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The intergenerational transmission of educational attainment among non-residential fathers and their children

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ABSTRACT

Research on the intergenerational transmission of educational attainment tends to assume that children are raised in traditional two-parent families. However, due to the rising prevalence of divorce, non-residential fatherhood is increasingly common in Western societies. This study investigates the differences in intergenerational transmission between residential and non-residential fathers because non-residential fatherhood might disrupt mechanisms that are assumed to be crucial for intergenerational transmission, such as regular contact between parents and children. In addition, we examine three factors that might explain why some non-residential fathers are better able to transmit their educational attainment than others: (1) the number of years a father lived with the child prior to divorce (exposure), (2) the age of the child at the time of divorce (timing) and (3) the year in which non-residential fatherhood started (cohort differences). The hypotheses are based on Coleman's concept of 'within-family social capital'. Our study focuses on the Dutch context and we use the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (NKPS) (birth cohorts 1960–1985) as well as register data from the System of Social statistical Datasets (SSD) (birth cohort 1995) of Statistics Netherlands. The results of the NKPS indicate that the association between the educational attainment of fathers and children is weaker for non-residential fathers than for residential fathers. However, the difference between residential and non-residential fathers is almost absent in the more recent cohorts of the SSD. We ascribe those cohort differences to an increase in shared custody arrangements since the late 1990s.

1. Introduction

Due to the increasing prevalence of divorce, non-residential fatherhood has become more and more common in Western societies (e.g., Thomson, 2014). Nevertheless, most studies on the intergenerational transmission of educational attainment are still based on the assumption that children grow up in a traditional two-parent family in which both biological parents and their children share one residency. This mismatch between reality and research is problematic because mechanisms, which are assumed to be crucial for the transmission of educational attainment, might be disrupted in families with a non-residential father. For example, research suggests that regular contact and parental involvement are important for the successful transmission of educational attainment (Coleman, 1988; Grusec & Hastings, 2014) while we know from previous studies that non-residential fathers have on average less contact with their children and are less involved in the socialization processes (Cheadle, Amato, & King, 2010; Scott, Booth, King, & Johnson, 2007). Accordingly, there are reasons to believe that

the intergenerational transmission of characteristics works differently in families with a non-residential father than in traditional two-parent families. Unfortunately, few studies have examined this hypothesis.

Previous literature has focused mostly on the main effects of divorce and there is a general consensus that a parental divorce is associated with lower socioeconomic attainment among children. Economic decline, interparental conflict and moving or changing schools have been named as explanatory mechanisms (for a review, see Amato, 2000). In this study we move away from the traditional focus on the main effects of divorce. Instead, we study interaction effects to examine the differences in intergenerational transmission between residential and non-residential fathers. This type of research is important for two reasons. First, it helps us to discover whether children in non-intact families are more likely to lose resources (Mare, 2011). Second, in data sets that are used for research on intergenerational transmission, socioeconomic characteristics are more often missing for non-residential fathers than for residential fathers. Consequently, non-residential fathers are more often excluded from the analysis and this could result in a bias, which

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becomes more severe with the increase in the number of non-residential fathers in society (Tach, 2015). Research is needed to learn more about this potential bias. Our first research question is: *How does the intergenerational transmission of educational attainment differ between non-residential biological fathers and residential biological fathers?*

We focus in this study on families in which the father left the household due to a divorce or separation. We exclude widowed families from the analysis because we want to focus on a comparison between residential and non-residential fathers who are potentially present in the life of a child. Furthermore, we exclude families in which the father never lived together with the child because children in these families face very different family dynamics; e.g., they never experienced a divorce between their biological parents. Another reason to exclude single-mother families are the demographic differences: single parenthood from birth onwards is more common among very young mothers and certain ethnic groups (Loozen, Pool, & Harmsen, 2014). The small sample size of the widowed and single-mother families does also not allow us to conduct a separate analysis with those groups. We refer to the families in which the father left the household due to a divorce or separation as ‘non-intact families’. Non-intact families are compared to traditional two-parent families, which we name ‘intact families’ from now on.

Only a few studies have examined the differences in intergenerational transmission between parent types before (Biblarz & Raftery, 1993; Erola & Jalovaara, 2017; Kalmijn, 2015b) and their results are mixed: Some studies show that the association between the socioeconomic characteristics of fathers and adult children is weaker for non-residential fathers than for residential fathers (Biblarz & Raftery, 1993; Erola & Jalovaara, 2017) while others report no significant difference (Kalmijn, 2015b). This could be the result of inconsistencies in outcome variables; Kalmijn investigates the transmission of educational attainment while the others focus on occupational status. The transmission of educational attainment might have a stronger genetic basis which could render non-residential fathers a larger role. However, it might also be that the underlying reasons for the mixed results are more complex and driven by differences in for example geographical context. In any case, the number of studies is still small and hence, more research is needed to get insight in the role of coresidence in the intergenerational transmission process and to obtain a better understanding of the contrasting results in existing studies.

