

Family Forerunners? Parental Divorce and Partnership Formation in Comparative Perspective

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Abstract

We use data from the Fertility and Families Surveys and Gender and Generations Surveys to analyze the associations between parental divorce and partnership formation in 18 countries. We found using the FFS that in almost all countries, children of divorce entered into coresidential unions younger, and that this first union was more likely to be an unmarried rather than married one. However, there were very few differences in eventual marriage between those whose parents had divorced and those whose had not. We do, however, find some cross-cohort changes in the latter association so that while the children of divorce married earlier in the older cohorts, the difference becomes smaller in the younger ones. These findings suggest that children of divorce may have been in the forefront of novel partnership forms and that different aspects of family change (here, divorce, rise in cohabitation, decrease in marriage) may have been mutually reinforcing.

Introduction and background

Declining rates of marriage and increasing prevalence of cohabitation and divorce are trends at the core of family change often dubbed under the second demographic transition (Lesthaeghe 1995). They can have mutually reinforcing effects, and among one of these, parental divorce has been linked to an increased likelihood of cohabitation and own divorce (Carmichael 1995; Kiernan 2000; Wolfinger 2005; Dronkers and Härkönen 2008). These patterns suggest that those with divorced parents may have been at the forefront of family change and that parental separations may have contributed to these broader developments.

Parental divorce can affect partnership formation behavior by influencing the willingness for forming different types of unions or the possibilities for doing so. Regarding the former, previous literature has suggested that children of divorce “grow up faster” (Weiss 1979) and leave home earlier, thus paving the way to earlier union formation (e.g. Wolfinger 2005). Regarding the latter, parental divorce may have lasting effects on psychological well-being, relationship skills, or ability for commitment, which may make it more difficult to form and maintain co-residential unions. The effects of parental divorce can also vary depending on the type of union being established. Children of divorce can be more negative towards marriage or more aware of its limitations and more positive about cohabitation (Amato 1988; Axinn and Thornton 1996). These different mechanisms lead to different hypotheses regarding the timing of union formation of different types of union formation.

Previous research has generally not considered the possibility that the role of parental divorce in union formation behavior may vary across different societal circumstances. Yet there are good reasons to expect such variation. The role of cohabitation in family formation has varied noticeably across countries and over time (Kiernan 2000; Heuveline and Timberlake 2004).

The relative propensity of children of divorce to enter a consensual union—who generally are seen as being more permissive to non-marital family forms (Thornton 1991; Axinn and Thornton 1996; Ongaro and Mazzucco 2010)—can thus be very different when premarital cohabitation remains avantgarde behavior compared to societies where it is normative (cf. Cherlin, Kiernan and Chase-Lansdale 1995:313). Furthermore, the results concerning parental divorce and entry into marriage have varied from a negative association between parental separation and entry into marriage via no association to a positive one, suggesting that contextual factors shape this association (Wolfinger 2003).

Objective

The overall objective of this paper was to improve understanding of how parental divorce was associated with partnership formation patterns across different social contexts. For this, we analyzed event-history data on partnership formation behavior of women from 18 countries that took part in the Fertility and Families Surveys (FFS) (later supplemented with data from the Gender and Generations Surveys). The countries included are Austria, Austria, Flanders (Belgium), Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, East Germany, West Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the USA.

More specifically, we had the following specific objectives. Firstly, we asked whether parental divorce and separation were associated with

- entry into first union
- entry into cohabitation versus marriage as the first union, and
- eventual marriage in our 18 countries.

Our choice of these outcomes was motivated by our interest in shedding light into the partnership formation process more generally. Does parental divorce affect timing of first union formation? Does it affect whether the first union is a cohabitation or marriage? Even if children of divorce are more likely to cohabit, does this mean that they are later less likely to marry?

Closely linked to the first objective, we secondly asked whether these patterns vary across countries and cohorts. As discussed above, there are various reasons to expect such variation but are these expected differences systematic, that is, statistically significant? Finally, we want to link this expected variation to macro-level measures.

Data and methods

In the first part of this study, we have used data for 18 countries from the Fertility and Families Surveys (FFS); in later versions these will be supplemented by available data from the Gender and Generations Studies. To analyze the effects of parental divorce on entry into first coresidential union and entry into marriage (with or without prior cohabitation) using discrete-time event-history analysis. We use competing-risks event-history models to analyze parental divorce and type of first union (direct marriage or unmarried cohabitation). Our main independent variable is parental divorce. We use a limited set of available control variables: year of birth, age (starting age 15 for cohabitation, 17 for marriage), age squared, number of siblings the mother gave birth to, and the size of locality the respondent grew up in.

Preliminary results with the Fertility and Families Surveys

A striking feature of our findings is the little cross-national variation found (Table 1). In almost all countries, women with divorced parents entered a co-residential union—and in particular, non-married cohabitation—at an earlier age. We find indications of lower rates of direct marriage for the children of divorce in six of the countries, but parental divorce effects in only two countries (France (negative effect) and Latvia (positive effect)). These results suggest that children of divorce entered cohabitation at an earlier age, but did not differ in eventual marriage. Children of divorce might thus have been more open to cohabitation as a trial marriage, which can reflect both non-traditional valuations and acknowledgement of the difficulties often inherent in intimate long-term relationships. It seems, therefore, that children of divorce were more likely to cohabit as a precursor to marriage rather than its alternative, and to cohabit as an alternative to waiting to be married before starting a life together.

