



# Family resources as mediators in the relation between divorce and children's school engagement



Nele Havermans, Sarah Botterman\*, Koen Matthijs

Centre for Sociological Research, Family and Population Studies, University of Leuven, Belgium

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 27 November 2012  
Received in revised form 7 April 2014  
Accepted 8 April 2014  
Available online 17 May 2014

### Keywords:

Family resources  
Divorce  
School engagement

## ABSTRACT

Children are increasingly growing up in non-intact families. Because the family is a vital developmental part of growing-up, parental divorce can have far-reaching effects on children. This article investigates whether divorce interferes with children's engagement in school. According to the deprivation perspective, the effect of a parental divorce on children is mediated through the availability of family resources. Structural equation models are performed on the Leuven's Adolescent and Family Study. We conclude that the parental divorce effect on school engagement is mediated by the parent-child relationship, parental conflict, and financial problems at home.

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## 1. Introduction

Demographic and social evolutions have made family structures more complex and diverse (Kalmijn, 2007). Rising divorce rates have resulted in a declining prevalence of traditional nuclear families (Wu, Hou, & Schimmele, 2008). These societal changes intersect with the day-to-day life experiences of children; as a result, more and more children live in single-parent and stepfamily households. Growing up with divorced parents is related to negative child outcomes, such as lower levels of well-being and lower academic achievement (Amato, 2010; Amato & James, 2010). The effect of divorce on children's educational outcomes is especially important to examine, as education is one of the most important social cleavages in society (Berlin, Furstenberg, & Waters, 2010). Individuals with a higher educational degree generally have more opportunities in the labor market, whereas those with a lower educational

level often attain a lower occupational status and income level (OECD, 2013).

Previous research has primarily focused on the school performance of children after divorce; they generally have lower grades and a higher risk of early school drop-out than children of married parents (Cavanagh, Schiller, & Riegle-Crumb, 2006; Ham, 2003; McLanahan & Percheski, 2008; Sun & Li, 2001). A number of recent studies look into the effects of divorce on children's non-cognitive educational outcomes (Brown, 2006; Cavanagh et al., 2006; Garg, Melanson, & Levin, 2006; Breivik & Olweus, 2008; Tillman, 2007). Non-cognitive educational outcomes relate to attitudinal, personal, and behavioral qualities at school. There is growing recognition of the importance of these non-cognitive outcomes for children, such as academic achievement, success in higher education, and employability (Heckman & Kautz, 2012; Johnson, Crosnoe, & Elder, 2001). This study focuses on the non-cognitive outcome of school engagement. The concept of school engagement not only covers behavioral aspects, such as school attendance, homework, and participation in class, it also covers more emotional and cognitive aspects, such as interest in school, motivation to study, and development of learning strategies (Dee & West, 2011). School engagement is

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +32 16 32 31 78.  
E-mail addresses: [nele.havermans@soc.kuleuven.be](mailto:nele.havermans@soc.kuleuven.be) (N. Havermans), [sarah.botterman@soc.kuleuven.be](mailto:sarah.botterman@soc.kuleuven.be) (S. Botterman), [koen.matthijs@soc.kuleuven.be](mailto:koen.matthijs@soc.kuleuven.be) (K. Matthijs).

strongly linked to dropout rates (Finn, 1989), entrance into post-secondary education, and labor market participation in adult life (Finn & Owings, 2006). Furthermore, school engagement can be considered part of children's well-being (Pollard & Lee, 2003). Looking into the mechanisms that affect children's school engagement can help researchers design targeted interventions to improve children's school experiences and decrease drop-out behavior (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). As a consequence, the focus in this study is not only on the association between divorce and children's school engagement, but also on potential mediators of the negative effects.

Some researchers claim parental divorce by itself is the most important and direct cause of negative child outcomes (Kelly & Emery, 2003). Stress and crisis theories argue that during a parental divorce children experience divorce-related stress, which leads to different negative outcomes. According to these theories, the psychological impact of a divorce itself causes lower levels of well-being and educational performance (Amato, 2000). There is, however, a need to investigate the mechanisms through which a divorce can affect child outcomes (Amato, 2010; Lansford, 2009). Identifying the processes that mediate the relation between divorce and child outcomes has particular importance for the development of interventions for children, parents, and families as a unit. In what follows, we focus on the resource deprivation perspective, which considers the loss of parental resources after divorce as the most important cause of negative post-divorce child outcomes. The main research question is: "Does the availability of family resources mediate the association between parental divorce and children's school engagement?"

