



Racial differences in the effects of parental divorce and separation on children: Generalizing the evidence to a European case

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ABSTRACT

Much American research has shown that the effects of parental divorce and single parenthood on children are weaker among African Americans than among whites. So far, this moderator effect has not been studied in other societies. Are there also weaker effects of parental divorce and single parenthood for blacks in other countries? We answer this question by analyzing Caribbeans in the Netherlands. We analyze effects of parental divorce and separation on eight outcome indicators for children in adulthood and we compare these effects between Caribbeans and whites. We show that for Caribbeans there are no effects of parental divorce on own divorce, cohabitation, leaving home, and contact frequency with the father, much in contrast to the effects for whites. For socioeconomic outcomes, however, the effects are similar for Caribbeans and whites.

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1. Introduction

Many studies have shown that children whose parents divorce fare less well than children from intact families. Negative effects are found for a range of outcomes, including well-being, behavior problems, school grades, school dropout, educational attainment, idleness, marital dissolution, and teenage pregnancy (Amato, 2000). Much current research focuses on the conditions which may increase or reduce the effects of parental divorce, i.e., a question of moderator or interaction effects. For example, authors have examined whether effects of parental divorce and family structure depend on the child's age and sex (Amato, 2000; Powell and Downey, 1997), on socioeconomic resources of fathers and mothers (Biblarz and Raftery, 1993; Fischer, 2004; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994), and on the quality of the parents' marriage (Amato and Cheadle, 2008; Dronkers, 1999; Hanson, 1999; Morrison and Coiro, 1999).

An important factor that moderates the effects of parental divorce is race and ethnicity. In their influential book on single parenthood, McLanahan and Sandefur (1994) showed that growing up with a single parent has a less detrimental effect on the fate of black (African American) children than on the fate of white children. For example, among whites, the rate of high school dropout was 2.5 times higher for children of single parent families than for children of intact families, but this ratio was only 1.8 among blacks (p. 59). In another study, McLanahan and Bumpass showed that the effect of growing up with a single parent on the risk of marital dissolution was more than twice as strong for whites as it was for blacks (McLanahan and Bumpass, 1988). A meta-analysis by Amato and Keith concluded that there are weaker effects of family structure on children's educational attainment and psychological adjustment among blacks than among whites (Amato and Keith, 1991). Black–white differences in the effect of family structure on the risk of teenage pregnancy are also present but less pronounced (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994; Wu and Thomson, 2001). An exception to these results is a recent study by Sun and Li which finds no significant black–white differences in the effects of parental divorce on school-related outcomes and children's behavior problems (Sun and Li, 2007).

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Virtually all the research on racial differences in the effect of parental divorce comes from the United States so that it is unclear how robust and how general these findings are. In other words, does the finding of smaller effects of parental divorce among blacks also apply to other societies? We try to answer this question by focusing on a European case, i.e., Caribbeans in the Netherlands. Although there is little research on racial differences outside the United States, there are two small-scale studies in the Netherlands which find no effect of single parenthood among Caribbeans for two child outcomes, i.e., school success (Hofman, 1993) and problem behavior (Distelbrink, 2000). These two studies suggest that the hypothesis may apply to the Netherlands as well.

The goal of the present paper is to compare the effect of parental divorce on children for (Dutch) Caribbeans on the one hand and for native stock Dutch persons (hereafter called 'whites') on the other hand. The focus is on adult outcomes for children in three domains: (a) socioeconomic outcomes (educational attainment and employment), (b) demographic outcomes (leaving home, marriage and family formation and dissolution), and (c) outcomes in family life (relationships with family members). For all these domains, the research literature has shown significant effects of parental divorce (Amato, 2000). Although the focus on a large number of outcomes makes the analysis complex, it also results in a stronger test of the general hypothesis than one would obtain if just a single outcome was considered.

The central independent variable is the experience of a parental divorce before age 18, the official age of becoming legally independent in the Netherlands. For most children, the experience of a parental divorce also implies living some time in a single mother household, although the duration of this experience can vary, depending on the age at which the child experiences the parents' divorce and the mother's repartnering behavior. Note that there are also children who grew up with a single, never married mother, but the number of these cases is too small for a separate analysis here.

2. Background

The goal of this paper is to compare whites and Caribbeans in the Netherlands. Dutch Caribbeans originate from Suriname and the Netherlands Antilles, both former colonies of the Netherlands. Caribbean immigrants were familiar with Dutch society and virtually all of them spoke Dutch as a second language before they immigrated. Dutch Caribbeans have a significant experience with single parenthood. Research shows that half of the Caribbean households in the Netherlands, is a single parent family (Harmsen and Garssen, 2005), which is much higher than it is for the general population (6%). In addition, Dutch Caribbeans have a higher rate of divorce (De Graaf and Kalmijn, 2006), and a higher rate of teenage childbearing than whites (Garssen, 2004).

Although there are similarities between Caribbeans in the Netherlands and blacks in the United States, the ethnic and racial context in the Netherlands is in some senses different from that in the United States. First, the concept of race seems less clearly defined in the Netherlands. For example, the words 'black' and 'white' are not often used in day-to-day language (Essed and Trienekens, 2007) and population surveys do not include questions on race or skin color.¹ There is discrimination on the basis of racial traits in the Netherlands (Bovenkerk, 1978), but discrimination is not more pronounced for the Surinamese than for the two other important minority groups, i.e., the Turks and Moroccans (Verkuyten and Kinket, 2000; Verkuyten and Thijs, 2002).

Another difference with the United States is that one of the two Caribbean groups, i.e., the Surinamese, consists of several different ethnic or racial subgroups. The largest groups are Creole Surinamese, Hindustani, and Javanese. The Creole Surinamese are descendants of slaves. The Hindustani's are descendants of contract workers who came from British India at the end of the 19th century and the early 20th century. The Javanese are descendants of contract workers from Indonesia (Choenni and Harmsen, 2007). These groups are different with respect to language use, intermarriage with whites, socioeconomic status, ethnic identity, and attachment to Suriname (Kalmijn and Van Tubergen, 2006; St-Hilaire, 2001; Van Niekerk, 2000). The Creoles are black but the two other groups would be more comparable to Asian Americans. In the Netherlands, these subgroups are often perceived as one single 'immigrant' group. With the data at hand it is not possible to check whether the results are different for the different Surinamese subgroups. As an alternative, we will replicate all the models for the Antilleans only which is a predominantly black group and which is therefore more comparable to African and Caribbean Americans.

The aim of this paper is to examine whether the effects of parental divorce on a range of child outcomes are different for Caribbeans than for whites. Following the research literature, the general expectation is that these effects will be smaller for Caribbeans than for whites. If such differences are found, explanatory questions can be a topic for further study. It is nonetheless useful to review the arguments for or against racial differences in the effects of parental divorce. In the literature, there are essentially two arguments about subgroup differences in the effects of parental divorce: an argument about the normative acceptance of divorce and an argument about parental resources.

2.1. Acceptance of divorce

One of the more common hypotheses about racial differences is based on the notion that single parenthood and divorce are significantly more common in black families than in white families (Distelbrink, 2000, 2006; Sun and Li, 2007). This

¹ This is also true in some other European countries, e.g., France (Model et al., 1999).

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