

Parental background and union dissolution from a cross-national comparative perspective

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Background

Divorce and union disruption rates have increased sharply during the last decades (Andersson, 2003; Härkönen, 2013). Previous research has shown that parental background plays an important role in understanding union dissolution, with the intergenerational transmission of divorce gaining the most attention (e.g. Dronkers & Härkönen, 2008; Gahler, Hong & Bernhardt, 2015). However, parental divorce is not the only parental background characteristic which might influence the union dissolution behavior of individuals. Several studies have analyzed the effect of parental socio-economic status (SES) as an important determinant of union dissolution decisions, leading to somewhat contradictory findings. Most studies found a positive association between parental socio-economic background and the risk of union disruption (Hoem & Hoem, 1992; Klijzing, 1992; Lyngstad, 2004; Lyngstad, 2006; Janssen, 2001; Maenpaa & Jalovaara, 2014, Todesco, 2013). In other words, the higher the status of parents (in terms of education and occupation), the more likely individuals are to dissolve their unions. Other studies, however, found a negative association or no association (Bumpass, Martin & Sweet, 1991, Bracher et al, 1993; Berrington & Diamond, 1999).

These contradictory findings from different countries suggest that the association between parental SES and union dissolution may vary cross-nationally. However, all existing studies were conducted in a single country (e.g. USA, Norway, the Netherlands and Italy), while it can be expected that the direction as well as the strength of the impact of parental SES on union dissolution depends on the societal context and its specific opportunities. Each country has its own history, social policies, norms and values, which can differently impact the demographic behavior of individuals (Billari, 2004). Thus far, no study has systematically compared the association between parental SES and union dissolution between countries, even though research on the associations between own education and union dissolution have found major differences in the educational gradient of divorce over time and cross-nationally.

The current study aims at better understanding the link between parental socio-economic status and the risk on union dissolution from a cross-national comparative perspective. We have the following research objectives. Our first objective is descriptive, and we analyze whether there is an effect of parental SES on union dissolution in various countries and if so, whether this association between parental SES and union dissolution varies cross-nationally.

Second, we analyze how much of the association between parental SES and union dissolution is mediated by parental separation and own educational attainment (cf. Lyngstad 2004; 2006; Todesco, 2013). The latter is used to investigate whether the impact of parental socio-economic status purely results from processes of intergenerational transmission of education (only indirect effect of parents) or whether parents have an effect on union dissolution beyond this intergenerational transmission of education (also a direct effect of parents). Some existing studies already show that the impact of parental status on union dissolution remains after including the individuals own educational level (Lyngstad, 2004; 2006; Todesco, 2013). Moreover, some studies suggest that the effect of parental SES is opposite to that of own SES (e.g. Lyngstad, 2004), underlining the importance of controlling for own education in order to understand the effects of parental SES.

Third, we analyze whether we can explain the cross-national variation in the effects of parental SES on union dissolution with information on country-level indicators. We expect that the parental SES is associated with higher separation rates particularly in societies in which the divorce rate is lower. Following Goode (1993), we argue that in such societies one needs higher socioeconomic resources to overcome the barriers to union dissolution, which has been found in earlier research on the relationship between education and divorce (Härkönen & Dronkers, 2006).

Data & Methods

We test these different assumptions using data from the Generations and Gender Programme (GGP). The GGP is a set of national Generations and Gender Surveys (GGS) consisting of 19 countries. In this study, we analyze the risk of union dissolution, which means dissolution from first union (irrespective of whether this was marriage or cohabitation). This measure was used instead of divorce from legal marriage due to major increases in non-marital cohabitation during the past decades. Both the occupation and the education of parents are indicators of the societal position of an individual's family of origin, so we will use both of these measures to study the impact of parental SES. We measure the aggregate divorce rate as the average divorce rate during 1970-2011. We analyze our data using meta-regression techniques for cross-national data. In other words, we estimate separate discrete-time event history models for each country. We compare the estimates from these models to assess the degree of variation between the countries with weighted analysis of variance, and plot these estimates against the average divorce rate to assess whether the parental SES effect is moderated by the incidence rate of divorce in each society.

Results

Figure 1 presents estimates (in odds ratios) from discrete-time event history analysis for each country, using a model which includes all our independent variables. The figure shows that, on average, those hailing from higher SES backgrounds have a higher rate of union dissolution. The figure also shows important cross-national variation in the strength of this association. The association is above average in many Eastern European countries, as well as Austria and Italy, but weaker than average in most Western European countries, as well as in Estonia and Lithuania. A reduced model, which excludes own education from the model (not shown), presents somewhat stronger associations as well as larger cross-national variation, suggesting that own educational attainment mediates a part of the association and of the cross-national differences.

Figure 2 shows how the association is generally weaker in countries with a higher average divorce rate. This is line with our expectations, discussed above.

Conclusions and additional analyses

Our findings show that although parental SES is, on average, positively related to union dissolution risks (as found in many earlier studies (Hoem & Hoem, 1992; Klijzing, 1992; Lyngstad, 2004; Lyngstad, 2006; Janssen, 2001; Maenpaa & Jalovaara, 2014; Todesco, 2013)), there is a great deal of cross-national variation in this association. The association tends to be stronger in societies in which divorce is less common.

