

# **Do adoptive parents differ? A study of dissolution risk among biological and adoptive parents in Sweden**

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## **Introduction**

Adoptive parents and biological parents encounter very different circumstances of parenthood. To get an adopted child is a longed for event that for most couples involves a large emotional and economic investment. To adopt indicates that the desire to become a parent is paramount, not least as the adoption requires planning in many ways and often for a long time. The potential parents undergo an extensive investigation for approval to adopt by Swedish social authorities. Adoptive children may mean more adjustments from the parents' point of view, related to the children's attachment to their parents and their school performance. The differences between getting an adopted and a biological child may thus have implications for the couple and we are in this study interested in whether that will lead to different divorce risks for biological and adoptive parents.

We take our starting point in the interrelationship between family stability and the level of gender equality within families. Some studies have shown that gender equal views and behaviour among couples correlate with family stability (Kaufman 2000, Cooke 2006). The goal of gender equality has permeated Swedish government declarations for decades, and the usage of parental leave has been recognized as an important measure of gender equality within families. Mothers and fathers are entitled to equally long and extensive parental leave, all together 16 months. Two months are reserved for each parent. Fathers take approximately  $\frac{1}{4}$  of all leave and practically all fathers take some leave (Duvander and Johansson 2012). The allocation of parental leave days has been shown to impact the divorce risk (Oláh 2001), a result that often has been interpreted to indicate that gender equal couples are more stable. Preliminary results by Duvander and Viklund (2012) show that adoptive parents share their parental leave more equal than biological parents, which may indicate a more gender equal parenthood.

This study investigates whether biological and adoptive parents differ in divorce risk. The adoption procedure as well as demanding circumstances of parenthood might cause tensions that increase the divorce risk for adoptive parents. On the other hand, a gender equal parenthood with involvement from both parents has the potential to decrease this risk. The issue is suitable to investigate in Sweden, a country with a relatively high rate of divorce as well as a high proportion of internationally adopted children.

## **Background**

Sweden has together with Denmark and Norway the highest share of internationally adopted children per capita. International adoptions started relatively early, in the end of the 1950's, and ever since about 50 000 children have been adopted in Sweden (MIA 2009). Most of these children originate from South Korea (Statistics Sweden 2007). The last decade the number of adopted children has been around 700-1000 children per year. Adoptive parents may have preferences on the child's sex and country of origin, but the demands by the adoption organizations of the countries of origin are often determining. They specify demands on the parents regarding their age, education, income, marital status, length of marriage etc. (MIA 2010).

Adoptive families and biological families naturally share the same experiences of having children, but the families are also different in many aspects. With regard to children's wellbeing and school performance studies have found differences between adoptive and biological children. As theories and

empirical research point out children's experiences of care, earlier separation from biological parents, and possible institution care affect how they attach to the new parents (see for instance Bowlby 1951, Broberg 2007, Broberg et al 2009). The biological mothers' situation during the pregnancy (in the country of origin) impacts the child's wellbeing and continued development; risky behaviour and malnutrition may for instance explain future learning difficulties (Miller 2000, Lindblad 2004). The language development of adoptive children often lags behind biological children of the same age, although they are likely to catch up (Dalen 2002, Dalen and Rygvold 2007).

Adoptive and biological parents differ in composition of age, education and presumably income (Statistics Sweden 2007). Adoptive parents are older and have higher education compared to biological parents. Moreover, the circumstances of becoming a parent are not the same. Adoptive parents have participated in mandatory parents' education to gain knowledge and understanding about the adoption procedure, about being an adoptive parent, and the special needs of their children. They have also undergone an extensive and demanding investigation for approval to adopt by the local Social Affairs Committee (MIA 2010). Thus, they are "certified" in a way that biological parents are not. Studies have pointed out that adoptive parents are more engaged in their children's development, both regarding the cognitive development and school issues in general, compared to biological parents (Dalen 2002, Dalen and Rygvold 2007, Gibson 2009).

