

Parental separation and leaving home: Comparison of 16 European countries

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Short abstract (150 words)

Previous research shows that parental separation is an important predictor of leaving parental home; young adults who experience a parental separation leave their home earlier than young adults from intact families. Most studies are conducted in single countries, while it can be expected that the societal context is important in understanding the link between parental separation and home-leaving. Therefore, we analyse this link for 16 countries from the Generations and Gender Programme to examine whether there is cross-national variation in the link between parental separation and home-leaving and if so, how this variation can be explained. Results show considerable cross-national variation in the link between parental separation and home-leaving. Parental separation has a stronger impact on leaving home in countries that offer more scope for agency and human development. In these countries, young adults have more freedom and autonomy to leave their home if something negatives happened, like parental separation.

Introduction & Theoretical background

Since ever more children experience a parental separation, there is a growing body of literature examining the impact of parental separation on children's life-course transitions (e.g. union formation and dissolution, birth of first child). Only a few studies have analyzed the link between parental separation and the timing of leaving the parental home, although leaving the parental home is one of the first major events during the transition to adulthood with important consequences for young adults (e.g. Blaauboer & Mulder, 2010; Mencarini et al., 2012). In the current study we take a closer look at the process of leaving home. More specifically, we examine, next to the impact of parental separation on the timing of leaving home, two pathways out of the parental home: leaving home to live without a partner and leaving home to live with a partner. We distinguish between these two pathways, because the motives of young adults to leave the parental home can be different. For example, leaving home to get married and leaving home for educational reasons are different processes with different causes and effects (Blaauboer & Mulder, 2010). We expect that experiencing a parental separation will lead to a higher risk of leaving home for both pathways out of the parental home, but we expect the strongest effects of parental separation for leaving home to live without a partner.

Moreover, we will examine this link from a cross-national comparative perspective. Most existing studies on this topic are conducted in single countries, mostly in the US or Northern European countries. Only the study of Mencarini and colleagues (2012) examined the link between parental separation and leaving home cross-nationally for 6 European countries. In the current study, we will analyze data on 16 European countries from the Generations and Gender Programme (GGP). First of all, we expect cross-national variation in the link between parental divorce and the timing of leaving home. Second, we test two possible but contradictory country-level explanations for this variation. One hypothesis is related to the commonness of divorce

within a country; it can be expected that in countries where divorce is more common, the impact of parental separation is weaker than in countries where divorce is less common. Experiencing a parental divorce is stigmatized in countries with a low divorce rate, while this is less the case in countries with a higher divorce rate. On the other hand, it can be expected that the impact of parental separation on leaving home is stronger in countries where the focus is on self-realization, autonomy and agency (higher score on Human Development Index) compared to countries that are less human developed. In countries that are highly developed, young adults are less hampered by their family background and have more freedom/opportunities to leave their parental home, especially if something negative happened, like a parental separation. This hypothesis is contradictory to the first one, since most countries that offer more scope for agency and human development also have a higher divorce rate.

Data & Methods

We test these different hypotheses using data from the GGP, which is a set of national Generations and Gender Surveys (GGS) of which we can use 16 countries. In this study, we analyze the risk of leaving the parental home. Young adults are at risk from age 15 onwards, because if young adults left their home before age 15 it is very likely that it is due to special circumstances instead of the transition to adulthood. We focus on young adults born from 1960 onwards.

