental divorce should continue to decrease in the next decade. Nevertheless, in a replication of the same comprehensive meta-analysis with the studies published during the nineties, Amato (2001) found that the effect size of parental divorce tends to be weakest in the early 1980s and stronger in the 1990s; even if it is taken into account that studies became more methodologically sophisticated during the 1990s than before, and that more methodologically sophisticated studies tend to yield more modest effect sizes. Results of cross-generational and country studies go in the same direction. Sigle-Rushton, Hobcraft, and Kiernan (2005), comparing British cohorts born in 1958 and 1970, showed that the association between parental divorce and children's and psychological well-being does not decrease. Gähler and Garriga (2009) obtained the same results comparing three Swedish generations. In addition, Ely and associates (2000) did not find that effects were more negative in Scotland (with low divorce rates) than in England (with high divorce rates).

4.2 Educational outcomes

A substantial part of the research on parental divorce focuses on children's educational outcomes such as standardized achievement tests, grades, teachers' ratings, or intelligence. During the last three decades research from different countries has demonstrated that parental separation has generally negative effects on these outcomes (see Amato and Keith, 1991a; Amato and Keith, 1991b; Amato, 2001; Sigle-Rushton and McLahanan, 2004 for a review).

Apart from the usual problem of causality versus selection, researchers have focused on getting an understanding of the mechanisms transmitting the effect of parental divorce on educational success. Below, we discuss some of the central ones.

4.2.1 Economic deprivation and downward social mobility

Family income is a good predictor of children's educational outcomes (Coleman, 1966; Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997). Poor parents may not be able to buy equipment such as books or computers or to defray the costs of additional training (Gähler, 1996). Adolescents from poor families may be pressured to leave the school early and to seek employment (Amato & Keith, 2001). Furthermore, low cognitive stimulation provided in poor households is a major pathway linking childhood poverty to childhood intellectual development (Guo and Harris 2000).

Divorce is often associated with decreased material well-being and downward social mobility (Jonsson and Gähler 1997). Separating couples need to divide their economic resources, thus losing their economies of scale (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994). It is also common for children of divorce to continue residing with their mothers, who tend to suffer economically more than their fathers (Jarvis & Jenkins, 1999; Aasve & all, 2007; Manting & Bouman, 2004). Single-mother families are more likely to experience a higher level of economic insecurity because female workers frequently have lower status, lower income and less secure jobs (Sigle-Rusthon & McLanahan, 2004). Besides purely material losses, children of divorce often also lose the social capital and prestige associated with the occupational and educational status of the other parent, usually the father (Jonsson and Gähler 1997). Fathers may find it hard to transfer their educational and occupational resources and aspirations to their non-resident children. Downward social mobility associated with the loss of the higher-status parent is correspondingly an important explanation for the weaker educational outcomes of children of divorce (ibid.).

There are strong country differences in terms of the economic penalty associated with marital dissolution (Andreß et al., 2006; Aassve et al., 2007). The general pattern is that divorced mothers in Scandinavian countries, with a generous welfare provision, are much better off than divorced women in other nations. Andreß and associates (2006) comparing Belgium, Germany, Italy, Great Britain and Sweden, find that British mothers, due the limited welfare provision, are particularly vulnerable, being

considerably more dependent on the labour market as a means to maintain a reasonable level of economic self-sufficiency. Therefore, empirical support of this explanation depends on the country under analysis. American researchers concluded that income differentials account for a 50% of the difference in high school graduations among children from unstable families (Sandefur & McLanahan, 1994). In contrast, in Sweden, family income accounts for a small proportion of the effect of family disruption on educational attainment (Jonsson & Gähler, 1997). Given these cross-national differences in the associations between family structure and living standards, it may not be surprising that Pong, Dronkers and Hampden-Thompson (2003) found that stronger public support for single parents was an important explanation for the cross-national variation in the test score gap between children from single-parent and two-parent families.