This study differs from previous research in a number of ways. Firstly, the resources deprivation perspective is explicitly tested by means of structural equation modeling. This technique allows us to estimate the indirect effects of divorce through different types of family resources. Also, relationships between different types of family resources are specified. To our knowledge, this has not been investigated in the same manner yet. Secondly, this research is conducted using a broad sample of secondary school pupils in Flanders, Belgium. Belgium has one of the highest crude divorce rates in Europe with 2.9 divorces per 1000 inhabitants in 2011 (Eurostat, 2012). Based on National Registry figures, Lodewijckx (2005) estimates that a minimum of 20% and a maximum of 24% of the 0–17 year olds have experienced a divorce of their parents. The crude divorce rate of Belgium is comparable to the one in the United States (Eurostat, 2012). Belgium combines this high divorce rate with significantly lower levels of school engagement than the OECD average (UNICEF, 2010).

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Family resources and children's school engagement

The availability of family resources is supposed to be a strong predictor of the educational outcomes of children. This perspective is strongly influenced by sociologists such as Bourdieu (1977) and Coleman (1988). Coleman's

framework has been the most influential so far largely due to his emphasis on interfamily relations (e.g. McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Schlee, Mullis, & Schriener, 2009; Sun & Li, 2009). Following Coleman's interpretation of family resources, we distinguish between financial, human and social family resources.

Financial family resources – the economic means of the family, usually seen as family income – influence children's school engagement in a number of ways. First of all, financial resources have an impact on physical environment at home. Low-income families tend to have inferior housing (Amato, 2005); a high-quality, safe living environment has been demonstrated to improve learning activities of children (Brooks-Gunn, Klebanov, & Liaw, 1995). Secondly, low income households have fewer financial means to invest in the cognitive stimulation of children. For instance, low-income families generally have less reading material at home than families with more financial means. Thirdly, family income can affect a child's health. Poor children tend to have more health problems which can interfere with their engagement and performance in school. Finally, financial problems at home can deteriorate the relationships between family members. These dynamics have an important impact on children's engagement and performance in school (Hakvoort, Bos, van Balen & Hermanns; Perdue, Manzeske, & Estel, 2009).

Human family resources encompass the skills and capabilities acquired by parents, typically their educational level. Parental educational attainment has a strong impact on the cognitive environment in the family (Raviv, Kessenich, & Morrisson, 2004). Higher educated parents tend to stimulate their children more to do well in school, as they comprehend the potential gains of education more than less educated parents (Astone & McLanahan, 1991), and they are more able to help their children with school work (Guo & Harris, 2000; Harper, Marcus, & Moore, 2003).

Social family resources, the third type of family resources, refers to the relationships between parents and children and the relationship between parents. These relationships are considered vital for children's academic success and engagement in school (Bartle-Haring, Younkin, & Day, 2012; Bowen, Rose, Powers, & Glennie, 2008; Brewster & Bowen, 2004; Perdue et al., 2009). Social family resources depend on both the quantity and quality of contact between parents and children. The amount of contact between parents and children is crucial for the transmission of human and financial resources to children, but this is not the only form of social family resources that affect children's school engagement (Coleman, 1988). The strength of parent-child relationships and parental involvement with their children's school work influences children's academic success and engagement in school (Brewster & Bowen, 2004; Perdue et al., 2009; Rumberger, Ghatak, Poulos, Ritter, & Dornbusch, 1990). The quality of the relationship between parents can also influence children's school engagement. A strained relationship between parents, which mostly results in parental conflict, often coincides with lower parental involvement, less effective parenting, and a worse parent-child relationship (Kalmijn, 2013; Lansford, 2009; Musick & Meier, 2010). Furthermore, parental conflict is highly stressful for children. Through

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