

## **Does father absence hurt more for boys than girls? Evidence from parental deaths.**

Anne Reneflot<sup>1</sup> & Svenn-Erik Mamelund<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Norwegian Institute of Public Health

<sup>2</sup>Work Research Institute

### **Introduction**

The potential negative consequences of family disruption have attracted considerable research interest. Many investigations have shown that children from divorced families have poorer educational outcomes than those raised by both biological parents measured by for example grade point average, years of education, and educational level attained (e.g. Jonsson and Gähler 1997; Steele et al, 2010; McLanahan and Sandefur 1994; Breivik and Olweus 2006 ).

A long held view is that family disruption is particularly harmful for boys due to father absence and the loss of a same-sex role model, especially if it takes place at an early age (McLanahan and Bumpass, 1988; Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan, 2004). Studies addressing gender differences have provided mixed and weak results (Krein and Beller, 1988; Amato and Keith 1991). This could in part be due to difficulties in isolating the effect of father absence because most fathers remain some contact with their non-resident children. Another way to examine father absence is to study children who experience parental death. Further, if the absence of a same-sex role model were potentially negative to boys, a similar negative effect of mother-absence would be expected for girls. By studying bereaved families we have the opportunity to study both.

To our knowledge very few studies have used this approach to examine the potential harmful effect of the loss of a same-sex parent. One exception is a study by Lang and Zagorsky (2001), who examined the effect of paternal and maternal death on various child outcomes including educational outcomes. They performed separate analyses for girls and boys. They found no effect on educational outcomes, but paternal death was associated with a lower probability of getting married in men. However, the study by Lang and Zagorsky was based on a very small sample (n=573) and they were not able to take into account the child's age at the time of parental death and the surviving parents marital status.

In this study, we use Norwegian register data covering all children born in 1974-79 to examine whether the loss of a same-sex parent is more negative in terms of poorer educational outcomes than the loss of a parent of the opposite sex. We also examine whether the child's age at the time of parental death and the surviving parents marital status moderates this relationship.

## **The parental loss perspective**

The loss of a household parent is assumed to be associated with various deficiency mechanisms (McLanahan and Bumpass 1988). Socialization explanations argue that the loss of a parental figure, usually the father, leads to a socialization deficit in one-parent families. Parents represent important gender role models, and children learn essential interpersonal skills by observing the interaction between the two parents. Lack of exposure to this kind of role modelling may lead to insufficient development of interpersonal skills needed to be successful in school.

Parental divorce is assumed to be more harmful to boys than girls due to the loss of a same-sex role model. Further, early disruption is associated with more disadvantage than later since important socialization processes take place in early childhood. Consistent with the socialization explanations, Krein and Beller (1988) found that the loss of a household parent had the largest negative effect in preschool age and was more negative for boys than girls. Overall, however, the evidence of early disruption and gender differences has been weak and inconsistent (Amato and Keith 1991).

The adverse effects of father-absence could potentially be offset by the presence of other male adults, like a step-father. Step-fathers can replace the missing male role model. Accordingly, children living in a step-parent family would be better off than children in one-parent families would. A step-father could, however, be less inclined to invest in their step-children both due to the lack of a genetic endowment (McLanahan and Sigle-Rushton 2004) and of clear norms regulating relationships with step-children (Cherlin 1978). So far studies examining the effect of remarriage find that children in stepparent families differ little from children in one-parent families in their educational outcomes (DeLeire and Kalil 2002; McLanahan and Sandefur 1994).

## **Data and methods**

### *Data*

Data covering the period up to 2003 are drawn from different Norwegian administrative registers. By means of a unique personal identification number assigned to each Norwegian resident it is possible to link individual records between different data sources and to link children to their parents.

While the data include all children born in 1974-79 (293 387 children), the analysis is restricted to the sub-group of children whose parents were married to each other 1 January the year after the child was born, and where one of the parents died before the child turned 16 years (6117 children). In addition, the following individuals were dropped from the analysis: Individuals who had either died or emigrated before 2003, and individuals with missing information about one or both parents.

Further, the data contain information about the parents' fertility and marital histories until 2003. The fertility histories include the dates of birth of all children for whom the person is registered as a father or mother. The marital histories include marital status for the persons 1 January each year in the period 1974-2003. In addition, there is information on both the child's and the parents' highest educational level attained.

Register data have obvious advantages. The large number of cases makes it possible to study very small groups (e.g. children living in bereaved families). Further, unlike retrospective surveys, register data are not hampered by underreporting (Juby 1999). One obvious limitation with Norwegian register data, at least for children born before 1987, is that we cannot study children of cohabiting parents.

### *Analysis*

We use logistic regression models to examine the relationship between the loss of a same-sex parent and the odds of attaining higher education. Some variables that may influence both family structure and education are included as controls.

First, we estimate a set of models to examine how the potential educational disadvantage of children in non-intact families is conditioned by the sex of the deceased parent, and whether the children's educational outcomes vary depending of whether they lost a same-sex-parent or an opposite-sex parent.

Second, we examine whether the potential negative effect of loosing a same-sex parent is moderated by the child's sex, age at the time of parental loss, and the educational and marital status of the remaining parent.

### *Variables*

Children's educational attainment is measured in 2003 when the children were aged 24-29 years. In the analysis it is only distinguished between the odds of taking (some) higher education and not.

The key independent variable is the family experience up to age 16, where we make a distinction between children who lost a same-sex parent by death and those who lost an opposite-parent by death. Age at disruption is the child's age at the time of the death of a parent. In addition, we include control for parents' education, the parents' age at the birth of the child and the number of siblings.

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