4.2.2 Psychological adjustment

Biblarz & Raftery (1999) and Jonsson and Gähler, (1997) argue that the emotional turmoil experienced by children after parental divorce could be also responsible for the negative impact of divorce on children's educational outcomes. Garriga (2007) demonstrated that children's psychological adjustment explain part of the association between parental divorce and educational performance. In fact, it is well-know that children with psychological problems have lower educational performance than the rest (Wigfield and Eccles, 1999; Margalit and Shulman 1996; Mercer 1997) while, as mentioned above, research shows that children from intact families have better psychological well-being than children from divorced families (Demo and Acock, 1988; Amato and Keith, 1991a; Amato and Keith, 1991b; Silitsky, 1996). However, in order to test this theory, further research is necessary.

4.2.3 Parenting of the residential parent

Socialization theories emphasize the essential role of parenting in shaping children's lives (Biblarz and Raftery, 1999). Correspondingly, several studies demonstrate that quality of parenting of the custodial parent, usually the mother, explains part of the association between parental divorce and children's educational outcomes (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Simmons et al. 1999). Empirical evidence suggests that divorced mothers tend to perform a less effective parenting—

such as monitoring, discipline, supervision— than married mothers (Furstenberg and Nord, 1985; Hetherington, Cox and Cox, 1985; Simmons et al, 1996). Several explanations focus on the importance of parenting but they differ on what explains the decrease on childrearing skills after parental divorce.

Firstly, the custodial parent—to compensate for the economic loss mentioned above— often has to increase the share of time spent in gainful employment. He or she also have to execute a greater share of the household tasks. This 'task overload' (Weiss, 1979) might cause a decrease in parental attention, help, and supervision (Amato & Keith, 1991b; Astone and McLanahan, 1991). Second, the parental authority structure can be weak in single-parent and stepparent families (Nock 1988; Steinberg 1988), in part because mother/child relations run the risk of becoming more peerlike (Biblarz and Raftery, 1999). Finally, the parental adjustment explanation (Amato, 1993; Simons et al, 1999) also focuses on parenting, but considers that the effect of parental divorce on childrearing skills is mediated by the psychological well-being and deviant behaviour of the custodial parent. It is well-know that divorce negatively affects the psychological well-being of the spouse (Lorenz et al. 1997; Turner, Lloyd and Wheaton, 1995; Dreman and Aldor, 1994). Several studies have shown that parental depression has a disruptive effect on the quality of parenting, which in turn increases the probability of child conduct problems (Conger et al., 1992; Radke-Yarrow, Richters, and Wilson, 1988; Simons, Lorenz, Wu, and Conger, 1993). Simons and associates (1996) found that parental depression and ineffective parenting practices explained a significant portion of the association between divorce and both adolescent internalizing and externalizing problems. Moreover, several studies have reported that divorced mothers have a higher incidence of antisocial behaviour than mothers who are married (Capaldi and Patterson, 1991; Lahey et al., 1988; Simons et al., 1993; Simons et al., 1996). Research has reported an inverse association between mothers' antisocial behaviour and quality of parenting (Capaldi and Patterson, 1991; Simons, Beaman et al., 1993; Simons et al., 1996). Several explanations can determine the effect of divorce on parental psychological well-being and deviance behaviour. On the one hand, it is well-known that single mothers experience more chronic sources of strain (McLanahan and Booth, 1989). On the other hand, divorce *per se* can also provoke a decrease in psychological well-being because it is one of life's most stressful experiences (Holmes and Rahe, 1967) and, as clinicians mention, it is an event followed by a great feeling of loss.