In additional analyses, not shown here but available in the full paper version, we additionally analyze changes in the association over time. We find that the association has remained relatively stable in most countries, but weakened over time in Australia, Belgium, Czech Republic, Norway, and Sweden.

Figure 1. Meta-analysis for 18 Western countries with odds ratio's for the residual effect of parental education on the risk to dissolve a childbearing union.

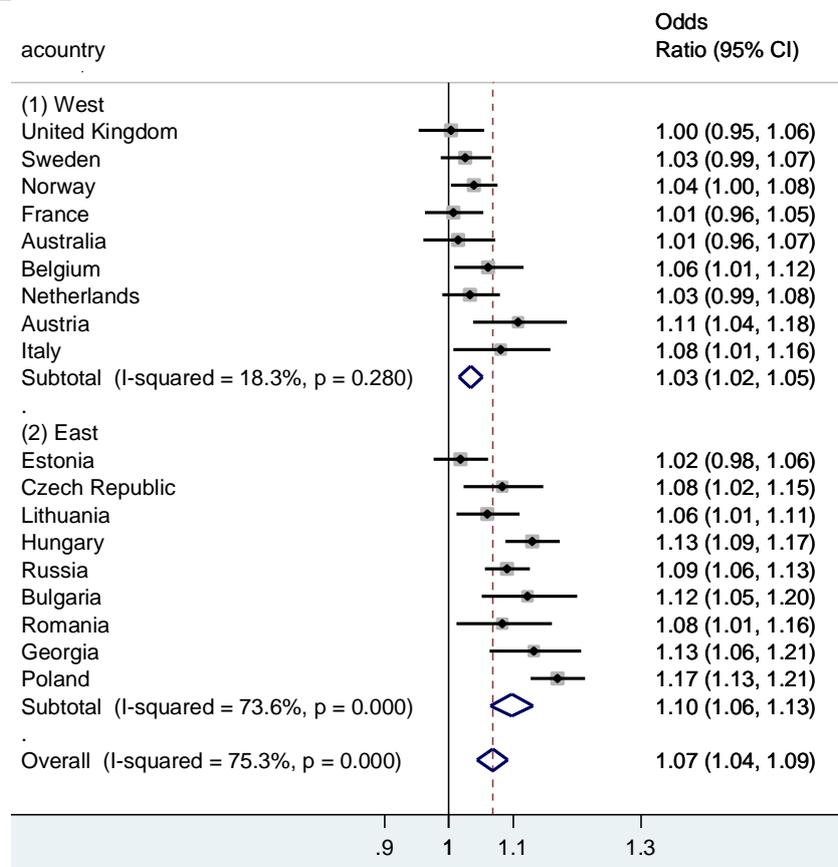
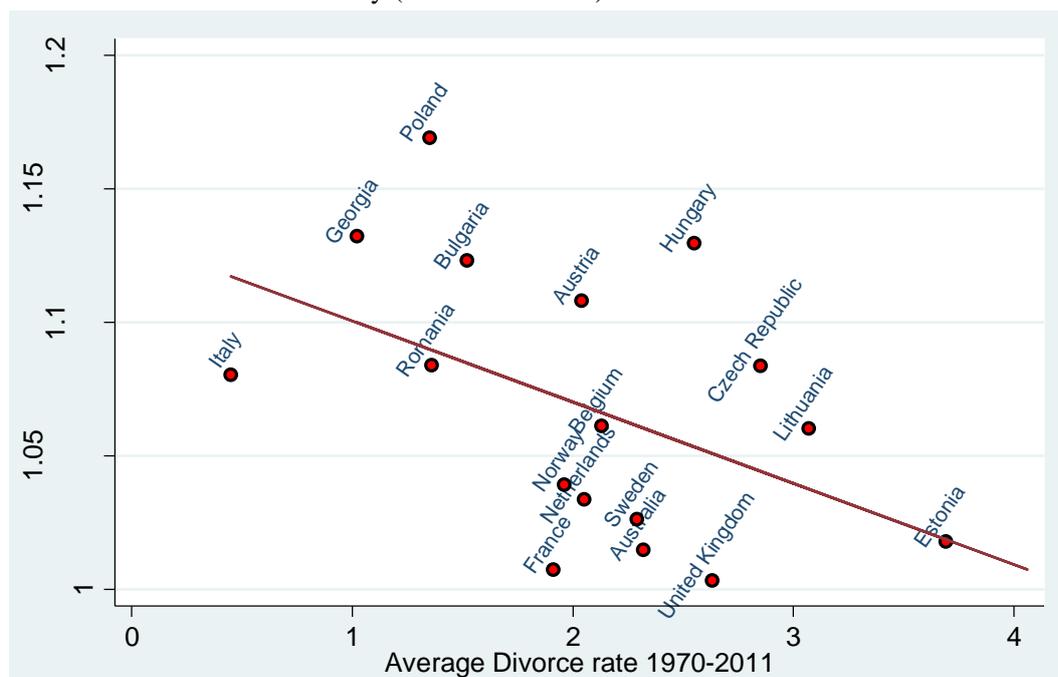


Figure 2. Meta regression between the residual effect of parental education on union dissolution and the divorce rate for each country (Russia excluded).



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