The impact of family composition on union stability among families with children in Sweden

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Abstract

Partnership stability has decreased substantially in Europe, even among families with children. In parallel, new family forms in which not necessarily both parties of a couple are the biological parents of all the children, have become more common. In this paper, we seek to shed more light on the impact of family composition on the dissolution risk among families with children. We focus on Sweden given its strong emphasis on gender equality also with respect to parenting, and generous family support system. We analyze data from the Young Adult Panel Study, conducted in 1999, 2003 and 2009. Piecewise constant proportional hazards model is our tool of analysis. Our results reveal that stepfamilies have an elevated breakup risk compared to intact families but also to blended families. The slightly higher disruption risk seen among blended families, as compared to intact families, is not statistically significant. Stepmother families and where both partners have children from previous partnerships but no joint children have the highest breakup risks. Among non-intact families, those with both joint children and the woman's children in the household are the least likely to break up, followed by blended families having also the woman's and the man's children living with the couple. Thus the results suggest that family compositions have a differential impact on family disruption, and it is important to distinguish by the gender of the stepparent as well as between step- and blended families.

Introduction

In the past decades, family patterns have changed substantially in industrialized countries. The new era has been known as the Second Demographic Transition (van de Kaa 1987, Lesthaeghe 2010). Beside new trends in family formation and fertility, the stability of partnerships has decreased greatly, even among families with children. In parallel, new family forms in which not necessarily both parties of a couple are the biological (adoptive) parents of the children, have become more common. In such families, children live with only one of their biological parents and her/his new partner (a stepparent), while retaining more or less frequent contacts with the non-coresident biological parent. As shown in the demographic and the psychological literature (for an overview see e.g. Martin et al. 2011), stepfamilies face rather high risk of union dissolution, due to the tensions linked to them (i.e. tensions may arise between the children and the stepparent, diminishing in the longer run the couple's relationship quality). Given the strongly gendered nature of the mother and the father roles, which are at least partly acquainted by the stepparent, tensions may differ (in strength and nature) by the gender of the stepparent. Yet, relatively little is known about whether and how the stepfamily composition influences the risk of family dissolution, especially in non-Anglo-Saxon countries.

Moreover, couples in some stepfamilies become biological parents, resulting in an even more complex family composition. In these so-called blended families, there are two categories of children; those who live with both of their biological parents (the "intact family"), and those who co-reside with only one of their biological parents and a stepparent. Also the adult parties in blended families belong to different categories; one living with own (biological/adopted) children only, and the other having a double role, that of a biological- and of a stepparent. Family disruption among blended families, and possible differences linked to the gender of the parent who also is a stepparent in the relationship, has hardly been studied in Europe.

In this paper, we seek to shed more light on the impact of family composition on the dissolution risk among families with children, in a European context. We focus on Sweden, given its strong emphasis on gender equality also with respect to parents' engagements with their children, statutory joint custody for children in case of family breakup increasingly involving shared physical custody (i.e. alternating residence for the children), and the generous family support system, considered to enhance child well-being and to mitigate the costs of children for parents (Oláh & Bernhardt 2008). Seen also as forerunner of the Second

Demographic Transition, non-traditional family forms have been more common and socially accepted in Sweden than in many other European countries. Hence, differences in dissolution risks between different types of families should be less of a consequence of some kind of social stigma or of prevailing traditional norms than of the structure and related functioning of the families themselves.

[Sections on the theoretical framework and previous studies to be written]

Data and methods

In this paper, we analyze data extracted from the Swedish Young Adult Panel Study (YAPS), conducted in 1999, 2003 and 2009, in which women and men born in Sweden in 1968, 1972, 1976 and 1980 were included. YAPS is a mail questionnaire survey, designed by Professor Eva Bernhardt at Stockholm University, and with Statistics Sweden in charge of all fieldwork. The Study is augmented with register data on vital events, currently up to 2010. YAPS provides information on attitudes regarding family and working life, histories of childbearing and partnerships as well as information about "current" situation (i.e. at survey waves) and background characteristics. Our working sample consists of co-resident couples who have children living with them at the 2003 wave, for whom we have information in the 2009 wave (777 couples). We study whether the family dissolved in the period between 2003 and 2009. The event of interest (i.e. breakup) has been experienced by 11.2 percent of the overall sample.