4.2.4 Parenting of the non-resident father

It is well-established that divorce is associated with a decrease in the quantity and quality of the relationship between children and non-custodial parents (Furstenberg, Nord, Peterson, & Zill, 1983; Seltzer, 1991; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1997; Shapiro & Lambert, 1999). Early research on non-resident fathers often was based on the assumption that frequent father contacts benefit children (King, 1994a). In contrast, Amato and Gilbreth (1999) in their meta-analytical study demonstrate that there is little evidence supporting that frequency of contact between the non-resident father and their children improve the well-being of the latter. It seems that parental-child contact is a necessary but not a sufficient condition. However, these researchers show that child's feelings of closeness with the non-custodial parent have a positive impact on children's educational outcomes although its effect is lower than authoritative parenting. However, even if there is a close relationship between the non-resident father and the child, some parents behave toward their children as an adult friend (Acock and Demo, 1994; Arendell, 1995; Mott, 1990; Rossi, 1984). They act merely as a "Disneyland Dads" to their children rather than assuming any real parenting responsibility. Stewart (1999) finds that patterns of participation in activities with absent children are: 30 % of non-resident fathers have not contact with their children; 41 % only participate on leisure activities; and 29 % participate on school or organized activities and leisure. Several studies have demonstrated that participating in leisure activities with the non-residential father has not a positive effect on children's outcomes (Stewart, 2003; Young et al. 1995). Taking into account these findings, it could be argued that recent literature has demonstrated that authoritative parenting of the non-residential parent explains part of the negative association between parental divorce and children's educational outcomes.

4.2.5 Comparative and institutional mediation

In most Western countries, there are studies on the effects of parental divorce on educational attainment. Moreover, it is surprising that, even in countries with generous welfare states such as Scandinavian ones, it is well-demonstrated that single parenthood or parental divorce has a negative effects on children's educational attainment- see Jonsson and Gähler, (1997) for Sweden, Deding and Hussain (2002) for Denmark; Riala and associates (2003) and Koivusilta (2003) for Finland. Cross-generational studies obtain similar results. Comparing British cohorts, Ely and associates (1999) and Sigle-

Rushton, Hobcraft, and Kiernan (2005) show that the effect of family breakdown on children's educational attainment has not attenuated over time. Biblarz and Raftery (1999) show that the effect of family structure on children's years of education has not decreased across generations in US. Moreover, Deding and Hussain (2002) demonstrate that the negative effect of family break-up on years of schooling is similar in two Danish cohorts.

There are not cross-national studies for the educational attainment outcome since all of them focus on test scores. Hamden-Thompson (2004), using data from Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development Programme for Student Assessment Study (PISA) 2000, find that the effect of single-parenthood on test scores is not significantly different for Scandinavian countries than for the rest. However, comparing United Kingdom, Germany, Spain, Denmark, Norway and Sweden, Esping-Andersen (2007), using the same data, concludes that lone motherhood only has negative effects in the United States. Pong, Dronkers and Hamden-Thompson (2003) show that the effect of single parenthood on math and reading tests is higher in the United States than in other countries. Moreover, following a multilevel analysis, these researchers also find that single parenthood is less detrimental when family policies equalize resources between single- and two-parent families.

4.3 Parental divorce and family formation and dissolution in the offspring

One line of empirical research on the effects of parental divorce has focused on its effects on the family formation and dissolution behaviour of the offspring. We first review the literature on the associations between parents' and children's divorce.

4.3.1 Parental divorce and family formation

As in many other cases, the literature on the impact of parental divorce on family formation behaviour is mainly American. Many studies have been interested in whether children of divorce marry more or less, earlier or later. Other studies have focused on the role of parental divorce on unwed parenthood.

Maybe the most comprehensive reviews on these topics (in the United States) were made by Nicholas Wolfinger (2003; 2005). Concerning the entry into marriage, he showed that whereas children of divorce were more likely to marry young in early cohorts (surveyed in 1973), they were marrying at a lower rate (i.e., later or not at all) in

the older cohorts (surveyed in 1994). However, in both cases, children of divorce were more likely to marry as teenagers. In the United Kingdom, Cherlin and associates (1995) found that children of divorce were more likely to cohabit, but did not show a higher nor lower likelihood to marry at the age of 23 than those from intact families.

