



*State-of-the-art report*  
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well-being and life chances: literature review**

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# Effects of family forms and dynamics on children's well-being and life chances: literature review

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*Abstract:*

In this report, we review literature on the effects of family forms and dynamics on children's well-being. We focus on European studies, and cover five themes, namely the effects of various family forms (and separation and step-parenthood in particular) on children's life chances, whether the effects are causal, the role of parenting and social relationships, heterogeneity of the effects, and variation in the effects over time and across countries.

*Keywords: family forms, separation, life chances, children, Europe*

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# Contents

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <b>1 Introduction .....</b>   | <b>2</b>  |
| <b>2 Family forms, family dynamics, and children’s outcomes .....</b> | <b>3</b>  |
| 2.1 Divorce and separation.....                                       | 4         |
| 2.1.1 <i>Demographic outcomes</i> .....                               | 4         |
| 2.1.2 <i>Educational attainment and cognitive development</i> .....   | 5         |
| 2.1.3 <i>Behavioural problems</i> .....                               | 6         |
| 2.2 Stepfamilies.....   | 6         |
| <b>3 Causality.....</b>   | <b>9</b>  |
| 3.1 Sibling models.....   | 9         |
| 3.2 Natural experiment: bereavement vs. separation .....              | 11        |
| 3.3 Longitudinal studies .....  | 11        |
| 3.4 Structural equation models.....                                   | 13        |
| <b>4 Family relationships and parenting.....</b>                      | <b>13</b> |
| 4.1 Nonresident fathers .....   | 16        |
| 4.2 Joint Custody.....  | 18        |
| 4.3 Relationships with other adults and between siblings .....        | 19        |
| <b>5 Heterogeneity in effects of family structure.....</b>            | <b>20</b> |
| 5.1 Gender differences .....  | 20        |
| 5.2 Age at parental separation.....                                   | 21        |
| 5.3 Socioeconomic heterogeneity .....                                 | 23        |
| 5.4 Ethnic heterogeneity .....  | 24        |
| <b>6 Cross-country and cross-cohort studies .....</b>                 | <b>25</b> |
| 6.1 Cross-national studies .....                                      | 26        |
| 6.2 Cross-cohort studies.....   | 28        |
| <b>7 Conclusion.....</b>  | <b>29</b> |
| <b>References .....</b>   | <b>31</b> |

## 1 Introduction

This literature review covers recent research on *effects of family forms and dynamics on children's short- and long-term wellbeing*. There is a wide literature on the topic and similar reviews have recently been published both in Europe and the United States (cf., Amato, 2000; 2010; Amato and James, 2010; Garriga and Härkönen, 2009). For this reason, we restrict our review to the following topics, which also cover the main areas of Work Package number 5 within FamiliesAndSocieties:

1. The effects of various forms of family configurations on children's life chances, with particular attention being paid to the effects of separation and step-parenthood.
2. The more methodological contributions that explicitly try to identify to what extent these effects are causal;
3. The role played by parenting and social relationships in mediating these effects;
4. The heterogeneity of these effects for different groups of the population
5. How these effects vary across countries and periods.

We have structured this review along these five points. We pay particular attention to research from Europe, but also draw on that done in the United States. We start by describing the general findings regarding the correlates of family configurations with child outcomes. Most of the research on the topic in Europe has focused on single parent and step-families that come about through separation and divorce. Consequently, most of this review will follow that lead. Literature from the United States has also focused on child-bearing outside of partnership and marriage. The former is relatively less common in Europe, and the latter has escaped the attention of most researchers so far. American scholars have also been more interested than European ones in differences between children raised by married and cohabiting parents, and differences in the consequences of dissolutions of these families. Because fewer European studies have made this distinction (however, see e.g., Jonsson and Gähler, 1997), we mainly do not separate between married and cohabiting parents (and their separations), while noting the potential for future research on this question. As life chance outcomes, we are particularly interested in effects on education, given its importance in shaping life courses and well-being.

A large body of literature has aimed at uncovering the extent to which observed associations between family structures and children's outcomes are causal or due to selection bias. This will be the second focus of our review. We discuss different innovations in the estimation of effects of family forms and what they suggest regarding the causality underlying the reported associations.

In the third section of this review we concentrate on what could explain the associations between family forms and child outcomes beyond selection bias. Several types of mechanism have been found to contribute to the influence from family structure to children's outcomes, including a loss of financial and other resources and the stress surrounding family transitions (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994; Amato, 2000; 2010; Garriga and Härkönen, 2009). Here we concentrate on parental involvement and parenting, which can often be affected by changes in family structures, and are among the research objectives of our project.

The fourth and fifth sections of this text focus on possible heterogeneity in the effects of family forms on child outcomes. Depending on individual and societal characteristics, some children might remain unaffected by changes in family structure, while others might respond in a very significant manner to these transitions. Not only does investigating such differences allow us to better judge whom to target possible policy interventions, but it also helps us understand the mechanisms connecting household structure and children's well-being. In the fourth section, heterogeneity by individual characteristics will be discussed, while the fifth section focuses on differences at the macro-level, namely, heterogeneity over time and space.

In the review that follows, we aim to concentrate on the fields of study set by the goals of the work package, as already mentioned. Some fields relevant to the study of family forms in general are therefore left out of consideration. We will mostly remark on this in the corresponding sections. For further reading, we refer to Amato (2000; 2010), Amato and James (2010), Garriga and Härkönen (2009), and Sweeney (2010) among other summary texts.

## **2 Family forms, family dynamics, and children's outcomes**

We start by considering the effects of parental separation and divorce on three children's outcomes, namely, demographic and life course outcomes; educational attainment and

cognitive development; and behavioural outcomes. These are among the most commonly studied outcomes in the literature. Another, which might be particularly relevant for this work package is health (see Amato and James 2010; Strohschein, 2005; Rasmussen, 2009). Subsequently, we move to review studies on the effect of non residential fathers and step-parenthood.

## **2.1 Divorce and separation**

There has been a long interest in the consequences of divorce and separation for adults and children. Common concerns have been related to whether separation as such could be seen as producing lower levels of well-being, how long these effects are likely to last, and which factors contribute to successful adaptation (e.g., Kitson & Raschke, 1981; Price-Bonham & Balswick, 1980). Answers to these questions varied. For example, conclusions concerning divorce and family structure effects on children varied from “harmful” to “weak and temporary” (e.g., Herzog and Sudia, 1973) and again to “potentially important” (Cherlin, 1999; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994), partly due to access to and use of better data. Among the most commonly studied outcomes among children of divorce are transitions to adulthood and demographic behaviors, educational achievement, cognitive development and behavioral problems. The findings on each of these dependent variables will be reviewed in the next sections.