These dissimilarities between adoptive families and biological families may have an impact on the risk for divorce. Adoptive parents have characteristics that are connected with lower risk of divorce, such as higher education and being older at the time of adoption (see for instance Hoem 1997, Lyngstad and Jalovaara 2010, Statistics Sweden 2012). These compositional effects will be controlled for in the analysis. The fact that adoptive parents have more socioeconomic resources compared to biological parents may speak for lower divorce risks. On the other hand, factors such as a possibly challenging and emotional adoption process, larger investments in and potentially more stressful childrearing, as well as self-perceived high demands on adoptive parents by the society (von Greiff 2004), may increase divorce risks.

The levels of divorce in Sweden are high from a comparative perspective (Sobotka and Toulemon 2008). Ever since the 1960's the divorce rates in Sweden has been among the highest in Europe. There was a steady increase of divorce risk in the 1970s up to 2000, but since the turn of the century a more stable pattern (Andersson 2004). Lately the risk has even declined somewhat (Andersson and Kolk 2011). In addition the marriage risk is relatively low in Sweden and it is very common with childbearing outside marriage. In fact, about 50 % of all first-born children are born to unmarried couples (Statistics Sweden 2012, Thomson and Eriksson 2010). Generally these children are born into stable cohabiting unions that in most respects are equivalent to marriages. However, the separation risks are higher for cohabiting couples than married couples. This indicates that divorce underestimates the risk of children experiencing separation of their parents. It seems that adoptive parents have a lower risk to divorce in the descriptive statistics from Statistics Sweden (2003). We want to nuance the understanding of adoptive parents' divorce and separation risks by following parents over time and to control for a number of characteristics that have been found to influence divorce.

The evidence is not conclusive on whether gender equality increases or decreases divorce risk (Lyngstad and Jalovaara 2010). The results are likely to vary between contexts, ways of measuring gender equality and between time periods. We are interested in how gender equality influences divorce risks among the two groups of parents in a setting where the norm of gender equality is strong. Sweden has long strived for gender equality and one of the most important areas are within family policy. The division of parental leave between the mother and the father is often used as an indicator of gender equal parenthood. Oláh (2001) found a positive association between fathers' involvement in childrearing and family stability in Sweden. As earlier mentioned preliminary results by Duvander and Viklund (2012) show that adoptive parents share their parental leave more equal than biological

parents. This can be interpreted as larger father involvement in childrearing and imply reduced risk of separation.

## Data and method

The study will use register data from STAR (Sweden in Time – Activities and Relations) administered by Stockholm University Demography Unit and Swedish Institute for Social Research. The database covers the entire Swedish population and it contains information about adoption, parental leave benefits, civil status, income, education, age, and family relations such as birth order for each individual.

In the study we investigate the period 1993 to 2007 and we study all parents that had their first child during this period. For adoptive families we consider those where both parents jointly adopted the child. Consideration will be taken to the adoptive child's age at adoption, as well as the arrival of siblings during the period for both adoptive and biological children, since siblings have an impact on the divorce risk (Andersson 2004). We will use event history analysis to model the risk of divorce for parents from the birth of a first child or adoption of a first child. Both cohabiting couples and married couples will be studied, and the length of co-residential union and marriage before becoming parents will be considered. As almost all adoptive parents are married, which is often demanded by the adoption process, we will test models with all biological parents included, and others where only the married biological parents are included.

Information on the length of the parental leave and the allocation of days between the parents make it possible to categorize parents in a short and long leave, and study the impact of different divisions of leave on the divorce risk for adoptive parents and biological parents. We will be able to investigate whether gender equal parenthood vary in its influence on divorce risk for these two groups of parents. Individual characteristics of parents such as age, education, and income will be controlled for, and both individual effects and the combination of characteristics will be considered. We will investigate whether parents' characteristics will influence the transition to divorce differently in biological and adoptive families.

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