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# Are the effects of divorce on psychological distress modified by family background?

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## ABSTRACT

This paper investigates whether an adverse family background amplifies the distressing effects of divorce. We use several waves (at age 0, 7, 11, 16, 33, and 42) of the British National Child Development Study to study the effect of divorce on psychological distress in middle adulthood (between ages 33 and 42). We measure family background with indicators such as father's social class, poverty and parental divorce. We find a pattern of significant interactions between divorce and indicators of disadvantage consistent with the idea that an adverse family background amplifies the distressing effects of divorce. The family background influence remains even if we take current socio-economic resources into account. Especially women with fewer socio-economic resources (own and parental) appear to be vulnerable to divorce.

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## 1. Introduction

In the research tradition examining the effects of life course transitions, the consequences of divorce for psychological distress take a prominent position (Amato & Cheadle, 2005; Wade & Pevalin, 2004; Willitts, Benzeval, & Stansfeld, 2004; Wu & Hart, 2002). Studies generally find that divorce leads to psychological distress. Recent research recognizes a number of sources of heterogeneity in the consequences of divorce: transitions might be modified by the quality of the relationship that one leaves (Hawkins & Booth, 2005; Kalmijn & Monden, 2006; Liu & Chen, 2006; Waite, Luo, & Lewin, 2009; Wheaton, 1990), by the level of socio-economic resources that one has (Liu & Chen, 2006; McLeod & Kessler, 1990; Wang & Amato, 2000), by the presence and age of children in the household (Williams & Dunne-Bryant, 2006), and by norms and values regarding marriage (Simon & Marcussen, 1999). The

effects of marital transitions over the life course may also differ between men and women (e.g., Simon, 2002; Williams & Dunne-Bryant, 2006).

A second strand of research in the life course literature, namely that into the "long arm" of childhood adversity, shows that people from an adverse family background suffer more psychological distress later in life (Gotlib & Wheaton, 1997). Evidence suggests that children whose parents are in lower social classes (Cheung, 2002; Gilman, Kawachi, Fitzmaurice, & Buka, 2002; Harper et al., 2002), whose parents are lower educated (Harper et al., 2002), who are from poor families (Sadowski, Ugarte, Kolvin, Kaplan, & Barnes, 1999), or whose parents divorced (McLeod, 1991; Rodgers, 1994; Ross & Mirowsky, 1999; Sigle-Rushton, Hobcraft, & Kiernan, 2005; Storksen, Roysamb, Gjessing, Moum, & Tambs, 2007), suffer more psychological distress later in life than individuals with a more advantageous family background.

The study of effects of life course transitions and of disparities in psychological distress may be integrated if an adverse family background makes people more vulnerable to the effects of transitions later in the life course, such as divorce. Family background may affect vulnerability because it influences the level of available adulthood

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resources that may help in buffering the disruptive influences of a divorce. First, people's adult social position is to a considerable extent determined by their family background. As a consequence, people with an adverse family background tend to have fewer resources to buffer the effects of a set-back. Studies showing a link between people's own socio-economic resources and vulnerability to negative life events (Liu & Chen, 2006; McLeod & Kessler, 1990; Wang & Amato, 2000) are in line with this argument, as they indirectly point to the importance of the family background. Second, people with an adverse background are less likely to benefit from social capital embodied in their parents in adulthood. Parents remain an important source of support to their adult children (McIlvane, Ajrouch, & Antonucci, 2007; Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Spitze, Logan, Deane, & Zerger, 1994), especially when their children are in need. People with an adverse family background (in terms of economic and social resources) benefit less from their parents, even in adulthood. Studies show, in particular, that people whose parents divorced, or who grew up with a single parent have less contact with both parents and can count less on their (step)parent(s) later in life (Amato, 2000; Amato & Cheadle, 2005). Parental support, in part determined by the family background, may thus lessen the negative impact of a divorce.

Few studies have investigated whether family background conditions the effect of disruptive life events, such as divorce. Moreover, these studies yielded mixed findings. Landerman, George, and Blazer (1991) find for a representative community sample in the USA that people whose parents divorced or separated during childhood suffered more from the effects of negative life events in the past year (more alcohol problems and psychiatric disorders) than people whose parents stayed together. Rodgers (1994) investigated whether an interaction effect existed between parental divorce and the experience of a number of life events on mental health in a UK birth cohort followed since 1946. He found that women whose parents divorced suffered more from their own divorce than women whose parents did not divorce. He did not find such an interaction effect for men. Storksen et al. (2007), however, presented opposite results using Norwegian data. They found no interaction effect for women but find that for men parental divorce worsens the effects of own divorce. McLeod (1991) using a sample of married people in the US did not find significant interactions between parental divorce and parental death in childhood with the effects of own divorce on mental health. Comijs et al. (2007) investigated whether childhood adversity modifies the effect of negative life events on depression in a panel study of Dutch older adults and do not find interaction effects.

These studies mainly focused on parental divorce or growing up in a single parent family. No study we are aware of links childhood socio-economic conditions to psychological vulnerability to divorce later in the life course. Furthermore, a potential interaction effect of parental divorce would be better investigated if childhood socio-economic conditions were simultaneously interacted, as there is a strong association between parental divorce and childhood economic conditions. Both in turn,

may influence socio-economic attainment and the parent-child relationship in adulthood.

We investigate the modifying effect of family background for life course transitions in more detail. The research question we pose is: To what extent does an adverse family background make people more vulnerable to the effects of a divorce? We expect that an adverse family background increases the effects of divorce on psychological distress. We put this hypothesis to the test using the National Child Development Study (NCDS), one of the large UK birth cohort studies. In addition, we test whether current socio-economic resources (educational level) can explain heterogeneity in the effect of divorce by family background. We investigate the effects of divorce on psychological distress in middle adulthood (between ages 33 and 42).

The NCDS has extensive prospective information on the childhood circumstances of respondents. Our study covers measures of socio-economic circumstances and whether the family remained intact and examines their potential interplay with divorce. Family background measures are described in more detail in Section 3.

## 2. Theory

### 2.1. Effect of divorce on psychological distress

Many studies document the negative effects of a divorce on well-being. These associations may be explained by selection mechanisms (psychologically distressed people are predisposed to union dissolution) and/or by a causal effect (divorce causes psychological distress). Two theories argue for a causal effect of divorce on distress. They both predict a negative effect of divorce on psychological well-being but they differ with regard to the causes and, in particular, the duration of the effect. The crisis model of divorce posits that divorce leads to a temporary increase in psychological distress due to the stresses and difficulties surrounding the process of divorce (feelings of loss, stress of separation, difficulties in finding new accommodation, arranging custody for children, etc.). The chronic strain or role theory perspective argues that a divorce affects people's life course so that it changes people's position to one with fewer resources and more stress (Johnson & Wu, 2002; Waite et al., 2009; Williams & Dunne-Bryant, 2006). More specifically, divorce may lead to psychological distress, because it entails the loss of social support, of social influence and control by the partner on health related behavior, and of economies of scale (Wu & Hart, 2002). Those who remarry after a divorce experience a decline in distress, as the level of resources (material and emotional) is restored (Johnson & Wu, 2002). Divorcees who remain without a partner may continue to experience higher levels of psychological distress. In our analysis we, therefore, also consider remarriage.

Family background may affect the impact of divorce on distress in two ways: first family background influences parental support that adult children may receive in adulthood and, second, it influences children's socio-economic attainment and thus the resources adult children have. Below we discuss both mechanisms. We spent most attention on the first mechanism – parental support – as

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