Information about partnership breakup, if any, children born between the two waves and marriages entered come from the 2009 wave (for births, marriage and divorce the survey information were cross-checked with register data, but this was not possible for separations). Some background information has been provided in the 1999 wave, while data on partnership type and length in 2003, the family composition and couple characteristics with respect to educational attainment, ethnic background and religiosity come from the 2003 wave. Piecewise constant proportional hazards model is our tool of analysis. We observe respondents from the time of the 2003 wave until the dissolution of the partnership or until censoring at the 2009 wave. Duration since the 2003 wave is our time variable, divided into pre-selected time-intervals; the dissolution risk is considered to be stable within an interval but may vary across intervals.

Our main explanatory variable is the family structure, as time-varying covariate. We use two ways of operationalization. The first, called *family type* is quite simple. Here we distinguish between 'intact families' in which the couple are the biological parents of all

children in the household, ‘stepfamilies’ in which only one member of the couple but not the other adult, is a biological parent for all the children living with the couple, and ‘blended families’ in which the couple are biological parents for some of the children in the household, but only one member of the couple is a parent for the rest of the children. The second way of operationalization, called *family structure* is more detailed. Here we distinguish between ‘intact’ families with only shared children, ‘stepmother’ families where the children are the man’s biological offsprings, ‘stepfather’ families in which the children live with their biological mother but are not related to her partner, ‘blended & stepmother’ families where the couple lives with their biological children and the man’s children from previous partnerships, ‘blended & stepfather’ families that include the couple’s joint children and the woman’s children from other unions, ‘stepmother-stepfather’ families where both partners have own biological children living with them but none of the children are the couple’s shared children, and ‘blended & stepmother-stepfather’ families in which the couple lives with shared children and their own biological but not joint children from previous relationships. In the first set of models we use the simple family type variable, thereafter we run models with the more complex family structure variable. It is important to point out that the ‘intact families’ category does not only include respondents with no previous co-residential union experience. In fact, about 30 percent of respondents in that category had other partnership(s), hence experienced a breakup, and some also had children in previous unions.

In the analyses, we control for birth cohort, respondent’s sex, her/his family background meaning whether growing up in an intact family, the partner’s year of birth, whether any member of the couple has non-resident children, the length of the union at the 2003 wave, the division of childcare tasks in the union at the 2003 wave, and couple’s characteristics with respect to ethnicity (simply distinguishing between whether or not living with a partner of Swedish/Nordic origin) that also implies (lack of) homogeneity in norms and values, religiosity (distinguishing between couples where both members are very religious and all others, the former expected to have much more stable unions), and highest educational attainment (independently of whether the man, the woman or both have that level of education) as higher education and consequently higher socioeconomic status is expected to reduce breakup risk. These are fixed covariates, with the couple characteristics measured at the 2003 wave. In addition, in the model we include time-varying covariates to control for the impact of i) the union type, as cohabiting unions can be transformed into marriage but not the other way around, ii) whether there is an adolescent in the household (i.e. a child aged 13-19 years), and iii) age of the youngest child, specified as a categorical variable. We know from the rich

literature of family dissolution that children usually have a "protective effect" on the partnership while they are very young, but less so later on. In fact, the teen-ages are considered to be related with substantial tensions, which may weaken relationship stability among the adults.

Table[1] 1 shows descriptive statistics for the variables in the analyses. As we have selected couples with children in the household in 2003, the vast majority of our working sample belongs to the oldest birth cohorts who were 30 and 34 years old then. Only one-fifth of the working sample were aged 22 and 26 years in 2003. Since men start family formation at later ages than women, male respondents are about one-third of our sample. Two-thirds of respondents grew up with both their biological parents. About 14 percent had a partner of non-Nordic origin, and only 4.5 percent of couples were very religious. As for highest level of education, it was upper secondary school for nearly 60 percent of couples, and about one-third had tertiary education. Most couples (about 85 percent) were living together for more than 3 years in 2003, which is also less surprising given our focus on couples with children. As for our family type and family structure variables, we see that intact families are the vast majority (nearly 85 percent of the total exposure time), but also blended families are less rare (about 13 percent of the total exposure time), usually having the woman's children living with the couple beside shared children. Stepmother, 'stepmother-stepfather' as well as 'blended and stepmother-stepfather' families are much more rare than stepfather families or 'blended and stepmother' families. The reason may be that the more stable unions that involve a stepparent become blended families rather soon, whereas the less stable ones break up relatively quickly. Nearly half of the partnerships were non-marital cohabiting unions and somewhat more than half were marriages. Given the relatively young age of respondents, living with adolescent in the household[2] was rather rare. As for age of the youngest child, we see that having very young children (below age 2) was not uncommon, many of these births transforming the previous stepfamily into a blended family.