Due to the changing nature of the effects of parental divorce on the entry into marriage, it is difficult to pin down a single explanation. However, different mechanisms have been proposed, some of which can have stronger effects in some socio-historical contexts than others. The reasons for early marriage among children of divorced parents include (i) marriage as a way out of a stressful or impoverished home environment; (ii) the psychological consequences of their parents' divorce that can also lead to earlier sexual initiation; and (iii) marriage as a result of deprived economic circumstances, a lack of alternatives such as that of remaining in education (Wolfinger 2003; 2005). All of these explanations have received various degrees of support. For example, Cherlin and associates (1995) found that children of divorce showed a higher probability of having moved away from their parental home due to friction at home.

On the other hand, the explanations for postponement of marriage include the more negative attitudes to marriage of the children of divorce, interpersonal skill deficits (discussed above), and the increasingly acceptable option of cohabitation. Some studies link parental divorce with more negative views towards marriage (e.g., Axinn and Thornton 1996). However, this result has not been universally supported (e.g., Amato 1988; Trent and South 1992; Tasker and Richards 1994: 341-2). According to Amato (1988), for instance, children of divorce value marriage but are also more aware of its limitations. Tasker and Richards (1994) argued that the more negative feelings toward marriage can be explained by parental conflict and deteriorating parent-child relationships, which also depreciate views on marriage for children from intact families.

Wolfinger (2003a) also claimed the children of divorce are more likely to postpone marriage because of an increasingly acceptable alternative of cohabitation. Children of divorced parents have been found to be, in general, more open to alternative family forms, such as non-marital cohabitation (e.g., Axinn and Thornton 1996). This, combined with an acknowledgement of the limitations of marriage (Amato 1988; Wolfinger 2005) can explain why children of divorce have a higher likelihood of entering cohabitation.

A few studies have looked at not only whether children of divorce enter partnerships and marriage in general, but also at whether children of divorce are likely to marry different kinds of people than those who grew up in intact families. Wolfinger (2003), for example, reported that American children of divorce were more likely to marry other individuals with similar experiences, which in turn increased the likelihood that these marriages dissolved. Teachman (2004) found that in the United States, the spouses of children of divorce have lower levels of education. In a similar vein, Härkönen, Erola, and Dronkers (2009) have found for Finland that children of divorced parents were marrying people with high levels of education at a lower rate than those from intact families, but no difference could be detected regarding marriage to people with low educational levels. Since marriage is one path that affects the levels of economic well-being in adulthood, the fact that children of divorce have a lower rate of marriage to highly educated people can be one pathway through which divorce shapes intergenerational socioeconomic outcomes.

Concerning the effects on fertility behaviour, (American) researchers have been particularly interested in unwed parenthood. The general finding has, indeed, been that children of divorce have an increased likelihood of having children out of wedlock (e.g., Cherlin et al. 1995; Teachman 2002b; Wolfinger 2005). At the same time, however, Cherlin and associates (1995) found that there was no difference in marital fertility behaviour (if they had entered marriage at age 23) between children from intact compared to divorced families.

4.3.2 The intergenerational transmission of divorce

One of the most robust findings from the literature on intergenerational effects of divorce concerns the intergenerational transmission of divorce, that is, the higher-than-average likelihood of those with divorced parents to divorce themselves. The intergenerational transmission of divorce has been reported in several European countries and the United States (Wolfinger 2005; Wagner and Weiß 2006; Dronkers and Härkönen 2008). This general findings mask, however, cross-national variation in the strength of the relationship (Wagner and Weiß 2006; Dronkers and Härkönen 2008). Furthermore, some studies have reported that—in line with the more general declining effects hypothesis—the intergenerational transmission of divorce has weakened across time (for the US; Wolfinger 1999), whereas other studies have not been able to replicate this result (Dronkers and Härkönen 2008; Li and Wu 2008). Finally, some studies have

reported different effects for men and for women, as well as for the experience of parental divorce at different ages. For example, Lyngstad and Engelhardt (2009) found the intergenerational transmission of divorce to be stronger for women than for men, and, regarding women, that the strength of the effect was negatively related to the age at which they experienced their parents' divorce.

