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The long-term consequences of parental divorce for children's educational attainment

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Abstract

Background: In this paper we study the long-term consequences of parental divorce in a comparative perspective. Special attention is paid to the heterogeneity of the consequences of divorce for children's educational attainment by parental education.

Objective: The study attempts to establish whether the parental breakup penalty for tertiary education attainment varies by socioeconomic background, and whether it depends on the societal context.

Methods: Data are drawn from the first wave of the Generations and Gender Survey, covering 14 countries. We estimate multi-level random-slope models for the completion of tertiary education.

Results: The results show that parental divorce is negatively associated with children's tertiary education attainment. Across the 14 countries considered in this study, children of separated parents have a probability of achieving a university degree that is on average seven percentage points lower than that of children from intact families. The breakup penalty is stronger for children of highly educated parents, and is independent of the degree of diffusion of divorce. In countries with early selection into educational tracks, divorce appears to have more negative consequences for the children of poorly educated mothers.

Conclusions: For children in most countries, parental divorce is associated with a lower probability of attaining a university degree. The divorce penalty is larger for children with highly educated parents. This equalizing pattern is accentuated in countries with a comprehensive educational system.

Comments: Future research on the heterogeneous consequences of parental divorce should address the issue of self-selection into divorce, which might lead to an overestimation of the negative effect of divorce on students with highly educated parents. It should also further investigate the micro mechanisms underlying the divorce penalty.

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