

# Intergenerational Transmission of Divorce in Sweden, 1902-2015

Martin Bergvall and Maria Stanfors

Centre on Economic Demography, Lund University, Sweden

[Martin.Bergvall@ekh.lu.se](mailto:Martin.Bergvall@ekh.lu.se)

[Maria.Stanfors@ekh.lu.se](mailto:Maria.Stanfors@ekh.lu.se)

*Background:* It is well established that having experienced parental divorce as a child is related with various adverse outcomes later in life (Amato, 2000; Wolfinger, 2005). It is also well documented that children who experience parental divorce are more likely to divorce themselves (Amato, 1996; Bumpass & Sweet, 1972; Bumpass et al., 1991; Wolfinger, 2005). This association is called the *intergenerational transmission of divorce* (ITD), and has been shown to exist in various countries and contexts (Diekmann & Schmidheiny, 2008). There is no clear evidence of a causal mechanism for the ITD, but several studies have argued that marital distress and divorce might be passed from generation to generation through economic or social factors. Many factors, including less economic resources, less emotional stability, and the experience of stigma attached to divorce, have been suggested as important links between parental divorce and reduced marital stability among children in adult life. With respect to these factors, there are reasons to believe that intergenerational transmission of divorce (ITD) would decrease over time. However, few studies have applied a longer historical perspective on ITD or studied the link over more than two generations.

As extant research is limited to shorter modern periods, it is very much an open question as to whether the link between parental divorce and own marital instability has long tap roots or changed over time, and whether it is transferred over multiple generations. As divorce becomes more common, stigma weakens, and as societies modernizes, the welfare state compensates for lack of economic resources and social support, and thus the negative consequences experienced by children of divorce abate. Studies on change in the ITD nevertheless show mixed results. Wolfinger (1999, 2011) found that the rate of transmission of divorce reduced by 50 percent in the USA for the period 1973-1996. Other studies have found no trend in the rate of transmission in the USA (Diekmann & Schmidheiny, 2008; Li & Wu, 2008; Teachman, 2002), with Li & Wu (2008) arguing that the trend is a result of methodological issues from right-censoring. Still, extant studies on trends in the ITD all investigate the period after 1950, primarily covering the period after the 1970 when divorce rates had increased to high levels. There is thus a need for studies using a longer time perspective in order to understand the intergenerational transmission of divorce during the transition from a low to a high divorce regime.

Moreover, almost all previous studies have only studied transmission of divorce from parents to their children, while the mechanisms used to explain the ITD could work over multiple generations. In a small survey study, Amato and Cheadle (2005) finds that divorce in the first generation increases the likelihood of divorce in both the second and the third generation, even when the divorce occurred when the grandchildren were not born. It is based on a sample from the USA and has not been studied further. There is thus need for more extensive studies of the transmission of divorce over more than one generation. Further, some studies find that the relationship is stronger if the woman in a marriage experienced parental divorce (Amato, 1996; Amato & Cheadle, 2005), while no difference between the sexes is found in other (Wolfinger, 2005). This ambiguous finding might be explained by changing gender roles over time (in particular, female independence) and more extensive welfare state policies supporting single mothers and children, but no previous study has looked further into this.

*This paper (aim and contribution):* We investigate the relationship between own divorce and parental as well as grandparental divorce in Sweden over the course of the twentieth century when the country industrialized and transitioned from a low to a high divorce regime. We use individual-level longitudinal data for Sweden covering multiple generations between 1902 and 2015. While previous studies have shown that the ITD exists in Sweden (Diekmann & Schmidheiny, 2008; Salvatore et al., 2018), we are able to extend on the research literature more generally by studying three important aspects of the ITD. Has the rate of ITD changed over time, and if so, did it increase or decline? Is the relationship between parental divorce and own divorce similar or different according to gender, more specifically, is it stronger for women compared with men? Does ITD extend over generations, through a link between grandparental divorce and own (i.e., grandchild) divorce?

Access to longitudinal data, linking individuals to parents and grandparents, allows us to study multiple generations and how the transmission has changed over time, generally, and depending on if the woman or the man experienced parental divorce. Data on Sweden are well suited for such a study on divorce. The country adopted no-fault divorce laws in 1915 and is often seen as a forerunner in family and household behavior. Although no-fault divorce was made legal already in 1915 in Sweden, there were relatively few divorces until the 1940s, and thus divorce was highly stigmatized. Higher socioeconomic status was needed to overcome the economic and social barriers to divorce, though this changed in the 1940s (Stanfors & Sandström, 2019). Sweden did not transition to a high divorce regime until 1974 when unilateral divorce was introduced. The development of divorce rates in Sweden occur against the backdrop of rapid industrialization and modernization during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and high levels of female labor force participation and a large expansion of the welfare state since the 1960s.

*Theoretical considerations and previous research:* Several factors have been suggested in earlier studies as being important links between parents' divorce on the one hand and the increased risk of marital dissolution for their children on the other hand. Partly, the relationship is due to selection, in that parents and children share common traits that make them more likely to divorce. This can be both genetic and social, though it is hard to disentangle these two (D'Onofrio et al 2007). According to Amato (1996), three different mechanisms mediate the transmission of divorce. First, experiencing a parental divorce as a child is associated with growing up with less economic resources, typically in single mother households, which in turn leads to poorer socioeconomic outcomes. Children of divorced parents might also receive less attention and time investments from their parents during childhood, which affects their educational performance and social skills. Second, children who experience divorce may be less optimistic regarding relationship success, and have less negative attitudes towards divorce. These children may have a less idealized and romantic perspective on marriage when they grow up than children from intact marriages. It might also be that they see divorce as viable solution to marriage problems and feel less pressure to stay in an unsatisfying marriage. Third, children who experience parental divorce beget less social skills to maintain relationships, and are more likely to exhibit interpersonal behavior that increases the risk of divorce, such as anger or inability to communicate in relationships. These factors might explain why children of divorced parents are more likely to divorce themselves. All of these factors might depend on the age of the child at the time of divorce. A younger child might suffer more economically and emotionally than an older child, since they have to spend more time with a dissolved family (Wolfinger, 2005). Further, if these factors affect the risk of divorce for children, it might also be that they also affect grandchildren. Both socioeconomic status and interpersonal behavior might be inherited across more than one generation, which would be associated with the risk of divorce.