### ***2.1.1 Demographic outcomes***

One of the most studied outcomes is union dissolution of the children of divorce themselves (e.g., Diekmann & Engelhardt, 1995; Dronkers, 1997; Dykstra, 1997; Hullen, 1998; Engelhardt et al., 1999; Kiernan & Cherlin, 1999; Dronkers & Härkönen, 2008; Lyngstad & Engelhardt, 2009). All of these studies find significant effects, covering a wide variety of countries. One group of explanations focuses on other demographic behavior of the offspring. Some studies found a role for age at marriage and for becoming a parent (Engelhardt et al., 1999; Kiernan & Cherlin, 1999), others for pre-marital cohabitation (Diekmann & Engelhardt, 1995; Kiernan & Cherlin, 1999). At the same time, other studies found parental divorce not to be related to these outcomes (Dronkers, 1997; Hullen, 1998). Another explanation could be that those whose parents divorced seem to end up with less attractive partners in terms of socio-economic status (Erola et al., 2012), which itself is a known predictor of divorce and

separation. Other studies have looked into attitudes and expectations. A study from Belgium showed how children of divorce more often expect to experience a divorce in the future (Sodermans et al., 2008). Furthermore, the American literature has increasingly explained the intergenerational transmission of union dissolution with interpersonal skills and socialization patterns into dealing with problems in intimate relationships (Wolfinger, 2005).

Studies concentrating on other life course transitions have found significant differences in the likelihood to move out of the parental home early (Ní Brohlcháin et al., 2000; Jansen, 2001). Regarding partnership formation, the findings are more mixed. One study finds no significant differences in the likelihood to enter a cohabiting union and the duration between leaving the parental home and partnering (Jansen, 2001). Other studies do find differences in the likelihood to partner and parent early in the life course (Ní Brohlcháin et al., 2000; Reneflot, 2011). Reneflot (2011) finds a modest role for educational attainment when explaining the entrance into parenthood.

### ***2.1.2 Educational attainment and cognitive development***

Studies that looked at the role of single parenthood in the intergenerational reproduction of inequality often focused on the effects on educational attainment and cognitive development (McLanahan & Percheski, 2008). If parental divorce affects educational attainment of children and is negatively correlated with parental SES, these processes can strengthen the intergenerational transmission of inequality. In the European studies reviewed, parental divorce was related to grade retention (Bosman & Louwes, 1988; Brutsaert, 1998), the kind of track entered in high school (Latten 1984; Dronkers, 1992; Hilmert, 2002; Låftman, 2008), cognitive development (Van Loon et al., 1978; Dronkers, 1992), and educational attainment overall (Van Loon et al., 1978; Bosman & Louwes, 1988; Bosman, 1994; Hilmert, 2002; Fischer, 2007).

A common process looked into is whether the slower cognitive development of children with divorced parents can explain their educational attainment, or whether other variables play a role. If the former is the case, one should focus on cognitive development, and less on educational choices net of performance. Results here are mixed, one Dutch study finding that cognitive development explained educational attainment completely (Bosman & Louwes, 1988), while another study from the same country noted that family structure differences in

teacher advice regarding which high school track to enter were only half explained by cognitive tests (Dronkers, 1992). Educational choices of children and their divorced parents themselves might therefore not be less relevant than behavioural and cognitive development and school grades.

Many studies seeking to explain the effects of family structures and transitions on children's educational outcomes have looked into changes in parental resources, and found them to explain part of these effects (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994; Thomson, Hanson & McLanahan, 1994; Jonsson & Gähler, 1997; Garriga & Härkönen, 2009). European studies which looked at the role of changes in parenting have found partly contradictory results, some reporting a partly mediated effect of parenting and contrary behavior of children on educational attainment (Bosman, 1994), while another paper found parenting and parental resources to not influence the relationship between parental divorce and child outcomes (Dronkers, 1992).

### ***2.1.3 Behavioural problems***

Two European studies looked at behavioural problems of children of divorce during adolescence (see also, Amato and James 2010). Funk's (1996) results showed no differences by family structure in the extent to which children justify violence. Dronkers (1999) showed how parental divorce is related to indicators of well-being such as drug use, illness, violence and crime, depression, and thoughts about suicide. In several cases, children whose parents were still together but had a lot of conflict fared worse than those whose parents broke up but who still had good contact with their fathers. Conflict might therewith be an important mediator of the effect of parental divorce on children's behavior, and this has been a common finding particularly in the American literature (e.g., Amato, 2000).

## **2.2 Stepfamilies**

The division between biological and non-biological families can hide important heterogeneity in the latter group, as these can consist of single parent families, families with step-parents, families with grandparents, and finally, in more complex blended families with both biological and step-children (Halpern-Meehin & Tach, 2008). If having two parents in a household was, per se, the main condition for good child outcomes, reconstituted families



would be equivalent to intact ones. However, studying step-families is of interest by itself since it provides new dimensions to family life where children have to adjust to an outside figure that enters the family (King, 2009; Sweeney, 2010). Studying step-parents can also provide insights into the mechanisms that connect child outcomes and union dissolution of parents.

The addition of an adult to the household can provide extra financial resources and time for monitoring. The presence of a step-parent can, however, also introduce more complex family relationships and conflict. Furthermore, some scholars have argued that it is the number of family transitions that matters, and that stability within a family is an important predictor for child outcomes (Sun & Li, 2009b; Hofferth & Goldscheider, 2010; Magnuson & Berger, 2010). The entrance of a step-parent would mean another period of adjustment for children.

Many studies have looked at the moderating role of the presence of step-fathers in single-mother families. The effects depended on the outcome. When looking at demographic outcomes the presence of a step-parent is in general related to an increased effect on non-standard demographic behavior of children (leaving the parental home earlier, earlier childbearing and entering a cohabiting union rather than marriage) (Ní Brohlcháin et al., 2000; Jansen, 2001; Reneflot, 2011). Especially for girls, outcomes are affected when a step-father enters (Reneflot, 2011). Interestingly, Reneflot (2011) found that remarriage of the biological father was related to a reduced propensity of having a child early and to enter parenthood inside a union. Conflict can be a possible mediator, as those who had a step-parent were most likely to leave the home early due to family conflict (Jansen, 2001). Sodermans et al. (2008), showed how having a step-parent is related to less positive attitudes towards marriage for girls. When moving to other outcomes, effects were generally negative on contact with parents during adulthood (Fokkema et al., 2003; De Graaf & Fokkema, 2007).

Several studies find that children in stepfamilies have worse academic achievement compared to those from intact families and display patterns of well-being closer to single parent families (Bjarnason et al., 2011; Borgers et al., 1996; Breivik & Olweus; Ginther & Pollak, 2004; Gennetian, 2005; Jonsson & Gähler, 1997; Låftman & Östberg 2006; Thomson et al., 1994; Turunen 2013a; 2013b). A meta-analysis by Amato (2001) renders the same conclusions. Sigle-Rushton and others (2009), controlling for SES selection into divorce and subsequent reconstitution, find no evidence for a positive effect of reconstitution on educational

outcomes, compared to single mother households. Some studies argue that children in stepfamilies can fare worse than children of single mothers, due to stress factors. This is found regarding both psychological wellbeing (Kirby, 2006; Sweeney, 2007; Thomson et al., 1994; Tillman, 2007), and educational outcomes (Biblarz & Raftery, 1999). Moreover, as will be discussed below, the effects on academic outcomes can vary for boys and for girls.

