Parental Divorce and Union Disruption among Young Adults in Sweden

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It is well established that the children of divorce are disproportionately likely to end their own marriages (Amato 1996, McLanahan and Bumpass 1988, Teachman 2002, Wolfinger 1999). Most studies of the intergenerational transmission of union dissolution deal with divorce, i.e. formal marriage disruptions, only, and focus on the situation in the United States. A comparative study of the intergenerational transmission of divorce (Diekman and Schmidheiny 2004), using FFS data, provides information for 15 countries: United States and Canada and thirteen European countries, including Sweden. The authors find that the divorce risk of children of divorced parents is on average about twice that of children of non-divorced parents. This multiplier effect is 2.03 for Sweden, but only 1.57 for the US. There was a strong negative correlation between the magnitude of this multiplier effect and the proportion of children who have experienced their parents' divorce, which indicates that low acceptance and stigmatisation of divorce aggravate the long-term consequences for children of experiencing parental divorce.

Amato (1996) has developed a model for analysing the mechanisms through which parental divorce can be assumed to influence the likelihood of offspring divorce or union dissolution. The model postulates three mediating mechanisms: 1) life course and socio-economic variables, 2) commitment and attitudes toward divorce, and 3) patterns of interpersonal behavior. The idea underlying such an explanatory model is that when young adults, who have experienced their parents' divorce, make their own life course decisions about family formation, they are likely to make choices that have detrimental effects on future union stability, i.e. partnering early, cohabit rather than marry directly etc. They are also likely to bring into their coresidential relationship attitudes, levels of commitment, and patterns of interpersonal behavior, that increase the risk of union dissolution. It may also be

important to take account of the level of conflict in the parental home (Amato and DeBoer 2001).

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

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

Studies of the disruption of marital and non-marital unions in contemporary Sweden are rare. Hoem and Hoem (1992), using data from the 1981 Swedish Family Survey, concentrated their analysis on first unions after entry into motherhood. Thus, they had information only for women, and parental divorce was not included among the explanatory variables. They conclude that the rapidly increasing dissolution risks of Swedish conjugal unions in the late 1960s and the 1970s were primarily due to ideational changes in society,

where “it became mainstream behaviour to assert one’s independence and break up a relationship when its future seems to bleak”. Gähler (1998) studied economic, social and psychological well-being among Swedish adults and children following family dissolution. He found that adults who experienced parental divorce during childhood do not report a lower psychological well-being than adults from intact childhood families. Instead the decisive factor seems to be whether or not the individual experienced severe conflict in the family of origin. There were no differences between men and women in this respect.

There are several reasons why we hypothesize that our study will find a lower multiplier effect than that found by Diekmann and Schmidheiny (2004). First of all, we analyse disruptions of both non-marital and marital unions, and our respondents come from later birth cohorts, where parental divorce was higher. Moreover, in a universalistic welfare state such as Sweden, with relatively large public and private transfers to single mothers, there are likely to be fewer serious negative consequences for children of divorce (or union disruption), compared to, for example, the US. Thus, Gähler (1998) found that the change in income was less negative for divorced mothers than for divorced non-mothers. Finally, children from non-intact families have increasingly continued to have a relationship also with their non-coresidential parent (usually the father).

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