We expect the mechanisms explained above to be different over time as stigma towards divorce change and remedial welfare policies are introduced. Marriages in the past were different from marriages in contemporary society (Philips, 1988). Not only in terms of family sex roles but also in terms of economic behavior as households often produced rather than consumed. Economic or social reasons for divorce are not the same today as in the past and the mechanism of ITD is expected to have changed over time. Moreover, increasing divorce rates have accompanied a decrease in the stigma surrounding divorce, as well as changes in society that would decrease the adverse outcomes experiencing a parental divorce (Wolfinger, 2005). As divorce has become more common, the negative outcomes for children of divorce should decrease. If divorce was inherited through attitudes toward divorce, we would expect that the ITD decreases over time and parental divorce should become less explanatory for children's divorce.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the expansion of the welfare state, particularly in Sweden. Divorce might run in the family because of the economic consequences of divorce such as less time and investment in children; however, the development of the Swedish welfare state reduced the need for economic resources for divorce – an expansion that specifically helped women and children financially – and increased the labor market options for women. This also meant that investment and care for children was taken care of outside the family, which would decrease the adverse effect of coming from a dissolved family.

*Data and method:* We use data from the Scania Economic-Demographic Database (SEDD) (Bengtsson et al. 2018). These data has individual-level longitudinal information from five parishes and one town in Southern Sweden. Individuals are followed across generations 1902 until 2015, which means that we can follow them and their children as well as their grandchildren. Up until 1968, the SEDD includes information on demographic events and change in occupation. Data are drawn from population registers, vital events registers, poll-tax registers, and annual income registers. After 1968, the SEDD has been linked to Swedish register data managed by Statistics Sweden (SCB), which allows us to follow individuals and their children even if they migrate to other parts of Sweden. Thus, the data after 1968 do not suffer from stayer bias. This linkage allows between historical and contemporary data allows us to follow multiple generations of marriages and divorces.

We use Cox proportional hazard model to analyze the transmission of divorce between generations. In different specifications, we estimate the risk of divorce dependent on parental and grandparental divorce, while including demographic and socioeconomic covariates. This allows us to estimate the duration-specific risk of divorce. The method is often used in studies on divorce and in previous research on the subject. The structure of our data also allows us to avoid the issue of right-censoring raised by Li & Wu (2008) in their critique of Wolfinger (1999).

*Preliminary results:* Preliminary results indicate a decreasing trend in the ITD, for both men and women, and that divorce in the first generation increases the risk of divorce in both the second and third generation. Results indicate that the negative consequences of parental divorce declined with the stigma of divorce as it became more common and as the welfare state expanded with support for women and children, not least for single mothers and their children.

*Selected references:*

- Amato, P. R. (1996). Explaining the intergenerational transmission of divorce. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 628-640.
- Amato, P. R. (2000). The consequences of divorce for adults and children. *Journal of marriage and family*, 62(4), 1269-1287.
- Amato, P. R., & Cheadle, J. (2005). The long reach of divorce: Divorce and child well-being across three generations. *Journal of marriage and family*, 67(1), 191-206.
- Bumpass, L. L., & Sweet, J. A. (1972). Differentials in marital instability: 1970. *American Sociological Review*, 754-766.
- Bumpass, L. L., Martin, T. C., & Sweet, J. A. (1991). The impact of family background and early marital factors on marital disruption. *Journal of family issues*, 12(1), 22-42.
- Diekmann, A., & Schmidheiny, K. (2013). The intergenerational transmission of divorce: A fifteen-country study with the fertility and family survey. *Comparative sociology*, 12(2), 211-235.
- D'Onofrio, B. M., Turkheimer, E., Emery, R. E., Harden, K. P., Slutske, W. S., Heath, A. C., ... & Martin, N. G. (2007). A genetically informed study of the intergenerational transmission of marital instability. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 69(3), 793-809.
- Li, J. C., & Wu, L. L. (2008). No trend in the intergenerational transmission of divorce. *Demography*, 45(4), 875-883.
- Phillips, R. (1988). *Putting Asunder: A History of Divorce in Western Society*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Salvatore, J. E., Larsson Lönn, S., Sundquist, J., Sundquist, K., & Kendler, K. S. (2018). Genetics, the rearing environment, and the intergenerational transmission of divorce: a Swedish national adoption study. *Psychological science*, 29(3), 370-378.
- Teachman, J. D. (2002). Stability across cohorts in divorce risk factors. *Demography*, 39(2), 331-351.
- Wolfinger, N. H. (1999). Trends in the intergenerational transmission of divorce. *Demography*, 36(3), 415-420.
- Wolfinger, N. H. (2005). *Understanding the divorce cycle: The children of divorce in their own marriages*. Cambridge University Press.
- Wolfinger, N. H. (2011). More evidence for trends in the intergenerational transmission of divorce: A completed cohort approach using data from the general social survey. *Demography*, 48(2), 581-592.