There are differences between blended and simple reconstituted families. Stepfamily effects might also work through the contact between step- and half-siblings. Tillman (2008) find that the presence of other children in stepfamilies explains some of the low academic performance scores of this group. Evenhouse and Rielly (2004) find that stepchildren perform worse on cognitive tests than the half-sibling of the same household (who has both biological parents present). Another explanation points to the transitions experienced by the former but not the latter.

However, it has been suggested that good contact with the stepfather can be important for the wellbeing and educational performance of the child (King, 2006). Furthermore, two adult households, including reconstituted families, tend to have more efficient parenting styles (Thomson et al, 1992). Erola and Jalovaara (2012) found that stepfather's SES position was of similar importance as the biological father's SES in intact families, suggesting that stepparents indeed can be important actors for child outcomes.

Finally, studies on the presence of grandparents in non-traditional families have shown how effects of the absence of a father are smaller when grand-parents are living with the family, an important mediator seems to be the resources they bring to the household (Mutchler & Baker, 2009; Monserud & Elder, 2011).

Summing up, the available evidence suggests that family reconstitution does not at least automatically lead to better outcomes for the children involved. Rather, children in step-families show well-being and other outcomes similar, and in some cases worse, to those in single parent households.

### **3 Causality**

A central issue in research on divorce is whether the associations found between family forms and child outcomes are causal or driven by selection or other forms of endogeneity. Families who divorce, re-marry, or have children while cohabiting differ on many characteristics from traditional intact households. It therefore remains unclear whether it is the family transition itself or these other characteristics or processes that drive results. An important question to ask here is what is the appropriate comparison group. For instance, some authors have argued that divorce should be seen as a process, and that it is the trajectory of conflict and insecurity preceding a divorce that might be more relevant for child outcomes (Amato, 2000). In that case one would be interested in child outcomes were the divorce including the process leading up to it not to have occurred. If one is interested in whether the choice of staying together or breaking up has an effect, the counterfactual moves towards the effects of parental separation, net of the process leading up to it.

So far studies have remained surprisingly ambiguous about the exact counterfactual they are addressing. At the same time, research on the effects of family dynamics, and in particular on the effects of union dissolution, has benefited from the development and adoption of new econometric techniques to identify and estimate causal effects from non-experimental data, which those used in divorce research without exception are. These studies include sibling difference methods (e.g., Björklund & Sundström, 2006; Ermisch, Francesconi, & Pevalin, 2004), the comparison between bereavement and divorce, differences-in-differences analysis (e.g., Sanz-de-Galdeano & Vuri, 2007), simultaneous equations estimation (e.g., Steele, Sigle-Rushton, & Kravdal, 2009; Bernardi & Martinez-Pastor 2011), and other advanced techniques. We review each of the techniques separately.

#### **3.1 Sibling models**

Sibling fixed effect models have been used in at least two ways. The first is to assess if stepchildren in stepfamilies are affected more than their half-siblings (the biological children in the same household). This helps tease out the effect of living with a stepparent/in a stepfamily net of the effect of being selected into one by some unobserved characteristic of the parent. Using this approach, Evenhouse and Rielly (2004) report that stepchildren in a mother-stepfather household have lower GPAs, whereas this effect is not found for the “full-biological”-sibling. However, using a comparable approach, Gennetian (2005) find only weak

(negative but insignificant) support for negative effects of being a stepchild. Ginther and Pollak (2004) also find no difference between the step and biological child, both showing a higher risk of not completing high school.

The second way sibling models are used is to assess if children that are exposed to living with parents when their separation occurs are more affected than their older siblings (who may have been exposed to fewer years of parental break up, or already moved out of the parental home). This helps answering the question whether the event of separation and living in a non-intact family is causal to some outcome rather than having been exposed to some unobserved parental characteristics. Björklund and Sundström (2006) found that children who had moved out of the parental home by the time of divorce had equally negative educational outcomes as the younger sibling that lived with the parent at the time of break up. Similarly, Erola and Jalovaara (2012) find only weak support for any causal effect of family structure on child's socioeconomic attainment. This points to selection rather than divorce causation. However, other studies (Ermisch, Francesconi and Pevalin; 2004; Francesconi, Jenkins and Siedler 2010) find that the child being exposed to divorce experience more detrimental effects than his/her older sibling. Similarly, Sandefur and Wells (1999) find that family structure effects on educational attainment stand robust (albeit much smaller) when using sibling fixed effects.

Sibling models have problems with external validity. These models essentially compare children from the same family to one another. Because one of the consequences of family dissolution is a decrease in financial resources, which is experienced in the same way by all children from the family, findings from sibling models may not generalize to all families. Moreover these models critically rely on the assumption that the effect of divorce differs by the length of exposure and exclude families with only one child (Steele, Sigle-Rushton, & Kravdal, 2009). Furthermore, they also rely on the assumption that the older sibling (who is either not regarded as experiencing the divorce due to having moved out of the parental home, or because s/he has otherwise aged out of the observation window) will not experience the divorce—and the potentially long process leading to it—regardless of how close in age the siblings are. These assumptions need to be kept in mind when using and interpreting findings from sibling fixed-effects estimates, which tend to be highly sensitive to correct model specification (Sigle-Rushton et al., forthcoming).

### **3.2 Natural experiment: bereavement vs. separation**

One way of trying to reach correct estimates of the effects of family structure is to categorize and compare divorced non-intact households to those that are caused by death of one parent. If effects stem from the lack of a full two-household family, the two should show no variation in their effects on children's outcomes. Empirical results suggested that bereavement had smaller effects on wellbeing and self-evaluated academic success parental separation in the Netherlands (Borgers et al., 1996), and on educational achievement in the US (Tillman, 2007; Biblarz & Gottainer, 2000) and Hungary (Bukodi & Dronkers, 2003).

This quasi experiment is not without limitations either. The main limitation is that families in which the parent dies can be different from those which dissolve, in which case a comparison between them is not without problems. Furthermore, if the objective is to estimate the effect of a loss of a parent, the comparison between these groups may not be the best one as children of divorce most often continue to have contact with both parents. (McLanahan and Percheski, 2008).

### **3.3 Longitudinal studies**

Other studies have used longitudinal data and repeated measurements to control for characteristics of children and their parents that remain fixed over time. Most of these effects looked at the effects of parental separation on educational outcomes of children. Some studies find a significant reduction or even a disappearance of effects. In an early study, Cherlin et al. (1991) found that the effects of divorce and separation on behavioral problems and test scores were greatly reduced when pre-separation behaviors and test scores were taken into account, and this reduction was particularly visible among boys. Kiernan and Mensah (2009) use longitudinal data to examine family structure impact on early year (3-5) cognitive development. The authors find that control variables (mother qualifications, education and mental health) mediate the cross-sectional difference by family structure except for living with a step parent (negative on learning delay). Using triple-difference methods, Sanz-de-Galdeano and Vuri (2007) control for educational attainment both before and after occurrence of divorce and find no effect of the event as such, supporting a selection explanation. Furstenberg & Kiernan (2001) use a long follow-up to compare children whose parents divorced once they had left the parental home with those who experienced it at various earlier ages. Even those whose parents separated after the child had moved away from the parental

home showed weaker educational performance than those whose parents remained together, suggesting that separated parents differed systematically already before the separation took place.

