



Parental divorce, sibship size, family resources, and children's academic performance

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ABSTRACT

Using data from 19,839 adolescents from the National Education Longitudinal Study, this study investigates whether the effects of parental divorce on adolescents' academic test performance vary by sibship size. Analyses show that the negative effect of divorce on adolescent performance attenuates as sibship size increases. On the other side of the interaction, the inverse relationship between sibship size and test performance is weaker in disrupted than in two-biological-parent families. Trends of such interactions are evident when sibship size is examined either as a continuous or a categorical measure. Finally, the observed interactions on adolescents' academic performance are completely explained by variations in parental financial, human, cultural, and social resources. In sum, this study underlines the importance of treating the effect of parental divorce as a variable and calls for more research to identify child and family features that may change the magnitude of such an effect.

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1. Introduction

A substantial amount of research has investigated whether parental divorce or separation affects children's chances for educational success (e.g., Cherlin et al., 1991; Kurdek et al., 1995; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994; Raley et al., 2005; Sun and Li, 2001; Teachman et al., 1996). A growing section of this research has now moved beyond an earlier model that depicts the consequences of parental divorce as uniform and undifferentiated for all children (Furstenberg and Kiernan, 2001). Instead, many scholars now argue that the effect of divorce on children's educational progress may vary contingent upon children's gender (e.g., Morrison and Cherlin, 1995; Zaslow, 1988), age (e.g., Allison and Furstenberg, 1989), race and ethnicity (e.g., Sun and Li, 2007), and the number of postdivorce family transitions (Kurdek et al., 1995; Sun and Li, 2008).

Another important family feature that may potentially alter the effect of divorce, but has not yet been rigorously examined, is the number of siblings a child has (hereafter referred to as sibship size). Specifically, we expect the negative effect of divorce on children's educational outcomes to attenuate as sibship size increases, for two reasons. First, siblings may provide emotional support and comfort to one another during family crises such as parental divorce. The fact that siblings within the same family are going through this difficult process with a child may reduce the stress of divorce on the child and therefore, ease its negative effect (Kempton et al., 1991). Second, large sibship size generally dilutes valuable parental resources available for each child in a family (e.g., Blake, 1989; Downey, 1995a) and the actual amount of parental resources divided by a given sibship size varies by the overall levels of such resources in different families. For instance, the levels of financial, human, and social resources are generally lower in disrupted than in two-biological-parent families (e.g., Coleman, 1988; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994). Thus, a large sibship size (e.g., five siblings) in both disrupted and two-biological-parent

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families will dilute the same proportion of resources, but the magnitude of dilution in disrupted families will be smaller, because they have fewer resources from the outset. Based on this argument, the extent of resource disadvantages in divorced relative to two-biological-parent families should be less severe in large than in small families. Given that resource deprivation in divorced families has been identified as a key reason for academic disadvantages in such families (e.g., Astone and McLanahan, 1991; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994), the divorce effect on children's education should be smaller for children with many siblings than for their peers with just one or two siblings. Although prior divorce and sibship-size studies have separately investigated how resource deprivation in disrupted families and resource dilution in large households negatively affect children's educational progress (e.g., Blake, 1981, 1989; Downey, 1995a; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994; Park, 2008; Sun and Li, 2001; Steelman and Powell, 1989; Xu, 2008), few of these studies have integrated the interrelated effects of parental divorce, sibship size, and parental resources in their investigations. Consequently, little is known to date about whether the effect of parental divorce on children's academic progress varies by sibship size and whether such potential interactions are further related to family resources.

Using data from 19,839 adolescents from the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS), we examine the potential interaction effects between parental divorce and sibship size on adolescents' test performance. Specifically, we investigate: (1) whether the effect of divorce lessens in magnitude as sibship size increases; and (2) whether various levels of parental financial, human, cultural, and social resources mediate the interaction effects of divorce and sibship size.

2. Background

2.1. Parents' marital disruption, resource deprivation, and children's educational performance

Previous research has provided convincing evidence that childhood experience of parental divorce is likely to compromise children's chances for educational success. Compared to their peers from married, two-biological-parent families, children from single- and step-parent families are likely to have lower GPAs and test scores (Cherlin et al., 1991; Pong, 1997; Raley et al., 2005; Sun, 2001; Sun and Li, 2001), lower chances of graduating from high school or attending college (Astone and McLanahan, 1991; Biblarz and Gottainer, 2000; Teachman et al., 1996), and a lower level of educational attainment by adulthood (Amato and Keith, 1991a; Sun and Li, 2008).

One important theoretical explanation for the negative educational consequences of divorce is resource deprivation. Proponents of this perspective (e.g., Coleman, 1988; McLanahan, 1985; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994) argue that parents' financial, human, and social capitals are crucial to their children's educational success. Parental divorce, however, deprives children of such parental resources. Financially, divorce often lowers the living standards for children (Duncan and Hoffman, 1985), cuts the family's educational budget (Downey, 1995b), and increases children's chances of moving into an economically deprived (and often academically noncompetitive) school district (McLanahan and Booth, 1989). In addition, when a non-custodial parent leaves the household after divorce, the parent (usually the father) may take away some human capital (e.g., tutoring and educational advice derived from his education) which otherwise would be available to the child.

More importantly, divorce is likely to reduce parental social capital. According to Coleman (1988), social capital consists of the time and effort parents devote to their positive interactions with their children, other parents, and school personnel. Obviously, family dissolution is likely to substantially reduce the amount of time the non-custodial parent spends in monitoring and supervising the child (Furstenberg and Nord, 1985) and may even compromise the time the custodial parent spends with the child (Astone and McLanahan, 1991). Furthermore, family dissolution often reduces time that parents spend in contact with other parents and school personnel. This reduction in access to community-based social resources may also limit a family's ability to allocate external resources for educational purposes (Coleman, 1988). Although the presence of a step-parent may somewhat compensate for the reduction of family resources in the household, the extent of such compensation is often limited (Downey, 1995b).

Consistent with this resource deprivation argument, most studies indeed reported lower levels of various parental resources in single- and step-parent families than in two-biological-parent families (e.g., Downey, 1995b; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994; Sun, 2001; Sun and Li, 2001). Shortages of family resources in these nontraditional families were found either to partially or completely account for the educational disadvantages commonly found in such households (Astone and McLanahan, 1991; Downey, 1995b; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994; Sun and Li, 2001, 2008).

The resource deprivation model can be enhanced in at least two aspects. First, while family resources are obviously important for child development, such resources do not have to come exclusively from parents. McLanahan and Sandefur (1994), for instance, point out that supplementary support provided by relatives and extended family members can be particularly valuable to children during family crises. Similarly, siblings may also provide emotional protection and support to one another after parental divorce (Kempton et al., 1991). Presumably, the presence of siblings may serve as a stress buffer in postdivorce families, because it makes children feel that they are not shouldering all the stress alone. Further, siblings may serve as confidants with whom they can share their frustrations. These stress-relief functions provided by siblings may reduce the negative effect of divorce on children's educational outcomes. Despite this apparent potential for siblings to buffer divorce effects, only one study (Kempton et al., 1991), to our knowledge, has directly examined this interaction effect and reported that the presence of a sibling indeed reduces children's externalizing behavior problems in disrupted families. This study, however, used a small and non-representative sample, and therefore, cannot generalize its findings to major populations.

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