

Why marry first? Explaining cross-national differences in the influence of parental education on nonmarital births.

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Over the past decades there has been a large increase in the percentage of nonmarital births in Western societies. Research shows that in the US and Canada, young adults who grew up with parents with a lower socio-economic status (SES) are more likely to have a birth outside marriage. However, in several European countries, young adults raised in higher and lower SES families are equally likely to have a nonmarital birth. Although previous research established that the influence of parental SES differs across countries, less is known about country-level characteristics that could explain these differences. This paper focuses on two macro-level characteristics which could explain part of the differences: economic inequality and the educational system.

First, scholars have argued that parental SES shapes the opportunity structure that young adults face, which increases the chance of young adults from lower SES backgrounds to have a child outside marriage. This mechanism might be less important in countries with low levels of economic inequality, since in this context different socio-economic groups face more similar constraints. Second, research has shown that the intergenerational transmission of education serves as an important explanation of why children from lower SES parents are more likely to have a nonmarital birth. Since the intergenerational transmission of education depends to a large extent on the educational system in a country, this too could explain cross-national differences. Taking these arguments together we expect that in countries with a lower level of economic inequality and a more open educational system, the negative influence of parental SES on the chance of having a nonmarital birth is less strong.

Data from the Generations and Gender Survey is used and extended with information from the American National Survey of Family Growth, the British Understanding Societies survey, the Canadian General Social survey, and the Dutch Family and Fertility Survey. The dependent variable *Partnership context at first birth* differentiates between people who have their first biological child within marriage, within cohabitation, or while being single. *Parental education* is used as an indicator of parental SES. Information on the macro-level indicators is obtained from contextual databases and merged with the dataset. Discrete time competing risk models are used to estimate multi-level, multinomial logistic regressions on a person-period file (in years).