Other studies, in contrast, find that effects remain also when taking a longitudinal approach. Kim (2011) used a longitudinal sample of young children that allows for measuring the dependent variable before, during (approximately) and some time after the separation. After controlling for factors that remain fixed over time and time trends, the author finds that divorce affects children's math-scores net of post-divorce results. Similarly, Steele and associates (2009) used longitudinal data to account for factors that are invariant across time for Norwegian data, and found that parental separation does lead to lower education attainment particularly when the event occurred around the transition to high school. Liu (2007) also used repeated measures that controlled for parental resources before, during and after divorce. The author finds lasting effects of divorce on highest educational attainment. Finally, Jonsson and Gähler (1997) controlled for socioeconomic correlates of divorce and separation and examined how the parental resources changed following these events. They did not find major selection into divorce and separation, but reported that downward social mobility following family dissolution explained much of its effects on children's educational attainment.

A few studies looked at the effects on health from a longitudinal perspective, and found effects to persist. Rasmussen (2009) used difference-in-difference models to control for unobserved time-constant heterogeneity when assessing divorce effects on health outcomes of Danish children. The authors suggest a causal impact of divorce on hospitalization and general effects of family structure net of selection processes. Strohschein (2005) used growth curve models to control for time-constant child characteristics and observed time varying events. The author looks at changes in family structure on children's mental health in Canada. While divorced families indeed are a select group, the author finds some independent effects of divorce on anxiety and depression.

Longitudinal settings provide an attractive modeling approach as they control for all factors, which remain constant during the observation window. As usual, whether these estimates reflect actual causal effects depends on whether the assumptions behind the model are met. Similar to the sibling fixed effects models, longitudinal models rely on the assumption that the

process leading to parental union dissolution itself does not affect the outcome. This assumption can be (at least to an extent) dealt with by using comparison points long enough in time before the event. Another crucial assumption is that time-varying factors can be sufficiently taken into account in the estimation. These include any shocks or changes in the family environment, which affect both divorce risk and children's outcomes.

### **3.4 Structural equation models**

Hawkins et al., (2007) worked within a SEM framework to model the relationship between fathers' parenting and children's wellbeing outcomes in the US. Taking account both the effects of children's wellbeing on fathers' parenting, and vice versa, they conclude that father's involvement and parenting style is negatively affected by the child's problematic behavior. Similarly, King and Sobolewski (2006) use SEM to establish and verify the relative importance of child's contact with mothers and nonresident fathers in the UK.

### **3.5 Conclusion**

The studies that have explicitly addressed causality in analyses of the effects of family dynamics have led to somewhat conflicting conclusions. Many continue to find that divorce has causal effects, even if they are weaker than the correlations between divorce and outcomes, but other studies have reported that these effects result completely from confounding. Up to date none of the methodological innovations have provided a bullet-proof strategy of assessing causality, but taken together, they can improve the possibilities for drawing conclusions about the effects of family structures and dynamics and child outcomes (see McLanahan, Tach & Schneider 2013). An important question for future research concerns whether differences in the results stem from differences in methods. A systematic comparison of the findings of different methods applied to the same data might prove extremely useful in this respect. Another strategy to gain greater insight into the causal chain connecting family dynamics and child outcomes is to identify the mechanisms that mediate the association. Next, we look into one of these, namely family relations and parenting.

## **4 Family relationships and parenting**

Family dynamics, such as divorce and parental re-partnering, imply a change in family structure. Consequently, several studies have looked at their consequences for relationships

within families. These studies include research on the amount and quality of contact between resident and non-resident parents with their children, and studies on (step)parenting. Since it remains more common that children stay, either full-time or part-time, with the mother after parental separation, these family dynamics have the potential to create inequalities between parents in their access to and relationships with their children, and vice versa (McLanahan and Percheski, 2008). On the other hand, separated parents re-enter the dating market, which may lead to a formation of a step-family. This not only creates a new social relationship between children and a new adult, but can also lead to changes in the relationships between children and their biological parents, and between the parents themselves.

Family dynamics can thus affect family relationships and parenting practices. According to the family process paradigm (Cavanagh, 2008) changes in family status can change family roles and family functioning. The process of family dissolution including transitional period following it can often be chaotic and stressful for parents and their children (Braver, Shapiro, & Goodman, 2006; Hetherington, 1993). This might disturb parenting (Braver et al., 2006).

Time is a necessary condition and resource for parenting. According to parental resource theory (Thomson, Hanson, & McLanahan, 1994), parents provide their children with two key resources: money and time. On the one hand, parents use money to supply their children with the necessary living conditions (food, clothing, shelter, etc). On the other hand, time offers parents the opportunity to demonstrate support and control to their children. Parental separation or divorce is associated with a decline in both parental resources (King & Sobolewski, 2006; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Thomson et al., 1994).

Kendig and Bianchi (2008) find that single mothers spend 10-16 % less time with their children compared to mothers of intact families, but this difference is primarily due to differences in education and in household income. Several studies find that the frequency of contact with fathers and grandparents is lower when parents are divorced (Oppelaar & Dykstra, 2004; Fokkema et al., 2003; De Graaf & Fokkema, 2007; Peters & Ehrenberg, 2008). Joint custody, good inter-parental relations and good early child-father relations led to substantially weaker negative effects on contact with fathers (Peters & Ehrenberg, 2008). The results for mothers are less clear with some studies showing no associations (Fokkema et al., 2003), and others finding worse relationships between mothers and sons only (De Graaf & Fokkema, 2007). Kalmijn (2012) argued and showed for the Netherlands that in most cases



the relationship with the father worsens, but in some cases mothers are less well connected to their children. Above all, inequality between the mother and father increases regarding the relationships with children.

The availability of time and absence of a resident biological father can also affect parenting styles that parents adopt. A widely used schema distinguishes parenting according to the level of control and support the parents exert. This schema identifies authoritative (lot of control and support), authoritarian (high control, low support), permissive (low control, high support), and uninvolved (low control and support) parenting styles (Baumrind, 1991). Of these, authoritative parenting has been found effective for preschool-readiness (Brooks-Gunn & Markman, 2005), teen delinquency, depression and school commitment (Simons & Conger, 2007; Baumrind, 1991; Campana, Henderson, Stolberg & Schum (2008), and self-esteem (Bastaitis, Ponnet & Mortelmans, 2012). Reviews generally conclude that high control and high affection are the most effective parenting styles (Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Lansford, 2009).

Previous research has often indicated that parents who are together do more effective parenting than separated parents. Comparative research by Pryor (2004) has shown that single parents are less authoritative than married parents. Longitudinal studies by McLanahan and Sandefur (1994) and by Seltzer (2000) also indicated that parental involvement declines after a parental divorce. Thomson, Mosley, Hanson and McLanahan (2001) find some duality: single mothers supervise their children more (good) but also apply overly-harsh discipline (bad) compared to mothers in reconstituted families. On the other hand, a longitudinal study by Strohschein (2007) did not discover differences in parenting before and after the separation.