Several explanations have been given to the intergenerational transmission of divorce. One of them points to the intergenerational transmission of personality traits and other psychological factors that affect the risk of divorce for parents and children alike. McGue and Lykken (1992) showed that shared genetic factors explain a sizable share of the intergenerational transmission of divorce. This selection explanation can be extended to cover divorce-enhancing traits and behaviours transmitted from parents to children through channels other than biological inheritance, such as socialization in behavioural patterns that undermine marital stability (Wolfinger 2005, p. 17-9).

One variant of the selection argument stresses the role of pre-divorce conflict between parents (e.g. Amato 1993). The often severe conflicts preceding divorce can decrease the psychological well-being of children and later increase their risk of divorce. Given this finding, one might expect that children with parents who stay married but in a conflictual relationship would also have lower marital stability. This is not the case. Instead, children of divorced parents have higher divorce rates than those whose parents had unhappy and conflictual marriages but did not divorce (Amato and Booth 1991; Amato and DeBoer 2001). Conflict between parents may even stabilize marriages by enabling the offspring to learn to endure marital hardship (Amato and DeBoer 2001).

Although selection mechanisms matter, there remains space for explanations that focus on the consequences of parents' divorce itself. One line of argument focuses on life-course decisions and outcomes that may weaken marital stability. As discussed above, children of divorce are—at least in some socio-historical circumstances—more likely to marry early, which in turn increases the risk of divorce (cf. Härkönen and Dronkers 2006). The same hold for low education in many countries and, as discussed in the previous section, children of divorced parents attain lower average levels of education. Furthermore, Wolfinger (2003) found that children of divorce are more likely to opt for the possibly permanent alternative of cohabitation (Wolfinger 2005). If children of divorce are less likely to marry (choosing instead either permanent

cohabitation or to remain single), marrying couples may comprise those with a lower propensity for marital dissolution in the first place.

Once married, children of divorce may themselves have traits, attitudes, and behavioural models that undermine marital stability. The divorce of parents usually implies that one of them, usually the father, will be absent for at least part of the individual's childhood. A popular explanation of the effects of divorce on children's behaviour (one that used to enjoy academic support) equates absent parents (fathers) with absent role models (cf. Wolfinger 2005, p. 12-4). Empirical support for this explanation is, however, weak (McLanahan and Bumpass 1988; Amato 1993; Diekmann and Engelhardt 1999; Wolfinger 2005). For example, children of divorced parents have a considerably higher risk of divorce than those for whom the reason for the absence of a parent was his or her death (McLanahan and Bumpass 1988; Diekmann and Engelhardt 1999). One common result of a father's absence is a reduction of the household's economic resources, which partly explains the long-term material disadvantages associated with single parenthood (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994).

Other explanations have built on the finding that children of divorced parents show more positive attitudes towards divorce (Amato 1988; Trent and South 1992; Axinn and Thornton 1996) and inferior interpersonal skills (Amato 1996). Although the divorce of parents does indeed affect children's attitudes towards divorce, these attitudes do not appear to explain its intergenerational transmission (e.g. Amato 1996). There is equivocal support for the view that inferior interpersonal skills may be a risk factor. Amato (1996) found that interpersonal behaviour problems explained up to half of the intergenerational transmission of divorce. On the other hand, Amato and DeBoer (2001) found that interpersonal problems did not mediate the effects of parents' divorce on their offspring's thoughts about divorcing, which in turn constitute an indicator of marital instability and a predictor of divorce. A possible explanation for this apparent inconsistency is that inferior interpersonal skills do not lead children of divorced parents to seek divorce themselves, but do increase the possibility that their spouses will do so.

