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Long-term effects of parental separation

Impacts of parental separation during childhood on the timing and the risk of cohabitation, marriage, and divorce in adulthood

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the long-term effects of parental separation during childhood on crucial partnership-related outcomes later in life, such as first cohabitation, first marriage, and first divorce, in Germany. To address this, we differentiate between a risk effect i.e. having a specific partnership-related event outcome later in life, and a timing effect i.e. having the event *earlier* or *later*. We also focus on age effects, analyzing the impact of parental separation at specific ages during childhood. We applied event history models to a sample of 2174 individuals taken from the second and third wave of the German *pairfam* data (Panel Analysis of Intimate Relationships and Family Dynamics).

Our empirical results indicate that parental separation works as a strong 'push effect' particularly on the timing of leaving the parental home and moving-in together with a partner. However, this push effect on cohabitation does not apply to marriage. Here we find no effects of childhood transitions on marriage rate. With regard to the transition rate to divorce, our data confirm the well-known hypothesis of the intergenerational transmission of divorce. We find that those who experienced a parental separation have a lower probability of staying married. Looking at specific age effects, we find that experiencing a parental separation before age seven is an influencing factor in regard to timing of a first cohabitation as well as on the risk of having an own divorce later in life.

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1. Introduction

A number of studies have shown that the living arrangements of children due to parental separation, divorce, and remarriage have become increasingly diverse in many societies (Amato, 2005; Brown, 2006; Cavanagh, 2008; Feldhaus & Huinink, 2011). The number of children growing up with their biological parents still married is decreasing, and the number of children experiencing parental separation, divorce, or remarriages and therefore growing up with a lone parent or stepparent is increasing. Many studies focus on investigating the effects of these biographical childhood transitions on child well-being. Looking at previous findings, studies either analyze children's short-term adjustment due to a biographical transition during childhood (e.g. Amato, 2006; Hetherington, 2006; Walper & Beckh, 2006; Osborne & McLanahan, 2007), or they concentrate on long-term effects, such as the

intergenerational transmission of divorce or the impact on educational attainment, delinquency, health problems, etc. (e.g. Amato, 2006; Bumpass & Sweet, 1972; Diekmann & Engelhardt, 2008; Li & Wu, 2008; Schulz, 2009; Teachman, 2002, 2003; Wagner, 1997; Wolfinger, 1999). This paper focuses on the long-term effects of parental separation on crucial partnership-related outcomes later in life: the first cohabitation with a partner, the first marriage and divorce.

Looking at previous research, many studies analyze these dependent variables with different longitudinal datasets and in different regional settings. With reference to these previous findings, there are two reasons why we focus again on these dependent variables from a life course perspective. First of all, the majority of previous research uses some kind of event history analysis, and in the methodological literature of event history analysis it was emphasized that it is useful to differentiate between a 'timing effect' or a 'risk or probability effect' (Bernardi, 2001; Brüderl & Diekmann, 1995). Looking at the 'timing effect', this means that articles aim to find an effect on having a specific event (such as age at first intercourse, age at cohabitation or marriage)

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earlier or later, which means at younger ages compared with a control group. The second one, the 'risk or probability effect', is the strategy of investigating whether a certain type of biographical transition occurs later in life or not, such as being married or being divorced. Both effects are very different in their interpretation and very important in regard to life course research. Looking now at previous research we see that in many studies where event history analysis is used both effects, the timing and the risk effects, are dependent from each other, which means that due to the type of parametric modeling a specific parameter determines both, the timing and the risk effect. This leads to the situation that this kind of modeling does not allow to differentiate *exactly* between the timing and risk effect. Using, for example, the standard log-logistic model (or other parametric models), which is often applied for this kind of research, it is not possible to separate both effects exactly. But with reference to a study done by Brüderl and Diekmann (1995) we will show in this paper that the differentiation between a *timing* and a *risk or probability effect* is very useful and can be done in an appropriate way by using some specific kind of event history analysis. Thus, our first motivation is a methodological contribution to differentiate more exactly between the timing and the risk effect and how it can be done by using event history analysis.

The second motivation is based on a content-related deficit in regard to this kind of research. The data we used here are from the German Family Panel (Huinink et al., 2011). This rich dataset expand our opportunities to analyze the first cohabitation, first marriage and divorce, depending on the experience of a parental separation during childhood. While the hypothesis of the intergenerational transmission of divorce is well documented (see e.g. Amato, 1996; Bumpass & Sweet, 1972; Diekmann & Engelhardt, 1999; Dronkers & Härkönen, 2008; Glenn & Kramer, 1987; Martin, Mills & Bourdais, 2005; Pope & Mueller, 1976; Wagner, 1997), less is known whether the age of the child at parental divorce matters for later partnership specific outcomes, or not. There are contradictory results in previous research (Amato, 1996; Diekmann & Engelhardt, 2008; Teachman, 2003). The data used here gives us the opportunity to control for this kind of age effects which gives us a better understanding of path dependencies between different age-periods and outcomes in later life.