Parents often re-enter the partner market after separation or divorce. This might lead to a new cohabitation or marriage. Having a new partner is expected to have a specific influence on parenting. On the one hand, the presence of a new partner in the household might lead to possible role conflict (Adamson & Pasley, 2006; Thomson, Mosley, Hanson, & McLanahan, 2001). Parents living together with a new partner have to divide their time and attention between the new partner (being a partner) and their child (being a parent), which might result in role conflict and lower parental involvement. Previous research (Pryor, 2004) has indicated that adolescents report lower parental support and lower parental control when they have

experienced different family transitions. Henderson and Taylor (1999) found that parents were less controlling and less supportive after they remarried. A study by Thomson et al. (2001) also revealed that children found their mothers to be less supervising after remarrying, and Rodgers and Rose (2002) reported that parental monitoring was less effective in reconstituted families. The suggested explanation is that reconstituted families offer ambiguous boundaries. Longitudinal research by Crawford and Novak (2008) indicated that living in a stepfamily predicted negative later attachment to the parent. On the other hand, the presence of a new partner might be positively related to parenting. They might encourage the parent and take part in raising the children, which might lead to a different division of household and parenting tasks (Hetherington, 2006).

These studies suggest that parenting practices can indeed differ by family type, but cannot conclude that family structure has a causal impact on parenting style. Parenting style can operate as a mediator in explaining some of the family structure effects on child wellbeing. This mediating effect is found in studies including controls for parenting (Crawford & Novak, 2008, Canavaugh, 2008; Amato and Gilberth, 1999).

#### **4.1 Nonresident fathers**

The previous section concentrated primarily on the effects of divorce on the parenting styles of the resident parent, mostly the mother. Although most research has focused on mothers, several studies have shown how involvement and the parenting style of the outside member of the family, normally the father, is likewise important for child outcomes (Stamps Mitchell et al., 2009; Swiss & Le Bourdais, 2009; Karre & Mounts, 2012; Choi & Pyun, 2013).

The literature provides mixed results regarding effects of the presence/absence of a nonresident father. In a meta-analysis from the United States, Amato & Gilbreth (1999) showed mixed results; about half the studies indicated that active nonresident fathering had a positive impact on child wellbeing (which included educational measures in 20 of the browsed studies). The other half reported no or negative effects. When positive, fathers authoritative parenting style and feelings of closeness were more important predictors than child support or frequency of contact (Stewart, 2003).

Some studies have compared the parenting styles of separated fathers, who are often the non-residential parent, to fathers not living with the mother of his child. They normally have a less

effective parenting style and provide less support and control than married fathers (Bastaiats, Ponnet, & Mortelmans, 2012; Sirvanli Ozen, 2004). King (2006) finds that children in stepfamilies who report being close to their nonresidential father have better school performance but do not have less behavioral problems, once controlling for child contact with the mother and the stepfather.

As mentioned above, not all studies find positive effects of non-resident fathering. Craigie (2008) suggests that father presence can bring about instability, which can have a negative impact on educational outcomes of children of single mothers. On the same note, Laumann-Billings & Emery (2000), using a small scale interview sample, find that distress among children was higher if father contact occurred once a month, compared to both weekly or no contact. Nonresident fathers' contact might thus be a source of instability, if not pursued fully. The same finding was reported using larger data. Menning (2006) finds that very frequent contact with the nonresident father was important for preventing child school drop-out. However, having a medium amount of contact increased likelihood of dropout, compared to none. A study from Norway (Kalil et al. 2011) also found not all contact with the resident father is necessarily good. They found that geographical proximity to the father following parental separation predicted modest negative educational outcomes for the children, and this effect was stronger for highly educated fathers. The authors explained this finding by reference to the stronger conflicts with the mother, and more contact with the child, among highly educated fathers. Children of highly educated fathers residing close to their father may thus be drawn into the conflicts of their separated parents. Nonresident fathers have also been shown to provide less support and to have a less effective parenting style than residing fathers in Belgium (Bastaiats, Ponnet & Morlemans, 2012) and in Turkey (Sirvanli Ozen, 2004). On the other hand, King and Sobolewski (2006) find that strong ties to nonresident fathers help to remedy the negative effects of having weak ties to the mother on children's school grades in the UK.

Father's involvement and child outcomes might be interdependent relationships. Hawkins, Amato & King (2007) found that active non-residing father involvement did correlate with child wellbeing and educational attainment, but that active fathering did not predict the wellbeing of children one year later, controlling for wellbeing at the first year. Rather, a *child effect* was suggested; children who display few behavioral problems have a positive impact on

active nonresident fathering. This could have two implications: First, it puts forward children themselves as agents. Second, it represents the causality problem of interdependency.

The main findings of this stream of the literature could then be summarized as follows. First, there seems to be mixed support for the hypothesis of a positive effect of frequency of contact with the nonresidential parent on children's educational and wellbeing. At the same time, some results suggest that financial support does matter. Second, child-nonresidential father contact must be of good quality to have a positive effect on child's wellbeing. Nonresidential parents have been found to provide uninvolved parenting, which has been proven to be an inefficient form of parenting.

Finally, it should be noted that studying nonresident father parenting is challenging, because their parenting style is highly correlated with mothers' parenting style (Simons & Conger 2007), and with mother-child relationship quality (King, & Sobolewski 2006). Father parenting might also be responsive to children's needs and behaviours, which posits another challenge for the identification of the effects of nonresidential fathers parenting.

## **4.2 Joint Custody**

Joint custody agreements and shared parenting are today common post-divorce arrangements in some countries, but relatively rare in others (Bjarnason & Arnarsson, 2011). However, its increasing incidence calls for research on its impacts on children's outcomes. Impacts of joint custody can be explained more or less by the theories that explain the protective function of two-parent households: social capital, financial resources, and effective parenting are arguably better maintained by a resident rather than nonresident parent (Breivik & Olweus, 2006), and by extension also by a custodial father compared to a non-custodial father.

Children of joint custody parents tend to differ in their education and well-being outcomes from children living solely with a single parent (Bender, 1994). Breivik and Olweus (2006) found slightly lower grade point averages among joint custody children compared to intact families and no differences in behavioral adjustment. Similar findings exist for 36 European and North American countries regarding parental contact (Bjarnason & Arnarsson, 2011) and educational performance (Bjarnason et al, 2012). A US meta-analysis reported that children of joint custody display no lower wellbeing compared to children living with both parents with

the exception of academic adjustment (Bauserman, 2002). In a literature review on joint custody in mainly Anglo-saxon countries, Nielsen (2011) summarizes that children in dual residence are better off or do as well as other non-intact family forms.

Bauserman (2002) reports that overall, the literature shows different effect sizes, but that might be because few studies control for parental conflict. Joint custody implies some degree of parental communication, low conflict parents with good communication might be selectively prone to engage in this arrangement (Pryor & Rogers, 2001 p. 210). In the Netherlands, Spruijt and Duindam (2009) find joint custody arrangements to be somewhat more efficient for school grades than other non-intact forms (but not significantly so), but also that joint custody parents had a significantly lower level of pre-divorce conflict. Neoh and Mellor (2010) found few differences in self-reported child wellbeing between single and shared custody arrangements. The most significant difference was found for parents themselves, with joint custodians being overall more satisfied with their arrangement (the latter effect could arguably have positive implications for child's development, regardless of child self-reported wellbeing). As another indicator of selection, Donnelly and Finkelhorn (1993) found high SES urbanities to be especially likely to choose into joint custody (compared to other post-divorce options). Whether this selectivity has changed is a question for future research.