Another explanation holds that children of divorced parents tend to have a lower long-term commitment to their own marriage than those from intact families (Glenn and Kramer 1987; Amato and DeBoer 2001; Wolfinger 2005). According to this argument, children learn marital behaviour from their parents and parents' divorce acts as a signal of possible and acceptable choices when marriages turn sour. This explanation benefits from some supporting evidence (*ibid.*). For example, Amato and DeBoer (2001) found

that when the parents' divorce ended a low-conflict marriage, the divorce was likely to have a strong effect on the stability of the children's marriage. On the other hand, when the divorce ended a high-conflict marriage, the children's divorce risk was lower and similar to that of children from intact families. Children of divorce were also more likely to think about divorcing when marital happiness was low. An interpretation of these findings is that parents who leave a low-conflict marriage 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). In other words, children of divorced parents are less willing to sacrifice marital happiness for marital stability.

In sum, previous research shows that the association between parents' divorce and children's divorce is partly a product of traits transmitted genetically or otherwise from parents to their children and partly a result of the experience of the parents' divorce itself. Regarding the latter, recent evidence does not support hypotheses that stress the effect of a parent's absence, conflict in the parents' marriage, or the effect of parents' divorce on children's attitudes towards it. The intergenerational transmission of divorce is mediated in part by life-course decisions and outcomes that also affect the risk of divorce, such as education, age at marriage, cohabitation, and fertility behaviour. Previous research has also shown that, independently of the other mentioned factors, the intergenerational transmission of divorce can be partly explained by the lower marital commitment professed by children of divorced parents and—with somewhat less consistent evidence—by their inferior interpersonal skills.

As mentioned above, there has been some cross-nationally comparative research on the intergenerational transmission of divorce, and comparative differences in the strength of the association have been reported. Both Wagner and Weiß (2006) and Dronkers and Härkönen (2008) stressed the role of the surrounding marriage norms and practices. The latter, for example, found that the intergenerational transmission of divorce was weaker in countries in which (parental) divorce was more common. They related this result to the weakness of the signal that divorcing parents send to their children about decision-making in marriage, as compared to the signals people get from the outside society. They also found that female labour force participation rates were negatively associated with the strength of the intergenerational transmission of divorce, possibly due to the relatively weaker socialization role working mothers have when children are exposed to other adult mentors, such as teachers in kindergartens and

schools. As also mentioned above, some studies, notably Wolfinger (1999) found that the association between parents' and children's divorce has weakened over time. He interpreted this also as yielding support to the Dronkers and Härkönen's first explanation, discussed above.

4.4 The impact of parental divorce on intergenerational relations

American scholars have thoroughly demonstrated the negative impact of parental divorce on intergenerational relations. More recently, European studies have also obtained the same findings (Albertini and Saraceno, 2008 and Albertini and Garriga, 2009). Children of divorced have less contact, provide less support and are less close to their parents (Spitze and Logan 1990; Aquilino 1994; Rossi and Rossi, 1990; Furstenberg and Nord, 1987; Soboleski and Amato, 2007). This is particularly true for non-custodial fathers, since the mother-child relationship is less affected by divorce. This finding is not surprising taking into account that females are more involved than males in maintaining intergenerational relationships (Hagestad, 1986; Spitze and Logan, 1990), and mothers frequently mediate the relationship between fathers and children (Aquilino, 1994; Rossi and Rossi, 1990). Moreover, custody arrangements could be also another plausible explanation, since the custodial parent is usually the mother. In addition, the effect of parental separation is stronger on father-daughter and mother-son relationships, as children often identify more strongly with the parent of the same sex and find it easier to share activities and interests with the parent (Aquilino; 1994).

