

The influence of parental socio-economic status on the timing of first union across European countries

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Abstract

Past empirical research demonstrates the importance of parental socio-economic status (SES) as a determinant for entry into a first union (cohabitation or marriage). The majority of existing studies found that young adults growing up in high socio-economic status families delay their first unions compared to those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. However, most studies examined the impact of parental background on the timing of first union within a single country (mainly the United States) and therefore it is yet unclear whether differentiation exists in the impact of parental status across European countries. It can namely be assumed that the strength of the link between parental status and the timing of first union depends on the societal context. Moreover, little is known about the degree to which the influence of parental status on timing of first union has changed over historical time. The current paper tries to reach three specific objectives: First, this article examines whether there is an effect of parental SES (both educational and occupational level) on the timing of first union and whether this effect varies between European countries. Second, we analyzed whether the impact of parental status has changed over historical time, to disentangle whether the effect of parental status has decreased for more recent birth cohorts due to, for example, increasing individualization. Third and finally, attention is paid to the mediating role played by individual educational attainment and school enrollment to investigate whether the impact of parental SES is partly or fully explained by the educational level of the child. In this study, we use the third round of the European Social Survey (2006), which includes data from 25 European countries. We focus on entry into first union during young adulthood (15 – 35 years old), because during this period most demographic events take place. Results from discrete-time hazard models show that in almost all countries young adults from advantaged backgrounds delay their entry into first union, although the strength of this effect differs across countries. The impact of parental status is stronger at early ages, while it hardly changed over historical time. Moreover, for almost all European countries, the impact of parental status on the timing of first union is partly mediated by individual educational attainment and school enrolment. Another important finding is that the impact of parental SES on the timing of first union is stronger for women than for men.

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