One of the shortcomings of the present literature is that it tends to compare non-residential fathers to residential fathers as if those are homogeneous groups. Instead, one would expect that there are important differences within the group of non-residential fathers due to which some non-residential fathers are more successful in the transmission of educational attainment than others. Post-divorce aspects, such as contact between fathers and children after divorce, as well as pre-divorce aspects, focusing on the time the father and child still lived together, might be relevant in this respect. For practical reasons we focus in this study mainly on the latter. Non-residential fathers in our research were initially residential fathers and some lived with their children until they were teenagers while others left the household shortly after birth. To capture this heterogeneity we differentiate within the group of non-residential fathers based on the number of years a non-residential father and child lived together (exposure). In addition, we examine the age at which the child lived with the father. It is possible that not the number of years in coresidence is crucial for the intergenerational transmission but rather the presence of the father during crucial moments in the socialization process, such as during the transition from primary to secondary education (timing) (Mare, 1980; Sigle-Rushton, Lyngstad, Andersen, & Kravdal, 2014; Tieben, De Graaf, & De Graaf, 2010). Our second research question is: *What is the role of father-child coresidence, measured by the length and the timing of this residency, in the intergenerational transmission of educational attainment among non-residential fathers and their children?*

Finally, we examine whether the process of intergenerational

transmission among non-residential fathers has changed over time. It is well known that visitation schedules, custody arrangements and co-parenting have become more common over cohorts (Bakker & Mulder, 2013; Poortman & Van Gaalen, 2017; Statistics Netherlands, 2009) and that these types of post-divorce arrangements are beneficial for paternal involvement and the frequency of contact between parents and children after divorce (Bjarnason & Arnarsson, 2011; Nielsen, 2011; Seltzer, 1998; Spruijt & Duindam, 2009). Hence, we formulate a third and last research question: *How did the differences between residential biological fathers and non-residential biological fathers in the intergenerational transmission of educational attainment change across cohorts?*

To answer the research questions, we use the first wave of the Netherlands Kinships Panel Study (NKPS) (Dykstra et al., 2005) and the System of Social statistical Datasets (SSD) of Statistics Netherlands in which register data and survey data are combined (Bakker, Van Rooijen, & Van Toor, 2014). Both data sets contain detailed information on the residential history of respondents and the educational attainment of their biological parents and are therefore suitable to answer our research questions. By analyzing these two data sets, we will be able to compare the older cohorts in the NKPS (children born between 1960 and 1985) to the more recent cohort in the SSD (children born in 1995). Moreover, both data sets are situated in the Dutch context which is a useful setting to investigate our hypothesis on the timing of coresidence due to the highly stratified educational system. Children are selected into academic and vocational tracks at age 12 when the influence of parents is usually still relatively strong (Tieben & Wolbers, 2010; Tieben et al., 2010).

2. Theory and previous research

This section discusses relevant theories on the role of coresidence in the intergenerational transmission of educational attainment. First, Coleman’s concept of ‘within-family social capital’ is used to explain why differences between residential and non-residential fathers could be expected (2.1). Next, we use the same theoretical concepts to explore why some non-residential fathers are more successful in the intergenerational transmission than others (2.2).

2.1. Residential versus non-residential fatherhood

To start, it is important to acknowledge the relevance of shared genes. The idea that biological relatedness is vital for the intergenerational transmission of educational attainment because intelligence is, at least partly, hereditary, is widely accepted and confirmed by several studies (Erikson, Sundet, & Tambs, 2013; Jencks, 1972; Nielsen, 2006). Based on this argument, we formulate an elementary hypothesis, that we use as a starting point for our research: *There is always a positive association between the educational attainment of biological fathers and their children regardless of whether they lived together during childhood (H_1).*

A sociological point of view suggests that biological relatedness in itself is not enough to transmit educational attainment to new generations and that there are reasons to expect that non-residential fathers differ from residential fathers in the transmission process. Parents have several forms of capital, such as financial and cultural capital, which enables them to increase their child’s educational success (Bourdieu, 1990; De Graaf, 1987). Due to the extensive welfare state in the Netherlands, low-cost higher education, and educational subsidies to children of low-income parents, the financial barriers in the educational system are reduced to a minimum. Hence, financial capital does not play a major role in the educational attainment of children in the Netherlands (De Graaf, 1986; De Graaf, De Graaf, & Kraaykamp, 2000). In contrast, previous studies indicate that cultural capital, which could be defined as a combination of preferences, linguistic skills, norms, behavior and (cultural) knowledge (Bourdieu, 1990), is positively associated with the educational attainment of a child (De Graaf, 1988; De

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