

VID Colloquium

Inter-Generational Effects of Parental Divorce on Children's Educational Attainment and Partnership Formation

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This talk explores variations in the direction and size of intergenerational effects of parental divorce on various transitions in the life course of their children. More specifically, it looks at children's educational attainment and partnership formation patterns across contexts (cohorts and countries). The presentation summarizes empirical results of two interrelated papers. First, it investigates if (and to what extent) the negative effect of divorce on children's education increases/decreases as divorce becomes more common. While the theory is ambiguous and would (under certain conditions) support both hypotheses, our data (taken from the Gender and Generations Surveys) indicate that children of divorce become more disadvantaged in education when divorce spreads through society. We argue that this reflects the changing composition of divorcing families with respect to pre-divorce conflict. As divorce spreads in society, even couples with less conflict separate. A child from a dissolving low-conflict family is strongly negatively affected by loss of the family, whereas a child from a high-conflict family is rather relieved from a dysfunctional parental relationship and the positive effects of breakup may outweigh the negative ones. With increasing divorce rates and the changing composition of the population of splitting families, the share of low-conflict dissolving families increases and hence the average negative effect of breakup becomes more negative.

Second, we study the changing impact of parental divorce on the type of children's first co-residential union, namely on the choice between marriage and cohabitation. While it has been rather well documented that children of divorce leave parental home earlier, establish co-residential unions at a faster pace, and have higher odds of entering cohabitations rather than marriage, we argue that two trends may lead to a weaker association between parental family configuration and the type of their first partnership. On the one hand, divorced parents may become a less select group over time (and thus they may pose fewer distinct traits to pass over to their children). On the other hand, cohabitation itself has become a more common phenomenon in many societies and cohabitators are thus likely to be a less selected group on both observed and unobserved traits. Indeed, our data (again from the GGS project) confirm that children of divorce no longer favor cohabitation over marriage as their first co-residential union.

About the presenter

Martin Kreidl is a social demographer affiliated with the Office for Population Research and the Department of Sociology at the Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic. He has obtained his Ph.D. from UCLA in 2005 (his dissertation – supervised by Donald Treiman and Robert Mare – explored historical trends in education inequality in the former Soviet bloc countries). He continues to study inequality (typically in a comparative perspective) as it relates to various forms of family heterogeneity. Recently, he has also developed an interest in

intergenerational relations, in particular in patterns of intergenerational exchange and its consequences.

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