

## **Childhood family structure and family formation in early adulthood in Norway**

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### **EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

Parenthood is perhaps the most important demographic transition in young adulthood. The timing and context of this event hold important implications for the life trajectories of both parents and their offspring. Entering parenthood early or outside a union is associated with later disadvantage like poorer educational outcomes, and economic disadvantage. Given this disadvantage, both to politicians and social scientists it is important to disentangle the different factors that influence timing and context of family formation.

Childhood family structure is one factor found to be associated with when and how men and women enter parenthood in Western countries. British and American studies find that children who grow up with both biological parents are less likely to enter parenthood early (McLanahan and Bumpass, 1988; Kiernan, 1992; Cherlin, Kiernan, Chase-Lansdale, 1995; Kiernan and Hobcraft, 1997; Ermisch, Francesconi and Pevalin 2002) and to have children outside marriage (McLanahan and Bumpass, 1988; Kiernan, 1992; Cherlin, Kiernan, Chase-Lansdale, 1995) than those who do not. Less is known, however, of whether this observed relationship prevails in other Western countries. Knowledge from countries with different welfare regimes might shed important light on the mechanism operating behind this observed association.

In this paper I ask if children who have experienced family disruption during childhood (before age 16) are more likely to enter parenthood early (before age 23) and outside a union. I take advantage of rich Norwegian register data covering all children born in 1974-79. The contribution of this study is three-fold. First, we expand previous research by including the remarriage of both natural parents. In most studies children's families equals to children's households. There are, however, good reasons for including children's non-resident families as well. Many children live at various times with both parents, and even if most children live with their mother, many keep regular contact with their non-resident fathers. Through this contact fathers can make important contribution to their children's welfare. Hence, also the remarriage of a non-resident parent can influence both the amount of parental resources (time and money) spent on the child and represent a source of stress. Moreover, by including only the remarriage of a resident parent we miss the total number of family transitions children actually experience during childhood. The adverse effect of family disruption may cumulate over the number of family transitions children experience during childhood.

Second, the register data contain full histories of the respondents' educational attainments and activity. By including these two variables we are able to examine whether some of a possible

association between family structure in childhood and family formation behaviour in adulthood is mediated through education. It is reasonable to assume such a link, because children in non-intact family structures have poorer educational outcomes than those living in an intact family during childhood (Jonsson and Gähler, 1997; Reneflot, 2007), and timing of first birth is found to be associated with enrolment and educational attainment (Kravdal, 1994).

Third, Norway makes an interesting case due to a combination of relative high divorce rates, and relatively low economic inequality. Single parent families are entitled to generous welfare benefits<sup>1</sup>. The wage structure is less dispersed, which means that most have relatively high incomes. Finally, all education, even higher education, is free so in principal there is no economic hinders to higher education in Norway. Hence adolescent in non-intact family might experience less push out of home for economic reasons and have other opportunities into early adulthood, like education, more readily available for them in Norway than in the US and GB.

The analysis is based on data up to 2003 from the Norwegian register data. Data consist of all children born in 1974-79 (293 387 children). The data contain information on the fertility, marital, and educational histories of the men and women and their parents up to 2003 (updated annually). The analysis is restricted to children whose parents were married to each other at the time the child was born or who married the subsequent year. The reason for excluding children of non-married parents is that we cannot separate between children born to single and cohabiting mothers.

The men and women are followed from age 17. Very few births occur before that age. The observation is censored in 2003 at age 25-29. I employ discrete time-hazard regression models in the analysis (Allison, 1984). The dependent variable is the conditional probability (measured in log-odds) of having the first child in year  $t$ /having the first child outside any partnership in year  $t$ , given that the individual was at risk at the start of year  $t$ . Separate models are run for men and women. In addition to the key independent variable, childhood family structure, In addition the following background variables are included: parents' education, and the parents' age. Both were measured at the time of the respondent's time of birth. Parents' education is measured by the parent with the highest educational attainment. Further, I controlled for the respondent's age. Finally, I included controls for the respondent's educational activity (enrolment) and educational attainment.

For the two outcomes, three models are estimated. The first model is a bivariate model examining the association between childhood family structure and the dependent variables (early childbirth and having a child outside any union). The second model is based on an equation that controls for family characteristics. A comparison between the two models allows us to determine whether the observed relationship between childhood family structure and adult family formation

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<sup>1</sup> The most important component is the transitional allowance, which is meant as temporary support to single parents who cannot support themselves. In addition, single parents are entitled to a supplementary rate of the universal child allowance (corresponding to having an additional child), they may also receive an education and child care benefit, and they are given priority in admittance to public day care centre. Finally, in most municipalities, there is also a reduced day care price for families with low income.

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behaviour is due to differences between non-intact and intact families in regard to these characteristics. Finally, the third model adds controls for the respondent's enrolment status and education. This is done to examine to what extent the effect of family structure on family formation mediate through education. In the models who examine early childbearing, only enrolment is included.

The analysis reveals that family disruption in childhood, either caused by death or divorce, is associated with family formation behaviour in early adulthood and especially for women. The association prevails even after controlling for family background characteristics, and educational attainment and status. Both to men and women only a modest effect of family structure is mediated through educational attainment and enrolment status.

To women, both divorce and losing a parent by death is associated with a higher propensity to have children early and outside a union for women. Further, I find an effect of remarriage for women and not for men. A mother's remarriage is associated with an adverse effect for women from divorced families. Since most children remain with their mother following parental divorce, this does not add any support to the economic deprivation explanation which hold that children would benefit from remarriage through increased household resources. This could, however, lend support to the stress perspective. Changes in daily routines and potential friction with a step-father could act as a push factor for daughters into the early assumption of adult roles. Another possible interpretation could be reached from the socialization perspective. Mothers who remarry have probably been more active searching for a partner than single-mothers, and during a process of dating potential new partners mothers could serve as role model to their daughters.

Finally, the fact that even in a country with relatively low economic inequality the association between childhood family structure and family formation behaviour in early adulthood prevails, suggests that economic deprivation is not the driving force behind the observed relationship.