In sum, joint custody agreements tend to be more positive / less detrimental to child wellbeing compared to other post-separation family forms. However, it has been noted that positive selection process into the joint custody is likely to be at play. Future research should accordingly try to address this selection issue and try to estimate the true causal effect of the type of post-separation agreement.

#### **4.3 Relationships with other adults and between siblings**

Family structures shape family relationships beyond those between parents and parents and their children. The literature on disadvantaged African-Americans often emphasized the positive roles of other family members, such as grandmothers and uncles (Richardson, 2009). Studies looking at co-residing grandparents have shown that the presence of grand-parents in single-mother families has positive effects on children's outcomes (Mutchler & Baker, 2009; Monserud & Elder, 2011). Siblings can support each other during a period of parental divorce.

An Austrian study showed that relationships between siblings improve after a divorce, especially in those dyads that involve a brother (Geser, 2001). A more recent paper has shown how the presence of siblings and sibling warmth dampens the effect of parental divorce (Waite et al., 2011). One study found smaller effects of parental divorce on educational achievement for bigger families, possibly due to them having less resources to lose (Sun & Li, 2009a), but another study found bigger effects arguably due to many children being too much to handle for a single mother (Dronkers, 1992).

Another important moderator might be extra-curricular activities of children (Martin, 2012). Are children who are engaged in clubs, associations, or extra school activities less affected by a parental divorce? Social selection into such behavior is likely to exist, but little research has looked at the role of these factors. One study found that cross-national variation in the intergenerational transmission of divorce is to some extent explained by levels of female labor force participation (Dronkers & Härkönen, 2008). If institutions other than the family take on more responsibility for child-rearing, family structure effects might be weaker. This is an avenue that future research still needs to explore further.

## **5 Heterogeneity in effects of family structure**

Another way to understand the effects of family dynamics is to look at the heterogeneity of these effects. Is everyone affected equally by a parental separation or step-parenthood? Are some groups unaffected? Some studies have looked into effects by gender and the timing of the family transitions. Much less research has been undertaken on how the effects of parental separation vary by socio-economic or ethnic group. These and some other moderators will be discussed in the following sections.

### **5.1 Gender differences**

Many studies have investigated whether the effects of parental separation vary by gender of the child. Reviews of the American literature drew no clear conclusions (Amato, 2010) and a similar picture emerges from the European literature (Amato & James, 2010). Several studies find no gender differences when looking at educational outcomes (Bosman & Louwes, 1988; Fischer, 2007), demographic behavior (Dronkers, 1997; Jansen, 2001), and contact to grandparents (Oppelaar & Dykstra, 2004).

The most contrasting significant results are found for the intergenerational transmission of divorce. Some studies observed bigger transmission effects for men (Diekmann & Engelhardt, 1995; Kiernan & Cherlin, 1999), while others did so for women whose parents divorced (Hullen, 1998; Lyngstad & Engelhardt, 2009). Ní Brohlcháin et al. (2000) and Reneflot (2011) looked at other demographic outcomes (leaving home early, entry into parenthood, extra-marital births) and found girls to be more affected by parental divorce. Results are also mixed when looking at contact between family members. Sibling dyads that contain a brother are in general closer when parents are divorced, but no effects are observed for sister-sister relationships (Geser, 2001). At the same time, some studies report that divorced mothers have worse relationships to their sons but not with their daughters (De Graaf & Fokkema, 2007).

For two outcomes, significant effects of parental separation were found for boys only. They have more nutrition problems when their parents have separated (Schmitz & Schmidt-Denter, 1999), and they are more likely to retain a grade in elementary school (Brutsaert, 1998). What would gender differences in effects point at? If effects are found for one gender but not for the other, this would move attention away from family variables such as financial resources (or boys should react differently to financial resources than girls). Instead, the absence of a same-sex parent would probably measure the effect of the lack of a role model. It can indeed be expected that role models are especially important when it comes to education and behavioral outcomes. For example, the presence of a step-father affected boys' school performance in a positive manner, but in a negative or non-existent way for girls (Dronkers, 1992).

The results for educational outcomes might point at the importance of role models. Boys will have an additional male figure within the family, while girls might get less attention from their mothers. The relationship between mothers and daughters in general worsens when a step-father enters the family (King, 2009). That step-fathers affect boys and girls differently decreases support for the argument that extra resources brought in can mediate effects of parental divorce.

## **5.2 Age at parental separation**

The age of children at which parents divorce can shape the influence it has on child outcomes. On the one hand, given that the basis for cognitive development is created at pre-school ages (Heckman & Lochner, 2000) one might expect effects to be strongest if parents break up

during that time of childhood. In addition, there might be a cumulative effect of the amount of years that children spent in a non-traditional family structure. For example, if parental resources play a crucial role, the total amount of money invested in children is likely to be lower the longer they spent time in non-traditional households. On the other hand, if the effects of parental divorce on children operate primarily through parental supervision, role modeling and monitoring, it might have the most impact at ages around puberty when parental authority is expected to be most important. A contrary expectation arises when one thinks of observed effects as being entirely due to selection into separation. In that case one would expect effects to be uniform, regardless of the age at which parents divorced. This requires the assumption that selection into divorce does not differ by age at parental divorce.

The findings regarding the age at parental separation generally show that parental separations that occur while children are adults have no or the smallest effects (Kiernan & Cherlin, 1999; Lyngstad & Engelhardt, 2009). If selection into parental separation at later ages has the same characteristics as selection into separation at younger ages, this would imply real effects on children. An exception to this overall picture was the study, which found that the strength of the intergenerational transmission of divorce was present even if the parents separated when the children themselves were adults (Kiernan & Cherlin, 1999). Other studies looking at the transmission effect did find heterogeneity by age of children when parents split up, with the effects being more pronounced the younger children were in one case, and during mid-childhood in the other cases (Lyngstad & Engelhardt, 2009; Hullen, 1998). Studies looking at other demographic and educational outcomes also find the effects to be most pronounced when parents divorced during mid-childhood or adolescence. The smallest effects are found when parents divorced during early childhood (Van Loon et al., 1978; Hullen, 1998; Jansen, 2001; Lyngstad & Engelhardt, 2009). The study by Sigle-Rushton and colleagues (forthcoming) pointed to the sensitivity of age-specific estimates to correct model specification within a sibling fixed-effects framework. Overall, in their preferred specification, there was no age-specific trend in the effects.

These findings imply that parental monitoring, role models and disruptions around major life course transitions are important for educational and demographic outcomes. The non-linear effect of age at parental divorce, with effects being smallest during adulthood, followed by early childhood, makes selection a less likely explanation. Selection into parental divorce should be 'worse' during mid-childhood compared to both early childhood and adulthood of



children, were selection to explain all effects of parental divorce found. Also explanations based on investments into children are not supported by these findings, given that children whose parents divorced in early childhood are likely to receive the least investments over the total life course and especially during the most crucial time of child development.

