

# Parental separation and children's educational attainment: Heterogeneity and rare and common educational outcomes

## **Abstract:**

While the association between parental separation and children's lower educational achievements is a robust finding, the evidence regarding its heterogeneity across social groups is mixed. Some studies show that socioeconomically advantaged families manage to shelter their pupils from the consequences of parental break-up, while others find the opposite. We contribute to this debate and sketch a structural theory of the heterogeneity of the consequences associated to parental separation on children's educational outcomes. We argue that the separation penalty and its heterogeneity across social backgrounds differ depending on the selectivity of a given educational outcome. In particular, the smallest penalty will be observed for very rare and very common outcomes. The rarity of an educational outcome depends on pupils' social background, which might produce the observed heterogeneity even if the separation penalty itself is equal across parental social background.

We investigate the heterogeneity of the consequences of separation by parents' education in Spain on two children's outcomes. One outcome (enrolment in tertiary education) is rare for children in low educated families, while the other (retaking in primary and secondary education) is rare for children in highly educated families. The results show that the penalty associated to parental separation for retaking a year in primary and secondary education is larger for children of low educated mothers. No heterogeneity is found for enrolment in tertiary education.

**Key words:** parental separation, diverging destinies, heterogeneity, rare and common educational outcomes

## **1. Introduction**

When compared to children raised in two-parent families, children from non-intact families tend to fare worse across a host of short- and long-term indicators of achievement and wellbeing (Amato 2000, 2001; Dronkers/Harkonen 2008; McLanahan et al. 2013). The negative consequences of parental separation on children include short-term increases in physical and psychological distress and decreases in interpersonal wellbeing and longer-term reductions in relationship stability, educational achievement and economic security

(Amato 1994). The associational evidence of the nexus between parental union dissolution and children's lower achievements is quite robust across countries and time. It was on the basis of this evidence that McLanahan's (2004) formulated her famous 'diverging destinies' thesis, suggesting that family instability that is more common among low educated mothers critically contributes to the disparities in children's access to resources and in their later socio-economic outcomes.

More recent studies have turned to the investigation of whether the consequences of family disruption for children differs across social groups, asking whether some groups are better equipped than others to deal with them. Some studies show that socio-economically advantaged families manage to buffer their offspring from the negative consequences of union dissolution (Albertini/Dronkers 2009; Bukodi/Dronkers 2003; Gratz 2015; Fischer 2007; Lampard 2012), while other studies find the opposite, namely that children from socio-economically advantaged families suffer a larger separation penalty (Kalmjin 2010). It has variously been suggested that the divide in the literature is due to the different contexts or cohorts studied, the choice of different child outcomes, the way some key variables such as parental social origins/union dissolution are operationalized and/or the measurement of the differentials in relative or absolute terms (Bernardi/Boertien 2017a; Härkönen et al. 2017).

This paper makes three main contributions to the literature on the consequences of parental union dissolution. First, it tests one of the core argument in McLanahan's (2004) 'diverging destinies' thesis. In her original formulation, for such a thesis to hold there should be a negative socio-economic gradient in family instability (i.e. lower socio-economic groups should be more likely to experience family disruption). Moreover, family instability has to entail a penalty in terms of children' educational and socioeconomic attainment. An additional factor generally overlooked by previous studies is that even if the two previous conditions hold, family structure might not contribute to inequality of opportunity if the separation penalty is larger for children of socio-economically advantaged families, when compared to children from the lower social strata (Bernardi/Boertien 2017b). This is because, if the family instability penalty is larger for the higher socio-economic groups, opposite processes can cancel each other out. The effect on socio-economic inequalities due to the larger prevalence of family disruption among the lower strata could be off-set by the larger penalty in terms of the educational and socioeconomic attainment that is experienced by children of higher social strata. Additionally, one might note that the diverging destinies thesis would also hold in a situation where there is no socio-economic gradient in family instability but the size of the separation penalty is larger for children of lower socio-economic strata<sup>1</sup>.

Investigating the heterogeneity of the family disruption penalty represents, then, a salient test of the diverging destinies thesis. In the present article, we analyze the existence of a separation penalty in Spain and its heterogeneity across socioeconomic groups. The second contribution is that we assess the existence of a penalty on two different educational outcomes in Spain: retaking one year in primary and secondary education and enrollment in tertiary education. What is relevant here is that one outcome represents an ed-

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1 Note that this specific situation was not discussed in McLanahan's (2004) original formulation of the 'diverging destinies' thesis.

educational success (enrollment in tertiary education) and one represents an educational failure (retaking). Previous work on the heterogeneity of the consequences of parental separation for children outcomes by parental socio-economic status have indeed shown that the results change depending on the outcome considered. We will argue that the distinction between outcomes in terms of success and failure might be crucial to understanding the inconsistency of findings in the literature on the heterogeneity of the penalty of parental separation.

Finally, this study focuses on a largely under-investigated context in this literature: Spain. Research on the consequences of parental separation is mostly concentrated on the US (Biblarz/Raferty 1999; McLanahan/Sandefur 1994; Augustine 2014) and on Northern or Continental Europe (Sigle-Rushton et al. 2005; Mandemakers/Kalmijn 2014; Bernardi/Boertien 2016; Engelhardt, Trappe/Dronkers 2002; Gratz 2015; Gahler/Palmtag 2014; Gahler/Harkonen 2014). In contrast, while empirical research on Southern European countries is still rare (for an exception see Albertini/Dronkers 2009). The Divorce Law in Spain was enacted only in 1981, relatively late compared to other western countries, and still two decades after the law was passed, the divorce rate was, as in other Southern European countries, well below that of other western countries. Divorces remained rare until the early 2000s when the Express Divorce Bill was passed, making legal separation easier and faster. After 2005, the rate of separation increased so rapidly that today, only a decade later, Spain resembles a Nordic European country more than a Southern one in terms of the divorce rate. Moreover, other institutional factors, such as the lower cost of higher education in Spain compared to other countries might reduce the differentials across family background of the family instability effect on pupils' transition to tertiary education<sup>2</sup>. Our study therefore also contributes to answering the question of how institutional features might buffer the consequences of family instability.

## 2. Background

### 2.1 *The union dissolution penalty in children education and its heterogeneity across socio-economic groups*

Research interest in how family structures are related to children's life chances has been extensive. In particular, literature addressing the consequences of parental separation on children outcomes has flourished in the last decades (Amato 2000, 2001; Blossfeld et al. 1995; De Graaf/Kalmijn 2006; Härkönen/Dronkers 2006; Härkönen et al. 2017; Hoem 1997; Jalovaara 2003; Kalmijn 2010; Lyngstad 2004; Matysiak et al. 2014). The experience of parental union dissolution has been shown to be associated with short-term increases in physical and psychological distress and decreases in cognitive development and interpersonal wellbeing, and longer-term reductions in relationship stability, educational achievement and economic security (Amato 1994). The reduction in time and resources

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2 In this article when we use the term "effect" without a strict causal interpretation. We discuss below issues related to the endogeneity of parental separation.