Parental divorce and partnership formation: A cross-national study

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Background

- Parental divorce associated with various children's outcomes, including partnership formation and dissolution patterns

- The intergenerational transmission of divorce maybe the best documented, and pretty universal

- Associations between parental divorce and partnership formation less researched outside US and UK and results somewhat less conclusive
Research questions

• What is the association between parental divorce and
  a) entry into first union,
  b) type of first union (cohabitation vs marriage), and
  c) eventual entry into marriage?

• Do these patterns vary cross-nationally and across cohorts?

• Are they associated with observed macro-level measures?
Parental divorce and partnership formation: theory

Parental divorce can affect: a) Children's willingness and b) Their possibilities to form relationships

• Children of divorce can be more negative toward relationships or be more aware of their limitations
→ **Less willing (likely) to form relationships**

• Children of divorce mature earlier, may have “an inner neediness to form romantic relationships” or find these as a way to escape a stressful parental home
→ **More willing (likely) to form relationships**
Parental divorce and entry to marriage: theory

- Alternatively, children of divorce can be “less attractive candidates” if they are more likely to, e.g., have lower social skills or be more likely to end relationships → children of divorce less likely to form relationships
Different patterns for marriage and (premarital) cohabitation?

- Despite cross-national variation, marriage is a more institutionalized and formal relationship, so parental divorce may have different effects.

- Previous studies have found children of divorce to be more likely to cohabit, and start cohabiting earlier.

- Controversial results for marriage:
  - In particular, Wolfinger (2003) claimed that in the US the association has changed from a positive to a negative one.
Cross-national variation?

- The country context may shape the effects of parental divorce on partnership formation.
- For example, acceptance of cohabitation may make it a more attractive option compared to marriage, especially for children of divorce.
- Or, it may also mean that gaps are smaller.
- When parental divorce is rare, it may be a more stressful experience, leading to wider differences.
- Economic prosperity and social welfare may reduce the incentive to form unions for economic reasons.
Data

- Fertility and Families Surveys, women from 18 countries
  - AT, BE (Flanders), CZ, EST, FIN, FR, LAT, LIT, DDR, FRG, GR, HUN, IT, POL, ESP, SWE, SWI, USA
- Dependent variables: entry into first union, entry into different union types, entry into marriage
- Main independent variable: parental divorce
- Controls (different countries): cohort, age, age2, N sibs, locality size
Data

• Macro-level measures from various sources (see Härkönen and Dronkers 2006, Eur. Soc. Review)
• Index of the prevalence of “unconventional families”
  – Measures how much family life detached from the institution of marriage
• % kids in cohort who experienced parental divorce
• % social expenditure of GDP
• GDP level
Methods

Discrete-time event history models

1. Entry into first union
2. Entry into first union: cohab vs marry (competing risks)
3. Entry into marriage
   • Start age: 15 for cohabitation, 17 for marriage
   • Censoring: interview, age 45
   • Cross-national analysis: interactions with macro-terms (multilevel)
First union (log odds)
First union: cohabitation (log Odds)
First union: direct marriage (log odds)
Ever marry? (log odds)
Cohort change? First union
Cohort change? First union: Cohabitation
Cohort change? First union: Marriage

Graph showing changes in marriage trends for various countries, indicated with bars in white, blue, and red colors.
Cohort change? Ever marry?
## Results: Macro-level interactions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>First union</th>
<th>1st cohab.</th>
<th>1st marr.</th>
<th>Ever marr.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>* Unconv. families</td>
<td>0.008***</td>
<td>-0.001</td>
<td>0.013***</td>
<td>0.007***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Unconv. Families^2</td>
<td>-0.000**</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>-0.000***</td>
<td>-0.000**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* % Parental divorce</td>
<td>0.146</td>
<td>0.309</td>
<td>0.244</td>
<td>0.205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* GDP/1000</td>
<td>-0.000+</td>
<td>-0.000***</td>
<td>-0.000***</td>
<td>-0.000***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* % social expenditure</td>
<td>-0.004</td>
<td>-0.016**</td>
<td>-0.024***</td>
<td>-0.021***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Summary

- Women with divorced parents formed their first unions earlier
  - These were more likely to be cohabitations
- There were few differences—across all cohorts—in the propensity to marry directly
  - Existing differences were mainly about postponement
- Even fewer differences in eventual marriage rates
- Suggests that children of divorce more careful about marriage, but cohabitation was more a stage in family formation than a permanent alternative to marriage
Summary

• There were few cohort differences in the timing of first unions...
• ...and few differences in change in forming cohabiting unions
• But more postponement in marrying directly, and marrying overall
• Children of divorce were more likely to postpone union formation—and marriage in particular—in richer countries with generous welfare states
• Maybe unlike expected, gaps in union formation—and marriage particularly—were largest in most conventional and most unconventional family settings
A preliminary interpretation

- These results give support to hypotheses that
  - Children of divorce were likely to form unions earlier
  - But they were also more careful about marriage and started by cohabiting
  - In this they were “family forerunners”
  - But generally were as likely to marry (cohabitation as a step in the family formation), but less so in wealthier welfare states (marriage less an economic necessity)
  - When families marriage-centered, children of divorce forerunners in cohabiting → later gaps diminish as cohabitation becomes more common in family formation → in the latest stage divorce kids forerunners again in forgoing marriage????
Thank you!