Table 1 Parental divorce and partnership formation: discrete-time event-history analysis.

	First union		First union, competing risks				Ever married?	
	b	s.e.	Marriage		Cohabitation		b	s.e.
Austria	0.20**	0.06	-0.33**	0.10	0.46**	0.07	-0.07	0.06
Flanders ¹	0.28**	0.08	-0.05	0.10	1.11**	0.13	-0.11	0.08
Czech	0.25**	0.08	0.01	0.11	0.65**	0.13	0.07	0.09
Finland ¹	0.36**	0.07	0.22†	0.11	0.37**	0.09	0.04	0.08
France ²	0.20**	0.06	-0.27**	0.12	0.40**	0.07	-0.20**	0.08
E-Germany	0.23**	0.06	-0.17†	0.09	0.68**	0.08	-0.03	0.07
W-Germany	0.30**	0.08	-0.15	0.14	0.54**	0.09	0.04	0.09
Greece	0.16	0.12	-0.08	0.17	0.42**	0.19	-0.02	0.13
Hungary	0.15**	0.06	-0.03	0.07	0.78**	0.11	0.02	0.06
Italy	0.34**	0.11	0.16	0.13	1.30**	0.23	0.16	0.12
Latvia	0.27**	0.06	0.05	0.08	0.63**	0.10	0.13*	0.06
Lithuania	0.11†	0.07	0.04	0.07	0.65**	0.18	0.07	0.06
Poland	0.19†	0.10	0.10	0.11	1.19**	0.32	0.09	0.11
Spain	0.34**	0.10	0.07	0.12	1.29**	0.18	0.06	0.11
Sweden	0.28**	0.06	-0.42†	0.24	0.36**	0.06	-0.05	0.08
Switzerland	0.37**	0.07	0.14	0.12	0.44**	0.08	0.02	0.07
United States ¹	0.18**	0.03	-0.21**	0.04	0.56**	0.04	-0.03	0.03

Control variables (not shown): age, age squared, year of birth, type/size of location during childhood, number of siblings. *Notes:* ¹ No type of location during childhood; ² No type of location during childhood and number of siblings. + p<0.1, * p<0.05, ** p<0.01

What about change, did the importance of parental divorce change as its experience became more common and family formation patterns in general went through change? Table 2 reports results from models in which parental divorce was interacted with birth cohort. It reproduced Wolfinger's (2003) finding of increasingly later marriage (direct marriage in particular) among the children of divorce in the United States. There, children of divorce also delayed

union formation in general more than those from intact families. Regarding marriage (both direct and overall) we see similar patterns also in some other countries, but less change in entering cohabitation as the first union (with Austria being the most clear exception) or overall first union formation (this even occurring earlier in Flanders, East-Germany, Lithuania, and Switzerland). Regarding ever marrying, the direct effects of parental divorce from these models (not shown) actually suggest that children of divorce were marrying earlier in the younger cohorts; in other words, they postponed marriage more than those from intact families, first approaching them in age at marriage and later possibly marrying later. Together with less change in the timing of entering cohabitation, this suggests that children of divorce were in the forefront for opting for cohabitation as a more permanent arrangement.

These preliminary results suggest that the different family changes—in fertility, divorce, cohabitation, and marriage—may have been to an extent mutually enforcing. An experience of parental divorce led to an increased propensity to enter cohabitation—as a trial marriage and alternative to waiting for marriage before moving in with the partner. The increasing delays in marriage in younger cohorts of some countries may suggest that with advancing family change children of divorce might again have been in the forefront by seeing unmarried cohabitation as a more permanent arrangement. Later results with new data (GGS) and macro-level indicators on societies' economic development and family change will shed deeper insights into these processes.

Table 2 Change in the effects of parental divorce and union formation? Interaction coefficients between birth cohort (linear) and parental divorce

	First union	First union, competing risks		Ever married?
		Marriage	Cohabitation	
Austria	-0.00	-0.02†	-0.02**	-0.01
Flanders ¹	0.04*	0.01	0.04†	0.01
Czech	-0.00	-0.03*	-0.01	-0.02†
Finland ¹	-0.00	-0.02	0.01	-0.02*
E-Germany	0.04*	0.01	0.02	0.01
W-Germany	-0.00	-0.01	-0.03†	0.00
Greece	-0.03†	-0.04*	-0.03	-0.03*
Hungary	0.01	-0.00	0.01	-0.01
Italy	-0.01	-0.03†	-0.01	-0.02†
Latvia	-0.01	-0.03†	0.01	-0.02*
Lithuania	0.02*	0.01	0.03	0.01
Poland	-0.02†	-0.01	-0.03	-0.01
Spain	-0.01	-0.02†	-0.01	-0.02†
Sweden	-0.01	-0.02	-0.01	0.00
Switzerland	0.02*	0.00	0.01	0.00
United States ¹	-0.01†	-0.03*	-0.01	-0.01*

Control variables (not shown): age, age squared, year of birth, size of location during childhood, number of sibs

Notes: ¹ No type of location during childhood; ² No type of location during childhood and number of siblings

+ p<0.1, * p<0.05, ** p<0.01