[1] Tables are presented at the end of the paper.

[2] Unfortunately we do not have information whether a child has moved elsewhere between survey waves. Yet, this is likely to be less problematic given substantial parental involvement in their children's life even after parental break-up as well as the high prevalence of shared physical custody in Sweden (SCB 2014).

Results and discussion

First we have run models with only the main explanatory variable, thereafter adding the controls one by one (stepwise model fitting). Here we only present the first and the last (full) models.

As Table 2 shows, families with stepchildren and no shared children have a much higher risk (six times as high according to Model 1 without control variables, and more than four times as high according to Model 2) to dissolve than intact families. Blended families have much lower dissolution risk, yet nearly twice that of intact families, but the difference is not significant. Compared to stepfamilies however, blended families are significantly more stable; their dissolution risk is less than half of that for stepfamilies. This indicates the strong value of shared (biological) children as union-specific capital reducing the risk of breakup. Alternatively, the improved parenting skills gained by the (former only-)stepparent upon entering biological parenthood lead to a better relationship also between him/her and the partner's children, reducing tensions in the family and hence improving its stability. Another explanation relates to the ambiguous status of stepfamilies (Sweeney 2010) which in itself can produce tensions as stepparents' role is rather vaguely defined, if at all, both socially and legally. Having own biological child (i.e. a shared child in the stepfamily) would greatly reduce such ambiguousness and hence the risk of breakup. Finally, a shared child can strengthen feelings of belonging to this family among family members as they all are related to that child (even the stepchildren who gained a half-sibling due to the birth of a shared child). This may be the case even though it has been shown that children with a half-sibling have lower school grades than those without or with only full siblings (Turunen 2013a).

As for the control variables, we find that marriages are about half as likely to dissolve as are cohabiting relationships, in line with previous findings. Having a partner of non-Nordic origin increases the breakup risk somewhat (significant at the 10 percent level), while neither religiosity nor educational attainment of a couple (used as a proxy for socio-economic status) matter[3]. As expected, age of the youngest child is important, with no significant difference between families with a new-born or a child below 2 years, but those with a youngest child older than two years have a nearly three times as high dissolution risk as families with a 1-year old. We find no significant effect for the rest of the control variables.

[3] We have also run models, not presented here, where we included various specifications of the couple's labor force attachment at the 2003 wave. None of these variables had a significant impact on family stability, nor did they improve the model fit.

Next, we turn our attention to the more detailed operationalization of family composition, and use family structure in the further analyses. Table 3[4] reveals that stepmother families have extremely high dissolution risk, in contrast to findings in a recent Canadian study (see Martin et al. 2011). The Swedish result seems to be in line with the US-literature (Coleman et al. 2000, Teachman, 2008) where it was argued that the role of a stepmother is more challenging than that of a stepfather as she often also has to face the negative public perceptions of stepmothers as well as continued strong influence of the biological mother with whom the stepchildren are likely to keep regular, frequent contacts. As maternal gate-keeping is a well-known strategy even for intact families, used there to reduce the biological father's time and contact with the children and thereby strengthen the mother's role as *the* parent (see e.g. Bianchi & Milkie, 2010; Craig & Mullan, 2011) it is not unlikely that a stepmother's position in the family may also be weakened by similar strategies if the biological mother feels her parental position "threatened". This in the longer run will create tensions not only between the children and the stepmother but also between her and the children's father, weakening relationship quality and possibly leading to a breakup. In line with this reasoning, the high break-up risk can be related to conflicts between children and the parent or stepparent which may accumulate as children in stepmother families are least likely to talk to the co-resident adults when feeling worried or anxious, as shown in a recent Swedish study (Turunen 2013b).

We find the next highest dissolution risk for stepmother-stepfather families (i.e. with the woman's and the man's children from previous relationships but no shared children) who are not significantly less likely though to dissolve the union than are stepmother families. It is easy to understand the high level of complexity and hence elevated tensions in stepmother-stepfather families that may be present between the stepparent and stepchildren and/or between his and her children, in addition to possible problems between the biological parent and child, leading to conflicts between the adults deteriorating relationship quality, and even ending the union. In addition to stepmother-stepfather families only the 'blended and stepmother-stepfather' families, with the most complex family structure, have dissolution risk that are not significantly lower from that of stepmother families. All other family types are significantly more stable than are stepmother families.