### **5.3 Socioeconomic heterogeneity**

Few studies have looked specifically at variation in consequences of family structure and divorce on children of parents of different socioeconomic background. These studies have tested the hypothesis of a possible compensatory effect which posits that socio-economically advantaged families should be better equipped to buffer their children from the negative consequences in case of separation (Bernardi 2012). On the other hand, recent studies (Erola & Jalovaara, 2012) find that resident partner SES becomes more important in non- intact families, and the effect of the SES of the non-resident partner decreases. In light of increased importance of mother-child SES transfers, family structure changes might become increasingly important, as they seem to shift influence away from the father and onto the mother (Beller, 2009; Erola & Jalovaara, 2012). Children with a high SES father might therewith experience bigger losses in resources than others.

Evidence is mixed in this regard, but tends to support the hypothesis that effects are smaller for lower SES children. Bernardi and Radl (2013) find for 14 countries that children of high social origin may be more negatively affected by divorce than children from lower socioeconomic groups. Similarly, Erola & Jalovaara (2012) find that the higher the father SES, the more the child loses from a divorce, in terms of the intergenerational transfer of SES. In congruence with this perspective Biblarz, Raftery and Buccur (1996) find that non-traditional family forms decrease the likelihood of a son to attain the same profession as his father, also in single-father families.

A second group of studies finds the opposite pattern, namely, bigger effects for those with the least resources (Fischer, 2007). Similar conclusions regarding child's likelihood to enter the professions were made by Lampard (2012). Children of employed mothers resemble children from intact families more than those of unemployed single mothers in terms of educational attainment, suggesting that adversity by lone motherhood is worse for lower socioeconomic groups. Albertini and Dronkers (2009) in a study on Italy and Budoki and Dronkers (2003) in

a study on Hungary find that mothers' education moderates the negative consequences of parental break-up for children's educational attainment.

Botterman et al. (2012) on the other hand, found no interaction effect between family structure and parental SES on children's self-reported school engagement in Belgium.

Regarding the effects of re-marriage Biblarz & Raftery (1999) find that a relative positive effects (when present) of stepparents they find is largely explained by the SES of the stepparent (suggesting heterogeneity in stepfamily effects based on the SES of the stepfather). Also, the authors find that a nontraditional family structure lowers the effect of intergenerational transmission in general, which makes it more detrimental to children of high SES parents.

In sum, contrary to the hypothesis of a possible compensatory effect so that socio-economically advantaged families should be better equipped to buffer their children from the negative consequences in case of separation, much of the available evidence suggests that parental separation has the largest impact on children from high SES parents. However some studies also find the opposite pattern. Differences in the operationalization of the dependent variable the possibility of a systematic evaluation and comparison of their divergent findings. Further research seems required, therefore, on this topic to test the robustness of the findings, and to replicate it for other outcomes such as occupational status and income, and to investigate its underlying mechanisms.

#### **5.4 Ethnic heterogeneity**

Variation in the effect of family structure based on race, ethnicity or country of origin is sparse outside of the US, where literature focuses on differences between Whites, Blacks and Hispanics. Findings indicate that Black children experience weaker effects of non-intact family structure on cognitive and behavioral outcomes (Fomby & Cherlin 2007), the reproduction of family behavior (McLanahan & Bumpass, 1988), and high school drop-out rates (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994 p. 59). Sun and Li (2007) find no substantial variation between Black, White and Asian Americans in divorce adjustment or response to control variables, but find that Hispanics are overall less affected than are the other three groups. When moving to non-US studies, Dronkers and Kalmijn (2013) suggested a possible interaction effect of ethnicity and family structure on the effects of child's outcomes when

looking at ethnic minorities in 13 European countries. Levels and Dronkers (2008) found significant effects of living in separated families on math scores among ethnic minorities of origin in 13 European countries, also after controlling for country of origin. In the Netherlands, Kalmijn (2010) find that Caribbeans were somewhat less affected in terms of demographic behavior compared to whites, but similar regarding the effect of parental divorce on educational attainment, which is insignificant once controlling for parental education.

In the US literature, two explanations for ethnic variation are proposed. The first one is stigmatization. Ethnic specific norms and generally higher rates of divorce and cohabitation produce more acceptance towards divorce and limit the stigma placed on divorced families, thus reducing stress. For example, Heard (2007) found that Blacks are less likely to be affected by exposure time to single motherhood compared to Whites, but are more affected by family structure change in the short run. He attributes this to the ease of adjustment in a cultural setting where traditional unions are less normative. Second, if financial resources mediate the main effects of family structure, then initial poverty levels will dampen this (spurious) effect of dissolution. For example, the higher the intact family fathers' likelihood of unemployment, the lower the actual loss of resources in the event of divorce. Social resources might also be more tied to the mother than the father within certain ethnic groups, making them less affected by divorce (Kalmijn, 2010). King, Harris and Heard (2004) conclude that White children with low-educated fathers suffer the largest loss of social capital due to household father absence. The authors suggest this is because the variation between high and low-educated white fathers' involvement is larger than among fathers of other ethnic groups.

Again, selection patterns into dissolution may differ among ethnic groups too. For example, in the US, Lichter, Qian and Crowley (2005) find that East Asian single mothers do not differ in poverty levels from intact families, suggesting that the overall pattern of child wellbeing correlates may differ among ethnic groups.

## **6 Cross-country and cross-cohort studies**

An overview of European research would be especially valuable if it could highlight differences between countries in order to uncover the effects of macro-variables. If social acceptance of non-traditional family forms and financial resources are crucial, one would

expect considerable cross-national variation in family structure effects. Countries differ considerably in the financial consequences family structure has for families as well as in the commonality of these different family forms (Kalmijn et al., 2007). Only few studies have taken an explicitly cross-national perspective. Most of them have focused on single parenthood and parental separation.

Another way to look at the effect of societal context is to look at change over time. If acceptance of non-traditional families and selection into them play a role, one would expect changes over time as these families become more common.

### **6.1 Cross-national studies**

Several studies on international variation in the effects of parental separation found surprisingly little variation on demographic and educational outcomes. One study looked at the intergenerational transmission of divorce in 17 countries and found surprisingly small cross-country differences (Dronkers & Härkönen, 2008). The only macro-variables that explain the existing variation between countries are the divorce rate and the level of female labor force participation in each country. The rationale for the latter is arguably a smaller effect of family variables in societies where responsibilities of child-rearing are to a larger extent taken on by non-family institutions. They found no role for welfare spending, divorce laws, attitudes towards divorce and life course outcomes. Another study, also looking at the intergenerational transmission of divorce did find cross-national variation. Engelhardt et al. (1999) compared East to West Germany and concluded that while the risk of divorce for children whose parents broke up is higher compared to those from intact families in both countries, the transmission is smaller in East Germany due to higher levels of divorce overall (Engelhardt et al., 1999). The proposed explanation was that due to earlier ages at marriage and parenthood in East Germany, these demographic outcomes, related in both countries to divorce, are less affected by parental divorce in East Germany.

