

Parents are not more likely to split up if mothers earn more than fathers

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Couples with young children are as likely to stay together if the mother is the main breadwinner rather than the father, new research shows.

A paper published in the journal *Sociology* today [Tuesday 18 February 2014] says the relationships of parents are in some cases more stable if the mother earns more than the father.

Dr Shireen Kanji, of the University of Leicester School of Management, and Dr Pia Schober, of the German Institute for Economic Research, Berlin, examined survey data on 3,944 British couples as their first child aged from eight months to seven years.

The researchers looked at whether the probability of relationship breakdown was different for couples where the mother earned more – defined as at least 20% extra – or the same, or less than their partners.

The researchers found no significant statistical difference in the risk of relationship break-up if the mother earned more than the father. They also found that in some instances couples were more stable if the woman earned more. For instance:

- **In the period between when the child was about four and seven**, the risk of divorce for married couples where the mother earned more than the father was 80% less than for married couples in which the father was the main earner.
- **In the period between when the child was about four and seven**, the risk of unmarried couples splitting up where the mother earned more than the father was 60% less than for couples where the father was the main earner. Here the effect was statistically less significant.

The research found that parents who earned approximately the same were no more likely to split up than those where the father earned more, and in some cases were less likely to separate. For example for couples with children of school age, the risk of separation fell by about half for those that were married, and by more for those that were unmarried.

The researchers also found that where mothers were the sole earners in the couple, this worsened the relationship if they were married, but not if they were living together. This applied to only 1.4% of couples and did not affect the main conclusion.

“Sociological and economic theories have long predicted that women’s increased economic independence would undermine the institution of marriage,” said the researchers. “Previous studies of married couples in the UK provided evidence that women’s higher earnings increased the risk of divorce.

“We found that influential theories that a woman’s higher earnings elevate the risk of divorce are unfounded amongst contemporary parents in the UK. Our findings show that equal earning, and a mother being a main earner, are not destabilising influences on relationships, even at an intense time of childcare responsibilities.”

The researchers said that at some points in time mothers earning more meant “there is a lowered rather than raised hazard of relationship dissolution and that this applies to both married and cohabiting parents.” The research breaks new ground in studying the stability of both married and cohabiting parents.

The researchers found that 6% of mothers of children aged less than one year earned at least 20% more than their partners, which fell to 3.8% by the time the child was around five years old. The figures for those earning approximately the same as their partners fell from 11% to 4.3% in the same period.

These results came at a time in the UK when “the potential for women to earn the same or more than a male partner has increased rapidly in recent years, in line with a steep rise in mothers’ labour force participation and women’s educational performance overtaking that of men.

“However, these results do not necessarily signal a victory for gender equality. Mother-main earner and equal-earner couples are not at a higher risk of splitting up, but they do overwhelmingly change to a male-breadwinner model [over time]. The proportions of couples in which the mother is the main or equal earner decrease significantly as the first child ages.”

The journal *Sociology* is published by the British Sociological Association and SAGE.

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Notes:

1. The researchers analysed four waves of the Millennium Cohort Survey (MCS), a nationally representative sample of babies born in the UK over a 12-month period starting in 2000. The first survey wave took place between eight and 12 months after the birth of the cohort child; the second took place when the child was 38 months, on average; the third when the child was 62 months on average; and the fourth when the child was 87 months on average. Data on parents were recorded as part of the survey.

2. For relationship quality, the researchers chose to use mothers’ responses to five questions because previous research had found that women initiate most divorces, and so this is a good indicator of the stability of the relationship. Mothers were asked whether they agreed or disagreed, using a 5-point scale, with statements about: 1) whether their partner is sensitive and aware of their needs; 2) whether their partner

listens; 3) whether they ever feel lonely in presence of their partner; 4) whether they suspect that the relationship is on the brink of separation. They also recorded how happy they were with the relationship, on a 7-point scale. The researchers then combined the results of all these to form one scale from 0-10, where 0 is the least happy with the relationship and 10 the most.

3. The researchers' paper is entitled 'Are couples with young children more likely to split up when the mother is the main or an equal earner?' The journal *Sociology* is published by the British Sociological Association and SAGE.

4. The University of Leicester is a leading UK University committed to international excellence through the creation of world changing research and high quality, inspirational teaching. Leicester is the most socially inclusive of Britain's top-20 leading universities. The University of Leicester is The Times/Sunday Times 2014 University of the Year Runner-Up and the THE University of the Year 2008-9.

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5. The British Sociological Association's mission is to represent the intellectual and sociological interests of its members. The BSA is a Company Limited by Guarantee. Registered in England and Wales. Company Number: 3890729. Registered Charity Number 1080235 www.britsoc.co.uk