Also stepfather families are more likely to disrupt (significant at the 10 percent level) than are families with shared children only. Compared to stepmother families however, this family

[4] We do not discuss the control variables for Table 3, as the effects are the same as for Table 2 except for couple's ethnicity which no longer shows significant difference in break-up risk when living with a partner of non-Nordic origin.

structure is much more stable (significantly so), and we find no significant differences comparing breakup risks of stepfather families to those in the other family structures. As suggested in the US literature (Coleman et al. 2000), stepfathers may face lower expectations given more limited family involvement of men in general, although this may not entirely apply to Sweden. Also, the children may have less frequent and/or intensive contacts with the non-resident biological father, so a stepfather can be more easily accepted as family member compared to a stepmother. On the other hand, children may view a stepfather as a competitor for the mother's affection and time, which can lead to conflicts and can explain the somewhat elevated dissolution risk for such family structure, compared to intact families.

Blended families including either the woman's or the man's, or both' children have slightly higher (but not significantly so) dissolution risk than intact families have. As discussed earlier, the presence of shared children may strengthen family cohesion and/or improve parenting skills of the previously only-stepparent, reducing tensions and the risk of breakup. The 'blended and stepmother' families are significantly (at the 10 per cent level) more stable only compared to the stepmother families, whereas the 'blended and stepfather' families have much lower dissolution risk (significantly so) than both the stepmother families and the stepmother-stepfather families. Interestingly however, the latter family constellation has significantly higher disruption risk only compared to intact families and 'blended and stepfather' families. The most complex family structure, the 'blended and stepfather-stepmother' families have no significantly different breakup risk compared to any of the other family constellations, quite surprisingly.

Summing up the findings, it seems that family compositions indeed have a differential impact on family disruption, and it is important to distinguish by the gender of the stepparent as well as between step- and blended families.

[Conclusion – to be written]

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Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the variables in the analyses.

	Frequency	Percent
Respondent's birth cohort		
1968	334	43.0
1972	287	36.9
1976	121	15.6
1980	35	4.5
Respondent's sex		
Male	291	37.5
Female	486	62.5
Non-resident child (of either member of the couple)		
No	705	90.7
Yes	72	9.3
Partner's year of birth		
1945-1967	237	30.5
1968-1970	201	25.9
1971-1973	187	24.1
1974-1982	139	17.9
Unknown	13	1.6
Respondent's family background		
Intact family	585	75.3
Non-intact family	183	23.5
Unknown	9	1.2
Length of union (by the 2003 wave)		
1 year or less	23	3.0
13 months to 3 years	96	12.3
More than 3 years	658	84.7

Couple's ethnicity		
Swedish or Nordic	668	86.0
Non-Nordic	109	14.0
Couple's religiosity		
Very religious	35	4.5
Not very religious	742	95.5
Couple's highest educational attainment		
Less than upper-secondary	54	7.0
Upper-secondary	461	59.3
Tertiary	255	32.8
Other	7	0.9
Division of childcare tasks in 2003		
Not equally	354	45.6
Equally	423	54.4
Time-varying covariates		
Family type		
Intact (shared children only)	3,821	83.3
Stepfamily (no shared child)	174	3.8
Blended family (step- and shared children)	593	12.9
Family structure		
Intact (shared children only)	3,821	83.3
Stepmother (man's children)	33	0.7
Stepfather (woman's children)	96	2.1
Blended & stepmother (shared & man's children)	71	1.6
Blended & stepfather (shared & woman's children)	470	10.2
Stepmother–stepfather (man's & woman's children, not shared)	45	1.0
Blended & stepmother-stepfather (shared & man's & woman's children not shared)	52	1.1

Union type		
Cohabiting	2,085	45.4
Married	2,503	54.6
Age of the youngest child		
Below 1 year	836	18.2
1-2 years	1,019	22.2
2-5 years	1,447	31.6
More than 5 years	1,286	28.0
Adolescent in the family		
No	3,863	84.2
Yes	725	15.8
Time variable		
Duration – since the 2003 survey		
< 12 months	1,297	28.3
12-35 months	1,625	35.4
36 + months	1,666	36.3
Total	4,588	100.0
N	**777**	**100.0**

Note: unweighted data

Table 2. Family composition and the risk for family dissolution among families with children in Sweden. Relative risks.

