

Gender differences in the long-term economic consequences of parental divorce

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Abstract

This paper reports tests of the broad hypothesis that there are gender differences in the long-term impact of parental divorce on the offsprings' achievement motivation and achievement behaviors. The hypothesis was tested with a sample of approximately 700 white men and women who wrote adequate protocols for the Thematic Apperception Test that was given in the 1976 survey of Americans' mental health. Principle inferences were that, holding control variables constant, parental divorce (1) raises the achievement motivation of daughters but does not lower it for sons, (2) lowers the earnings of daughters who work but has no effect on the earnings of sons. Through marriage, the offspring of divorce are able to attain the family income of the offspring of an intact family. © 1998 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

More than thirty years ago, psychologists (Veroff et al., 1960) hypothesized that divorce has asymmetric consequences for the achievement motivation of children: weakening it for sons and strengthening it for daughters. The argument underlying their hypothesis rested on assumed role model effects. In a divorce, typically the mother gets custody of the children. This implies the loss of a son's role model. In families where the father is the prime wage earner, the loss of the role model also deprives a son of his model for achievement. If the mother assumes the function of prime wage earner, a daughter's model for achievement is strengthened.

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However these role model effects are also extant in the case of a father's death. Only in the case of divorce can they be exacerbated by resentment of the father. For a boy, loss of his model for achievement coupled with resentment can dampen his positive motivation for success. For a girl, resentment of the father 'can reinforce a need for feminine independence and self-reliance' (Veroff, et. al., p. 27.)

The purpose of this paper is to test the hypothesis of asymmetric consequences of divorce on the long-term economic success of offspring. Two broad hypotheses are tested: first, that there is a gender difference in the impact on achievement motivation, and second, that there is a gender difference in the impact on achievement behaviors. The paper adds to the behavioral findings of previous research by estimating the impact of parental divorce on components of the adult offspring's reported family income; i.e., on own earnings and on the spouse's contribution to family income, if any.

The paper would not have been possible without the 1976 survey of Americans' mental health (Veroff et al., 1982) which gathered detailed economic as well as psychological data. All survey respondents were asked questions about parental family structure, educational attainment, labor force participation, personal income and family income. About one-third were given a Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), the instrument used to measure motivation.¹ Although the achievement motive (McClelland et al., 1953) was the focus of Veroff's hypotheses, the affiliation and power motives (Heyns et al., 1958; Winter, 1973) are necessary to explain outcomes for family income. The sample on which the paper is based is comprised of about 700 men and women.²

A search of the literature on divorce revealed that, although there had been studies of gender differences in the long-term economic impact of parental divorce, none had controlled for the effects of divorce on achievement motivation. A meta-analysis of thirty-seven studies conducted from 1950 through the 1980s (Amato and Keith, 1991) found that men and women whose parents were divorced experienced a lower material quality of life than adults whose biological parents were continuously married and that, in general, there were no significant gender differences in the decrement.³ The studies variously measured material well-being by income, assets held, housing quality, welfare dependency, and perceived economic strain. The decrement was less in the 1980s than in earlier time periods and more severe for whites than for blacks.

In the discussion of their results, Amato and Keith noted that their findings were contrary to studies of children which tend to show that the boys in divorced families experience more problems than do girls. It seems likely that the Veroff et al. hypothesis was grounded in the studies of children.

¹ A TAT consists of imaginative stories told in response to word or picture cues. In this survey, six pictures were shown to the respondents. See Appendix A.1 for a description of the pictures and score reliabilities.

² The regression program dropped missing cases. Therefore, the number of observations varies somewhat among the reported regressions. The regressions were based on white respondents only, due to the small number of blacks in the nationwide sample. The regressions were limited to respondents who gave adequate responses to the TAT protocols. The definition of adequate response is given by Veroff, Atkinson, Feld and Gurin, *op.cit.*

³ An exception to the general gender neutral impact was a stronger negative impact on the level of education of women than men. However, this exception 'is consistent with previous research showing that noncustodial fathers are more likely to maintain contact with sons than with daughters (Hetherington et al., 1982)'... and 'less willing to finance the education of daughters than sons (Wallerstein and Corbin, 1986)' (Amato and Keith, p. 56).

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