

## **Parental divorce and union formation: a comparison of 18 countries**

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### **Abstract**

Parental divorce may have far-reaching consequences on educational outcomes, psychological well-being, and family demographic behavior. Previous research has documented how parental divorce is associated with a heightened risk of dissolution of one's own marriage in various countries (Dronkers and Härkönen 2008). There has been less research on the implications of parental divorce on union formation behavior, and the existing studies show some conflicting patterns. In this study, we analyze the relationships between parental divorce and union formation outcomes in 18 countries. As outcomes, we analyze entry into first cohabitation and entry into first marriage. We expect that parental divorce is associated with higher rates of entry to cohabitation, but lower rates of marriage, and that the strength of these associations varies across countries. We aim to link this expected variation to macro-level factors that measure features of the family institution, degree of economic development, social and family policies. We use data for women from the Fertility and Family Surveys (FFS) for Austria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Flanders, France, East Germany, West Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United States. The outcomes will be analyzed simultaneously with data and methods for interlinked processes (e.g., Steele 2008).

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### **Extended abstract**

There is a wide literature on the short- and long-term consequences of parental divorce. Among other outcomes, previous research has considered the relationships between parental divorce and family demographic behavior. Possibly the best-documented relationship concerns the elevated risk of divorce found among those with divorced parents (e.g. Wolfinger 2005; Dronkers and Härkönen 2008). There has been less research on the effects of parental divorce on union formation. Furthermore, the existing literature points to somewhat

conflicting results. For example, Wolfinger (2003; 2005) documented how the relationship between parental divorce and the timing of marriage has varied across cohorts of Americans so that in earlier cohorts, children of divorce were marrying earlier than those from intact families, whereas in the later cohorts this relationship has been reversed. In both cases, however, children of divorce were likely to marry as teenagers. For other countries, Cherlin and associates (1995) found that British children of divorce were more likely to cohabit, and cohabit earlier, but no more or less likely to be married, than children who grew up in intact families (cf. also Kiernan and Hobcraft 1997). Given these somewhat conflicting findings, a lack of a comprehensive outlook on the relationships between parental divorce and union formation, and the general lack of cross-national research on the topic, we will in this paper analyze and describe the relationships between parental divorce and union formation in 18 countries. As outcomes, we look at entry into cohabitation and entry into marriage. Therefore, our first research questions are:

- a) Is parental divorce related to entry into first cohabitation?
- b) Is parental divorce related to entry into marriage?

These processes are closely interrelated. For example, the shift in the association between parental divorce and entry to marriage has been partly explained by the increasingly acceptable alternative of non-marital cohabitation (Wolfinger 2003). Therefore, it is necessary to model these different aspects of family formation as simultaneous processes (e.g. Steele 2008). It is important to know whether the recent results pointing to delayed marriage among the children of divorce are due to a reduced transformation rate of cohabitation to marriage, the stronger likelihood that children of divorce separate from their coresidential unions, or delays in forming unions, whether coresidential or marital, in the first place. We therefore ask the following, additional questions:

- c) Is there a relationship between parental divorce and transitions from cohabitation to marriage?
- d) Is there a relationship between parental divorce and separations from coresidential unions?

Above, we pointed out a general lack of cross-nationally comparative research on this topic. Therefore, we further want to investigate the extent to which the relationships between

parental divorce and union formation are similar across countries. To do this, we compare eighteen countries: Austria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Flanders, France, East Germany, West Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United States. Thus, our final research question is:

e) Do the relationships between parental divorce and family formation vary cross-nationally?

In our earlier work on the relationships between parental and own divorce, we found a positive relationship in all of our countries except Poland (Dronkers and Härkönen 2008). We also found some variation in the strength of this relationship, which varied according to the prevalence of divorce in the parental generation. Building on previous work, we expect that children of divorce have a higher likelihood of cohabiting in each country. We further expect that the relationship between parental divorce and entry into marriage varies across countries. Our preliminary results support these expectations. More generally, we expect that parental divorce is positively related to non-marital union formation, whether in terms of entry to cohabitation or (lower) rates of transition from cohabitation to marriage, or fertility. This prediction follows results showing less trust in marriage (despite positive attitudes toward it), lower rates of marriage and higher rates of divorce among children of divorce. We furthermore expect that these relationships vary (across countries and cohorts) by the degree to which non-marital family formation is acceptable and commonplace (Heuveline and Timberlake , family policies are more developed, and with a higher general degree of economic “modernization”).

### **Data and methods**

We analyze these issues using data for women from the Fertility and Families Surveys for the above-mentioned countries. Although these data are somewhat outdated, they remain a highly valuable source for cross-national research on family demography (as the Gender and Generations Surveys are yet to widely available to numerous countries). Given the limited number of family background variables available, the analyses will be primarily descriptive. Similar to our previous work on the topic, we link these data also to macro-level data on family change, family and social policies, and economic development (Dronkers and Härkönen 2008). The data will be analyzed using multilevel multiprocess event-history methods (e.g. Steele 2008).

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