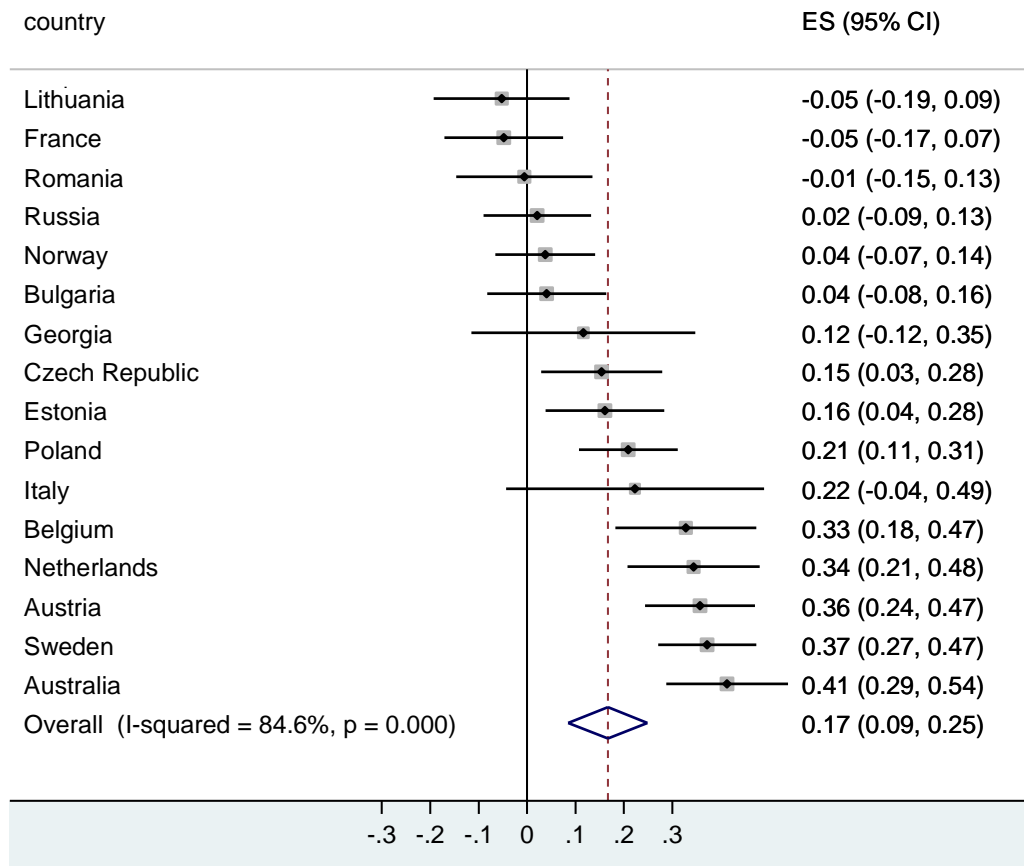
Next to parental separation as our main independent variable, we include the average educational level of both parents, respondents' own educational level and educational enrolment in the models. Individuals' educational level and enrolment are time-varying variables. With regard to the country level indicators, we use the average crude divorce rate from 1970 until 2011 (United Nations, 2009; 2013) and the average Human Development Index from 1990 – 2013 (United Nations Development Programme, 2017).

Discrete-time hazard models are estimated for each country separately to obtain the estimate and standard error of the effect of parental separation on the rate of leaving home. Next, we use meta-analysis and meta-regression to examine whether cross-national variation in this effect exists and whether this variation is related to country-level indicators.

Preliminary results

In Figure 1 and 2, we show the first preliminary results for women. Figure 1 shows that, overall, there is a significant impact of parental separation on the timing of leaving parental home. Young adults who experienced a parental separation leave their parental home earlier than young adults from intact families ($b = .17$). However, when looking at the country-specific results, for only half of the countries there is significant association between parental separation and leaving home. Moreover, Figure 1 also shows that there is considerable cross-national variation in the link between parental divorce and the timing of leaving home ($I^2 > 50\%$).

Figure 1. The effect of parental separation on the timing of leaving parental home for women for 16 European countries. Meta-analysis with discrete-time event-history models.



Note: controlled for age and squared term, birth year and squared term, parental education, individuals own education and enrolment.

In a next step we examine whether we can explain this cross-national variation in the link between parental separation and leaving home. Results from Figure 2 show that in countries where agency, freedom and self-realization are more central and where young adults can develop themselves better (higher score on Human Development Index), the impact of parental divorce on leaving home is stronger. In these countries, young adults have more freedom and autonomy to leave their parental home, especially if something negative happened, like a parental separation. Young adults are less hampered by their family background and can realize their preferences if they want to leave their parental home. Results, not shown in this abstract, also show that the average crude divorce rate does not explain the cross-national variation.

Figure 2. The association between the effect of parental separation on leaving home and the average Human Development Index. ($b = 1.45$, $p = .025$)



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