

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

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## Short abstract (300 words)

*Previous research has shown that parental background is an important predictor of union dissolution, with the intergenerational transmission of divorce gaining the most attention. Next to parental divorce is parental socio-economic status (SES) also shown to be an important determinant for union dissolution decisions. Although the findings from previous studies are not consistent, most existing studies show that the higher the status of the parents, the more likely individuals are to dissolve their own union. However, all these studies are conducted in a single country, while it can be expected that the strength of the impact of parental status on union dissolution depends on the societal context and the specific opportunities this contexts offers. Therefore, the current study aims at better understanding the link between parental socio-economic status (including both the educational and the occupational level of parents) and the risk on union dissolution from a cross-national comparative perspective. First, we test whether there is cross-national variation in the link between parental SES and union dissolution. Second, attention is paid to the mediating role played by parental divorce and own educational attainment. Third, we analyze possible country level indicators which might explain this cross-national variation in the impact of parental SES. In this study we focus on two country level indicators; cultural segregation in the intergenerational transmission of liberal values and the level of income inequality within a country. In this study we examine the dissolution from first union, irrespective of whether this was a marriage of unmarried cohabitation. The data used is from the Generations and Gender Programme (GGP). The GGP is a set of national Generations and Gender Surveys (GGS) consisting of 19 countries. Multilevel discrete time hazard models are estimated to incorporate both individual and contextual level factors into the explanatory model.*

## Introduction and theoretical background

In many European countries, divorce and union disruption rates have increased sharply during the last decades (Andersson, 2003; Härkönen, 2013). Union dissolution is an increasingly common life course event which can have substantial economic and psychological consequences. As a result, it may negatively influence future life chances of individuals (Härkönen, 2013). The focus of the study is on the dissolution from first union, irrespective of whether this was a marriage of

unmarried cohabitation, because cohabitation has become increasingly prevalent in Western countries in recent decades (Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004).

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. Therefore, 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. In general, it can be expected that the effect of parental SES on the risk of union dissolution is stronger when the

difference between high and low status families is larger within a society, so when the level of inequality in a country is high. From a sociocultural perspective, there might be differences between high and low status families with regard to the transmission of liberal or individualistic values, which can result in a stronger impact of parental SES on union dissolution. The transmission of more liberal attitudes and norms towards union dissolution might be the result of socialization of these liberal norms in high-status families (Hoem & Hoem, 1992; Lyngstad, 2004; 2006). In these families, the emphasis is more on self-realization, independence and individualization compared to lower-status families. Thus, we expect that in countries where there is a clear cultural segregation between high and low status families with regard to the transmission of liberal values, that the impact of parental SES on union dissolution is stronger compared to countries where both high and low status families transmit liberal values to their offspring.

From an economic perspective, the level of income inequality could be another important country-level indicator that might explain the link between parental SES and union dissolution. The younger generation might look upon the union dissolution process with fewer concerns, when they can rely on the economic resources of their high-status parents in case of divorce (Lyngstad, 2004; 2006). This financial support of parents can cause an ‘independence effect’, because individuals are supported by their parents in hard times. However, when the difference between high and low status parents is smaller with regard to their income in a country, it can be expected that the impact of parental SES on the likelihood to dissolve a union is weaker compared to countries with a high level of income inequality. These two possible explanations (income inequality & cultural segregation of liberal values) might explain cross-national variation in the link between parental SES and the risk of union dissolution and that is what we test in the current study.

## **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). 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. With regard to the country level indicators, we use the Gini-coefficient as an indicator for the income inequality in each country. For the cultural segregation between high and low status families with regard to the transmission of liberal values we calculate the average correlation between the educational level of respondents and the most important qualities children have to learn at home. This list of qualities are derived from the European Values Study and the World Values Survey and consist of qualities like ‘good manners’, ‘independence’, ‘feeling of responsibility’ and ‘religious faith’. Liberal values are related to qualities like ‘independence’ and ‘feeling of responsibility’, so qualities related to self-realization, while more traditional or conservative values are related to for example ‘religious faith’ and ‘determination’.

Multilevel discrete time hazard models are estimated to incorporate both individual and contextual level factors into the explanatory model.

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