There are few cross-national and cross-generational studies on that outcome and they focus only on parent-child contacts, obtaining contradictory results. Kalmijn (2008) finds that the effect of parental divorce on father-child contacts is higher in the low-divorce Southern countries than in the high-divorce Nordic countries. However, Daatland (2007) shows that the negative effects of divorce on parent child-contacts are similar in Norwegian rural areas than in urban ones. Moreover, comparing Denmark, Sweden, France and Belgium, Albertini and Garriga (2009) do not find country differences. In contrast, Tomassini and associates (2004), comparing Finland, Great Britain, Italy, and the Netherlands, show that the association between parental divorce and mother-child contact is only significant in Finland, while the effect of separation on father-child contacts is not significant in the Netherlands, whereas it is not significant in the rest of countries.

5- Summary and future research

This report has examined the literature on the effects of parental divorce on children, focusing less on the effects on short-term economic outcomes, and more on long-term outcomes, in particular psychological well-being and adjustment, education, family formation and dissolution, and intergenerational social relations.

Similar to the review by Amato (2000), the summary finding from this report is that parental divorce has the potential to create a major turmoil in children's lives, a turmoil that can have long-term consequences. This may need not be the case, however, as not all children suffer from divorce and divorce may even be beneficial for children from highly conflicting and abusive families (Dronkers 1999; Amato 2000). Nevertheless, parental divorce appears, on average, to have more negative than positive consequences on children's lives.

Despite accumulating research, there is still a need for further research, and to bridge the gaps in the existing literature, some of which already discussed earlier. A clear question concerns causality: are the apparent differences between children from divorced and those from intact families the result of parental divorce as such? Or are they caused by other factors that preceded both the parental divorce and the children's outcomes? As discussed above, many studies that have taken this question seriously and attempted to correct not only for observed differences between divorced and intact families, but for unobserved differences as well, have concluded that the effect of parental divorce becomes clearly smaller, and sometimes disappears. There remains a clear need for further research of this kind, aimed at tackling this important question.

However, there is also a need to rethink what is actually being measured when divorce is measured. This seemingly apparent question becomes more complicated when divorce is treated as a process of unpartnering—which has possibly started years before the actual divorce becomes legal—instead of a discrete event (Amato 2000). Such a process-oriented view is not only important theoretically, in order to improve our understanding of divorce and its consequences, but also from a methodological and policy perspective. Methodologically, it calls into question strategies that compare outcomes immediately before and after divorce, since the effects of the unpartnering

process (divorce) can appear long before the divorce becomes valid, and recorded in our data (Davies and Cummins 1994). This thus raises questions about the types of selection we are interested in, whether related to differences that exist shortly before the legal divorce (when the process is already ongoing), or to some longer-term, more “fundamental” and stable differences damaging the stability of certain unions (Amato 2000). Overall, this raises the question of what are we actually interested in. In fact, many of the mechanisms discussed above have less to do with divorce as an event than with divorce as a process. For example, those explanations focusing on the stress involved in divorce have at least as much to do with the uncoupling process as with divorce as an event. On the other hand, the “low marital commitment” explanation for the intergenerational transmission of divorce stresses the role of the actual divorce of the parents after the possibly long process that led to it. These thoughts are also important from a policy perspective, as they force one to consider whether the main problem lies in actual divorces (and the laws regulating the ease of getting a divorce), or in dysfunctional marriages in broader terms (policies supporting families more generally).

Future research should also address the questions of who suffers more from divorce and why, and what are the positive and negative coping strategies that reduce the potential of negative effects of parental divorce. Much of this research is American, and it would be interesting to conduct similar studies in Europe. While it is unlikely that the results differ very much, one should keep in mind the intersocietal differences regarding the popularity of coping mechanisms, which make it important to understand which of the popular mechanisms produce positive or negative effects.

From a policy perspective, it is also important to gain more insights into the role that public institutions and policies can play in mediating the effects of parental divorce. This not only calls for explicitly comparative cross-national research, but also for research that takes advantage of changes in national policy regimes. Furthermore, meta-analyses—that provide a quantitative summary and assessment of previous research—continue to be welcome.

6 Bibliography

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