

Understanding cross-national variation in the influence of parental socio-economic status on union formation decisions

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Abstract

Past empirical research has demonstrated the importance of parental socio-economic status as a determinant of the entry into a first union (cohabitation or marriage). Most existing studies were conducted in a single country, mainly the U.S., and found that young adults growing up in high socio-economic status families delay their entry into a first union compared to those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. However, the strength of the link between parental status and the timing of first union may also depend on the societal context and its specific opportunities. Our previous work revealed cross-national variation in the strength of the link between parental status (including both educational and occupational level of father and mother) and the timing of first union. The current study aims at better understanding the macro-level mechanisms behind this cross-national variation in the strength of this link between parental status and union formation decisions. We will focus on two different macro-level mechanisms, namely the *economic situation* and the *openness of the society*. We hypothesize that the better the economic situation in a country and the more open a society is, the weaker the link between parental status and young adult demographic behavior. In more open societies and in good economic times parents have less influence on their children's behavior because children are less dependent on their parents and their resources. Moreover, in more open societies, the boundaries between different status groups are blurred and, therefore, the influence of parental status on the timing of first union is expected to be weaker. The gdp per capita is used to measure the economic situation in a country, which we have from 1950-2007 for each year (period effect). An indicator for openness in a society is the level of intergenerational educational mobility, measured as the country-specific association between parents' and children's educational attainment for different birth cohorts (cohort effect). We hypothesize that the influence of parental socio-economic status on young adult union formation decisions is weaker in countries where intergenerational educational mobility is higher. Moreover, attention is paid to the (mediating) role played by individual educational attainment and school enrollment to investigate, first, the impact of individual educational level on union formation decisions and second, whether the impact of parental status is partly or fully mediated by the educational level of the child. We analyze whether the effect of parental status purely results from processes of intergenerational transmission of education or whether parents have an effect beyond this intergenerational transmission of education.

We test these different assumptions for both the timing of first union and first marriage for men and women using data from the third wave of the European Social Survey (2006), consisting of 25 European countries (N = 47,099). Multilevel discrete time analyses are estimated to incorporate both individual and contextual level factors into the explanatory model.

Keywords: timing first union, parental socio-economic status, comparative research, multilevel modeling, intergenerational educational mobility