	Hazard ratio	**Standard error**
Model 1:		
Family type		
Intact	*1*	
Stepfamily	6.06***	1.71
Blended family	1.62	0.50
Model 2:		
Family type		
Intact	*1*	
Stepfamily	4.36***	1.83
Blended family	1.77	0.65
Union type		
Cohabiting	*1*	
Married	0.58*	0.14
Length of union (by 2003)		
1 year or less	*1*	
13 months to 3 years	1.00	0.61
More than 3 years	1.89	1.09
Age of the youngest child		
Below 1 year	0.48	0.40
1-2 years	*1*	
2-5 years	2.66*	1.28
More than 5 years	3.00*	1.51
Adolescent in the family		
No	*1*	
Yes	0.72	0.23

Non-resident child (of either member of the couple)		
No	*1*	
Yes	1.20	0.42
Couple's ethnicity		
Swedish or Nordic	*1*	
Non-Nordic	1.66†	0.51
Couple's religiosity		
Very religious	*1*	
Not very religious	0.70	0.38
Couple's highest educational attainment		
Less than upper-secondary	0.69	0.31
Upper-secondary	*1*	
Tertiary	0.89	0.24
Other	1.10	1.14
Birth cohort		
1968	*1*	
1972	0.89	0.25
1976	0.60	0.26
1980	1.54	0.84
Respondent's family background		
Intact family	*1*	
Non-intact family	1.41	0.34
Unknown	1.47	1.53
Respondent's sex		
Male	*1*	
Female	1.13	0.28
Partner's year of birth		
1945-1967	*1*	

1968-1970	1.13	0.34
1971-1973	0.99	0.36
1974-1982	1.20	0.51
Unknown	2.40	1.43
Division of childcare tasks in 2003		
Not equally	*1*	
Equally	0.76	0.17
Duration		
< 12 months	*1*	
12-35 months	0.97	0.29
36 + months	0.81	0.25
Constant	*0.00****	*0.00*
Log likelihood	*-328.508*	
No. of independent parameters	*28*	

***$p < .001$. **$p < .01$. *$p \leq .05$. †$p < .1$

Table 3. Family composition (detailed) and the risk for family dissolution among families with children in Sweden. Relative risks.

	Hazard ratio	Standard error
Model 1:		
Family structure		
Intact	*1*	
Stepmother	13.56***	5.43
Stepfather	3.50**	1.63
Blended & stepmother	2.15	1.55
Blended & stepfather	1.57	0.54
Stepmother-stepfather	5.73***	2.96
Blended & stepmother-stepfather	1.46	1.48
Model 2:		
Family structure		
Intact	*1*	
Stepmother	12.80***	8.45
Stepfather	2.51†	1.39
Blended & stepmother	2.29	1.87
Blended & stepfather	1.62	0.65
Stepmother-stepfather	6.46**	4.23
Blended & stepmother-stepfather	1.83	1.99
Union type		
Cohabiting	*1*	
Married	0.57*	0.14
Length of union (by 2003)		
1 year or less	*1*	
13 months to 3 years	1.51	0.99
More than 3 years	3.23†	2.09

Age of the youngest child		
Below 1 year	0.48	0.41
1-2 years	*1*	
2-5 years	2.56*	1.24
More than 5 years	2.85*	1.44
Adolescent in the family		
No	*1*	
Yes	0.75	0.25
Non-resident child (of either member of the couple)		
No	*1*	
Yes	1.25	0.44
Couple's ethnicity		
Swedish or Nordic	*1*	
Non-Nordic	1.39	0.46
Couple's religiosity		
Very religious	*1*	
Not very religious	0.73	0.40
Couple's highest educational attainment		
Less than upper-secondary	0.72	0.33
Upper-secondary	*1*	
Tertiary	0.89	0.25
Other	1.18	1.22
Respondent's family background		
Intact family	*1*	
Non-intact family	1.42	0.34
Unknown	1.46	1.57
Respondent's sex		
Male	*1*	

Female	1.31	0.36
Respondent's birth cohort		
1968	*1*	
1972	0.93	0.26
1976	0.63	0.28
1980	1.56	0.86
Partner's year of birth		
1945-1967	*1*	
1968-1970	1.15	0.34
1971-1973	0.98	0.36
1974-1982	1.13	0.49
Unknown	2.00	1.25
Division of childcare tasks in 2003		
Not equally	*1*	
Equally	0.77	0.18
Duration		
< 12 months	*1*	
12-35 months	0.99	0.30
36 + months	0.84	0.26
Constant	0.00***	0.00
Log likelihood	-325.871	
No. of independent parameters	32	

***$p < .001$. **$p < .01$. *$p \leq .05$. †$p < .1$