

The Effect of Parental Loss on Social Mobility in Early-20th Century Sweden

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Abstract

Socioeconomic attainment in the form of occupation or earnings are strongly dependent on parental attainment, and especially the attainment of the fathers. Theoretical models and empirical research both support such an association in intergenerational socioeconomic attainment (Becker and Tomes 1976; Björklund and Jäntti 2012; Blanden 2013; Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992). Several pathways exist through which parents can influence their children's career development. Some of them depend crucially on the parent being alive and present during the upbringing of their children, e.g. access to resources and socialization (Zeng and Xie (2014)). It could therefore be expected that losing a parent, and especially a father, would negatively affect socioeconomic attainment (Corak 2001; Amato and Anthony 2014; Land and Zagorsky 2001; Van Poppel et al. 1998). In this paper we study first the association between parental loss and the occupational attainment of children in Sweden in the first half of the 20th century using linked micro-level full-count census data. We analyze associations between losing a mother or a father and occupational attainment in adulthood, and also look at differences in social mobility for men and women depending on the life status of parents. Moreover, we estimate the causal effect of parental loss on social attainment and mobility using the deaths from the Spanish flu as an exogenous shock on adult mortality. Previous research has shown small to non-existent socioeconomic differences in excess mortality from the flu in Sweden, and other confounders can be controlled for in the analysis. Deaths from the Spanish flu are identified through the monthly distribution of deaths in the influenza period, which has been shown to be a valid approach. Occupational attainment in 1950 for individuals born in 1905-1910 with a mother or a father dying during the peak flu period are compared with children of the same cohorts with surviving parents as well as children whose parent(s) died before or after the flu. Controlling for socioeconomic and family background we expect a causal effect of parental death to show as a lower social attainment/mobility for children whose parents died in the Spanish flu compared to children whose parents survived, but a higher attainment/mobility than children whose parents died outside of the flu period, because the latter group can be expected to have been negatively selected in terms of health which would also negatively affect the career development. Our linked census dataset contains about 400,000 men and women born in 1905-1910 and observed in 1950, for which we have information on when their parents died. Our preliminary results show that the death of the mother was significantly associated with lower occupational attainment, while there is no similar association for the death of the father. The association is stronger when losing the mother before age 10 than in ages 10-20. Importantly, the association with parental death in the Spanish flu period is no different from that in other years, suggesting that the effect of mother's death on social attainment is not a result of negative health selection but reflects a causal impact. The death of the mother affected both the chances of reaching the top occupational classes, and the risk of ending up at the bottom.