2. Parental separation and partnership-related outcomes later in life: previous findings, theoretical remarks, and hypotheses

Following the theoretical approach of life course research, biographical decisions and the current biographical status of an individual are the results of many influencing factors and interdependencies. Beside impacts at the individual level (such as dispositions, preferences, beliefs), at the micro level of social relationships, the meso level of corporative actors and the macro level (political systems, law, norms, culture), the emerging life course is endogenous (Elder, 1994; Huinink & Feldhaus, 2009). This means there are path dependencies in an individual's life course, which result from the developed personality arising from former experiences and foregone decisions that cannot be easily redirected. The question of analyzing the impacts of childhood experiences on partnership-related outcomes later in life is embedded in this question of endogeneity and path dependencies in the life course.

With regard to this, the general argument is that children who experienced parental separation during childhood have a higher propensity to develop personal attitudes, traits, and behavior patterns that are in turn associated with a certain kind of specific outcomes on partnership formation processes later in life, such as early cohabitation or non-marital relations, or divorce (Amato & Keith, 1991; Furstenberg & Teitler, 1994; Kiernan & Hobcraft, 1997; Schulz, 2009; Teachman, 2002; Wu & Martinson, 1993).

Looking at the transition to cohabitation, in most northern European countries, as in Germany, cohabitation is becoming more important and the common way to progress in a relationship. The importance of marriage is declining, and more children are being born to cohabiting but unmarried parents. This is particularly the case for people from the former East Germany (Konietzka & Kreyenfeld, 2002; Perelli-Harris et al., 2012). Thus in Germany, non-marital cohabitation is a widespread phenomenon in the partnership formation process, while direct marriages (leaving the parental home due to a marriage) are more frequent in the United States compared with Germany, where they are on the decline (Andersson & Philipov, 2002). Previous findings show that children from divorced parents are more likely to show a negative subjective well-being which often comes along with negative outcomes in personality (such as *aggression, noncompliance, withdrawn and distancing behavior, anxiety, depression, emotional insecurity, early sexual intercourse*; Amato, 1993, 1996, 2006; Brown, 2006; Cavanagh, 2008; Cavanagh & Huston, 2006; Davies & Cummings, 1994; Hetherington, 2006; Kiernan & Hobcraft, 1997; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2000). A significant number of children of divorced parents suffer for many years from psychological and social difficulties (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2000). Furthermore, being affected by a parental separation at a younger age increases the risk for further biographical transitions (such as a repartnering, a second separation, etc.) during childhood, and children have to cope with these new situations. In addition, increasing conflict between parents as well as between parents and their children can be a pushing factor to escape from the parental home and cohabit with a partner much earlier. Thus, on the one hand, there are some good arguments that children of divorced parents leave the parental home and cohabit with a partner much earlier. On the other hand, there are some arguments that parental separation leads to the situation where children, particularly at older ages, postpone their decision to leave the parental home because they have to support their mother or father (or a sibling) in this critical situation. However, empirical findings from the USA, Great Britain, and Canada, offer support for the first hypothesis as they have indicated that individuals experiencing parental separation leave the parental home earlier, cohabit with a partner much earlier, and marry prematurely (Kiernan & Hobcraft, 1997; Martin et al., 2005; McLanahan & Bumpass, 1988). Therefore, as cohabitation becomes a normal part of the partnership formation process, we hypothesize that parental separation will have no effect on the intensity of cohabitation (*cohabitation risk hypothesis*). With regard to the timing, we hypothesize that cohabitation will start earlier for people who were faced with parental separation during their childhood. Furthermore, given the fact that women are more likely than men to cohabit at an earlier age (Kley & Huinink, 2006), we hypothesize a positive timing effect for women. The same is the case for people from the former East Germany as they are less traditional than people from the former West Germany (Kley & Huinink, 2006) (*cohabitation timing hypothesis*).

Looking at the relationship between parental separation and marriage, previous findings offer a variety of mediating factors. Empirical results show that parental separations during childhood are more related to *liberal, non-traditional attitudes* (toward early sexuality or non-marital cohabitation), to *lower marital commitment*, or to more *egalitarian, non-traditional gender roles* (Axinn & Thornton, 1996; Kiernan & Hobcraft, 1997; Teachman, 2002; Schulz, 2009). Children may internalize or develop these personality traits and attitudes either because their parents showed this behavior, or they built it up due to the experience of certain kinds of biographical situations, such as parental separation or divorce. As a result, we hypothesize that people who have experienced these childhood transitions will show a higher rate of being unmarried later in life (*marriage risk hypothesis*). On the other hand,

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