Ely and colleagues (2000) found no significant differences when comparing Scotland and England in terms of family structure effects on children's educational outcomes. Testing a similar hypothesis, Albertini and Dronkers (2009) found no differences in the effect of divorce on children's educational attainment between Italian regions of different religiousness and stigma towards divorce. One recent study looked at cross-national variation in the effects

of union dissolution on school performance of children using PISA data for 18 countries (Hampden-Thomson, 2013). Again, macro-level factors had a limited effect. At the same time, it was found that in countries where policies favor low-income single-parent families, the gap between children with divorced parents and those with intact families is smaller. A policy environment that favors average-income families augments the performance of all children but the gap between single parent's children and others widens.

Other studies did find considerable cross-country variation in the effects of family forms on educational outcomes. Hypothesizing that the degree of tolerance toward divorce and crude divorce rates might impact its effects on children, Kreidl (2013) found that living outside a two-parent household has more adverse effects on child educational attainment in countries where the (cohort specific) divorce rate are high. In another study, Hampden-Thompson (2009) compared the effect of single-motherhood in 16 European and North American countries. While initially the relationship was significant in most countries, once controlling for parental involvement and economic conditions of the household, only a few countries show significant negative effects of single motherhood on failing in reading understanding. Interestingly, there were substantial differences between countries in the mediating effects of parental involvement and economic conditions (which are hard to explain).

In another cross-nationally comparative European study, De Lange et al (2009) find that countries with generous child-care policies reduce the adverse effects of single motherhood on child educational scores. However, countries with generally large social insurance schemes had no or sometimes negative effects on non-intact children's test scores. Using a different set of countries, similar findings were made by Pong et al. (2003) for math and science scores. Bjarnason et al. (2012) found substantial degrees of between country-variation in the effects of family structure on life satisfaction, but no interaction with country level inequality and life satisfaction. The authors suggest that "economic deprivation relative to others affects children on a personal level that has little to do with societal-level poverty or inequality".

Houseknecht and Sastry (1996) compare child wellbeing and educational performance in West-Germany, US, Sweden and Italy by ranking them according to a "traditional family decline" index. They find that Italy indeed has the highest child wellbeing and the lowest "family decline". However, Sweden has the highest family decline, and scored just after Italy, suggesting a more complex picture regarding macro-level factors.

## 6.2 Cross-cohort studies

Similarly to theory on cross-national differences, the main arguments for differences among cohorts are stigma and law (Lansford, 2009). The level of father involvement has increased across cohorts too, arguably changing the resources children of divorce may draw upon (Amato, Meyers & Emery 2009).

Literature reviews from the United States find among their sample of studies that effect sizes declined from the 1960s to the 1980s (Amato and Keith, 1991; studies post 1960), but increased again during the 1990's (Amato, 2001). More recent reviews concluded that in the last two decades effects have remained stable over time (Amato, 2000; 2010). Several European studies found similar stability. Dronkers and Härkönen (2008) found no significant linear differences between cohorts in the intergenerational transmission of divorce, and the same holds for the German and Dutch studies of Diekmann & Engelhardt (1995), Dronkers (1997), and Engelhardt et al. (1999). In Britain, no changes are found across the year 1946-1970 regarding the relationship between family structure and child's educational outcomes (Ely et al, 1999; Sigle-Rushton et al, 2005). Similarly, Biblarz and Raftery (1999) found no significant cohort effects in the US, neither does Deding and Hussain (2002) for Denmark (the latter only browsing 1963-73). Gähler and Garriga (2013) found weak signs of cross-cohort change in children's psychological adjustment to divorce in Sweden, but these results were not significant.

In contrast to most expectations, some studies have found increased effects of divorce over time. One study looked at cohort differences in the effects on educational outcomes and observed that effects of parents' union dissolution increased (Dronkers, 1992). Dronkers (1994) also found an increased impact of living in a single mother home for children's education between 1970's and 1980s, and suggests that the decline of welfare might be an explanation. Kreidl (2013), looking at several European countries, finds that living outside a two-parent household had more adverse effects on children's educational attainment for cohorts (and countries) with high divorce rates. The author concluded that the ease of divorcing led to an increasing number of low-conflict marriages ending in divorce (cf. De Graaf and Kalmijn, 2006). Children who experience such a divorce are likely to experience more negative consequences (Amato, 2000). Bukodi and Dronkers (2003) investigated generational differences in the effect of family structure on children's educational attainment,

providing some (but not decisive) support that the less religious communist regime cohorts in Hungary were less adversely affected by divorce, but differences were very small.

The overall impression from research on variation across countries and time is that effects are relatively constant. Contextual variables such as welfare policies and social acceptance are therefore expected to play a limited role for the link between parental divorce and child outcomes. Instead, effects that are relatively invariant over countries should be studied more: the reduction in parental monitoring, family stability, and the signals parental divorce might give to children when they form their values and norms about family life. This fits with the finding that levels of female employment determine cross-national variation and reflect the extent to which monitoring is done by parents or institutions outside of the family (Dronkers & Härkönen, 2008).

## **7 Conclusion**

When looking at the overall trends of this review we can conclude that family forms are related to demographic, cognitive, educational and behavioral outcomes of children. Almost all studies show that both living in a single parent family as well as a step-family is correlated with negative outcomes. Other coherent findings have been that the changes in parenting and family relations related to family dynamics are important in understanding the association between family forms and child outcomes. But non-resident father involvement might only be effective if fathers are very committed.

Relatively stable findings are also found when looking at variation across ethnic groups with minorities being affected to a lesser extent than others. Regarding change over time in the effects of parental divorce, studies find no or a worsening change in the effects of parental divorce.

This is where the coherent findings end. Many of the topics addressed and hypotheses examined in the studies reviewed led to inconclusive and often contrasting results. Some studies find boys to be more affected but others girls, the results for heterogeneity by socioeconomic resources go in opposite directions, and above all studies looking at selection effects and other forms of endogeneity do not manage to conclude that causal effects exist of

family forms on child outcomes, but cannot confirm selection as a complete explanation either.

A very plausible cause of these inconclusive results might have to do with another general observation that can be made from the literature. Substantial heterogeneity exists in the effects of family forms on child outcomes. If such forms of heterogeneity are not well understood and taken into account, results from varying samples and contexts are likely to lead to different results. This might especially be the case for studies focusing on the causal effects of divorce. Searching for a source of variation that is uncorrelated with other characteristics often leads to the study of very specific samples (examples are sibling models where the sample is restricted to certain types of (step)families). The problems of external validity these studies have are especially problematic if heterogeneity in effects of family forms is substantial. The likelihood that results can be generalized to groups beyond the select sample studied is in that case substantially smaller.

A first step for future research would therefore be to come to a thorough understanding of how individuals are differently affected by family forms and dynamics, and how this differs across societies. More focused causal approaches are in that case likely to provide more coherent results. To proceed in finding important sources of heterogeneity, focusing on family relations and parenting seems like a fruitful avenue for future research. One conclusion that persists across studies is that family relations and parenting matter for the connection between family forms and child outcomes. Studying heterogeneity in effects by such practices and family relations can be a first valuable source of information.



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