

## Parental divorce and gender equality in Sweden

This analysis tests the impact of parental divorce on children's gender role attitudes. We examine two theories: "Role-restructuring" predicts that children raised with one parent will develop more egalitarian attitudes because the parent undertakes the roles of both parents; while "father-absence" predicts that this would only be true for mother-only families. Children growing up with fathers will be more traditional, because it is fathers who are more likely to reinforce traditional roles.

### **Theoretical background**

During recent decades the proportion of children experiencing a parental divorce or separation has increased dramatically. Recent estimates for Sweden show that only 60 percent of all 16-year old Swedish children live with both their biological parents (Statistics Sweden, 2007, Table 4:2b). This is mainly due to family dissolution; only a very few children were born into a single-parent family or experienced parental death. This development is viewed as problematic, because there is much evidence that parental divorce is linked with negative short- and long-term outcomes for children, e.g. psychological adjustment, social relations, marital quality, own divorce, and educational attainment (Amato & Keith, 1991b; see Amato & Keith, 1991a; Amato, 2001 for meta-analyses).

Much more rarely discussed or studied, however, is how parental divorce might affect children's views on gender equality, as well as their actual gender-related behaviour. This is surprising, given that there are theoretical reasons to assume such a link. According to social learning theory, children acquire sex-typed behaviour by imitating role models (Stevenson & Black, 1996). One salient model is the same-sex parent. Children, then, learn that mothers and fathers perform different tasks. Consequently, when these children grow up and form couples they "tend to replicate the families that they experienced as children" (Goldscheider & Waite, 1991:114). Two theories suggest why this might be. According to "role-restructuring" theory, specialization by gender is more difficult in single-parent families, as parents must perform a wide range of tasks, including ones that are non-traditional for their gender. Hence, children in one-parent families, irrespective of parent's gender, should be less likely than children in two-parent families to "learn" to distribute household chores by gender. According to the "father-absence" theory, in contrast, the impact of growing up in a single-parent family depends on the parent's gender. Fathers are more likely than mothers to stress conformity to traditional gender roles. Hence, the single father family should instil more traditional gender attitudes and behaviour in children than growing up with a single mother, with children from intact families in an intermediate position (Kiecolt & Acock, 1988).

## Parental divorce and gender equality in Sweden

There are few empirical studies of the association between childhood family structure and gender attitudes. Kiecolt & Acock (1988) find that whereas men and women who grew up with divorced single mothers have more liberal attitudes toward women in politics than their counterparts growing up in intact families, no difference is found when attitudes toward female employment and views on 'proper' gender role behaviour among boys and girls are considered. A more recent study finds no childhood family structure difference in gender attitudes for men (Wright & Young, 1998). For women, however, differences according to family structure are substantial. Women growing up with single mothers report significantly less traditional gender attitudes than women from intact families whereas women growing up with single fathers report significantly more traditional gender attitudes. These findings partly (for women) support the father-absence hypothesis. Wright and Young also find support for the role-restructuring hypothesis, because having grown up with an employed mother, i.e. a non-traditional female role model, reinforces gender equal attitudes, in particular for men and women who grew up in single mother families.

### **Data**

We test these theories using data from the second wave of the Swedish Young Adult Panel Study (YAPS), conducted 1999/2003. We examine attitudes towards gender equality in the public sphere of work, the private sphere of the family, and a combined measure. YAPS is a mail questionnaire survey augmented with register data on vital events up to the end of 2006. The first wave was carried out in 1999 and a third will be conducted in 2009, with the Survey Unit of Statistics Sweden in charge of the field work. With an overall response rate of 70 per cent, the second round provides information on 2,816 persons, 1,588 women and 1,228 men born in Sweden in 1968, 1972, 1976 and 1980, including a small sample of young women and men (347 respondents) with at least one parent born in either Poland or Turkey. YAPS provides information on plans, expectations and attitudes regarding family and working life, including gender-role orientation, histories of childbearing and partnerships, as well as information about current situation and background characteristics, especially childhood family structure.

### **Measures**

In our models we will use three dependent variables, namely (i) gender equality in the public sphere, (ii) gender equality in the family, and (iii) a combined-sphere indicator addressing ideal work-family balance for families with pre-school children. Our main explanatory variable is *childhood family structure*. We distinguish between respondents growing up with 'both parents', 'mother only', 'father only', 'mother and stepfather' and 'other'.

## Parental divorce and gender equality in Sweden

In our preliminary analysis, we include as independent variables: gender, age (22, 26, 30 and 34), ethnicity (Swede, Polish-origin, Turkish-origin), and partnership status (single, cohabiting, married). In later analyses, we will add measures of own education (primary, lower secondary, upper secondary, post secondary), economic activity (study, full-time work, part-time work, other), income, and parental status.

### Results

Clearly family structure affects the likelihood of holding egalitarian attitudes, effects that differ by the gender of the respondent (Table 1). Those who grew up with their mothers, either with their biological fathers as well, a stepfather, or no father, do not differ among themselves for either men or women. However, those who grew up in a single-parent family headed by their fathers show strong differences, similar to those found by Wright and Young (1998). Sons with this experience are more than twice as likely to express egalitarian attitudes as those who grew up with both parents; daughters with this experience are barely half as likely to do so. We will test this difference in later analyses and will also explore why those who grew up in ‘other’ family structures are also more egalitarian.

**Table 1. Determinants of holding egalitarian attitudes in 2003 (odds ratios)**

	men	women
<b>FamStructure</b>		
Both parents	1	1
Mother-only	1.091	1.139
Father-only	2.049 ^^	0.566 ^^
mum+stepdad	0.992	1.021
Other	1.907	2.511 *
<b>Birth year</b>		
1968	1	1
1972	1.867 **	0.766
1976	1.692 *	0.861
1980	1.213	1.102
<b>Ethnic background</b>		
Swedish	1	1
Polish	0.882	1.088
Turkish	0.282 ***	0.428 **
<b>Partner status</b>		
single	1	1
cohab	0.792	0.689 *
married	0.561 **	0.576 **

\*\*\*  $p < .001$  tested against  
 \*\*  $.001 > p > .01$  holding  
 \*  $.01 > p > .05$  traditional  
 attitudes

^^ difference between men and women significant at .01

Other results are mostly as expected. The married express the most traditional views, the single are the most egalitarian and those who are cohabiting are intermediate. The results of ethnic background are also as expected, with no significant differences between those of Swedish and Polish backgrounds, but more traditional attitudes among those of Turkish background (especially males). The results for birth year are more puzzling, but may reflect the fact that only the middle two cohorts include those of Polish or Turkish origin. We will investigate this result.

## References

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