

What are the risks, for children, of family disruption? European comparisons

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Short abstract (223 mots)

This study applies an original approach by adopting the child's standpoint to measure changes in the risk of family disruption (i.e. parental breakup) by child's age and cohort, and to identify the parental characteristics associated with the highest risk of childhood exposure to disruption. Data from the GGS surveys conducted in the 2000s in several European countries can be used for these analyses as they include complete family event histories of adult respondents (birth of children, union formation and separation). Pursuing research already carried out in France, then extended to Russia, we broaden the comparison to other European countries in the Generations and Gender programme (Austria, Norway, Netherlands, and possibly Germany) to identify the countries where the risk of childhood exposure to parental separation is highest, and to see whether the characteristics of the most unstable parental couples are shared across countries. In particular, we want to find out whether differences between married and unmarried parents are narrowing, and whether the effect of educational level is identical in all countries. The risk of disruption by age and cohort is calculated by means of longitudinal and/or cross-sectional analysis. We then model the risk of disruption before certain ages (5 years then 10 years) using a logistic regression to verify the effect of the various characteristics of the parental couple, all other things being equal.

Long abstract

Objectives, sources and methods

This study has a dual objective:

- To measure changes in the risk that children born to a couple will experience parental separation during their childhood, and to compare disruption frequencies in different European countries.
- To see whether the parental sociodemographic characteristics associated with the highest risk of childhood exposure to family disruption are the same in different countries (for example, the effect of marriage, non-marital cohabitation, educational level, age at union formation, etc.).

In particular, we want to find out whether differences between married and unmarried parents are narrowing, and whether the effect of educational level is identical in all countries (Kennedy and Thomson, 2010).

This work is based on data from the GGS surveys conducted in Europe in the 2000s, looking at the question from the children's viewpoint. In addition to France, we will include Austria, Norway, the Netherlands and possibly Germany if data quality so permits (Kreyenfeld, M. et al., 2010). We reconstitute the family event history of children born to a couple, from their birth to age 15, using the marital life-event history of their mother to determine whether parental breakup (excluding the father's death) occurred during their first 15 years. We use the mother's responses rather than those of the father, which tend to be less reliable (Breton and Prioux, 2009; Breton, Popova and Prioux, 2009).

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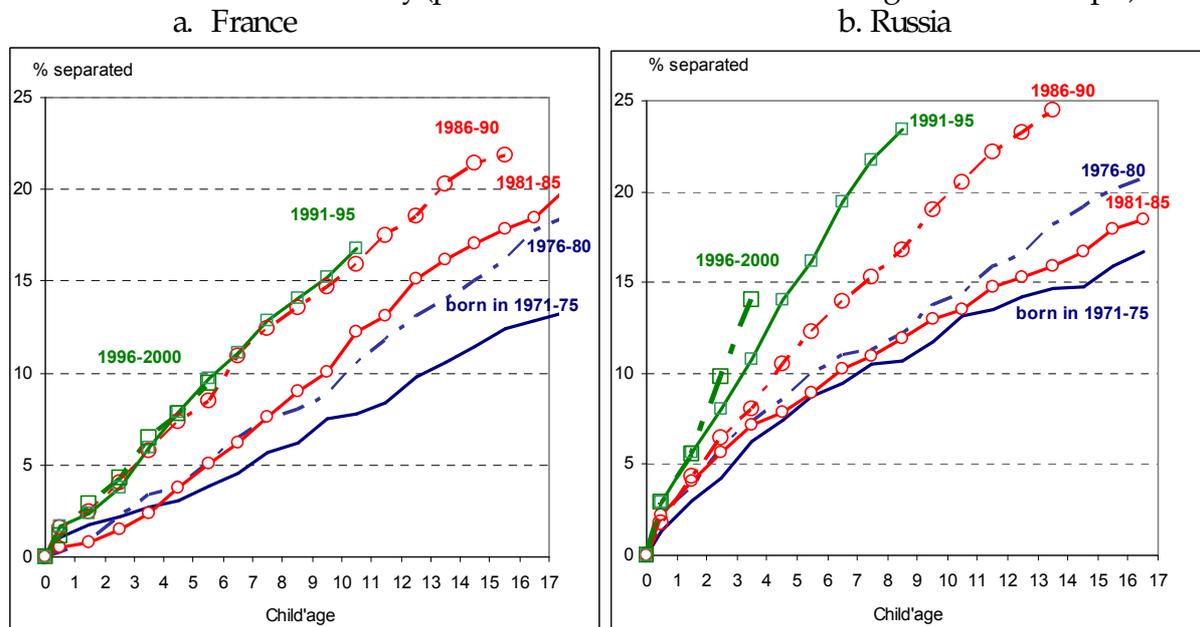
Initial findings

The first results concern France and Russia. They will be extended to the other European countries mentioned above.

Family disruption by child's age and cohort

The risk of parental disruption is much higher in Russia than in France, where the upward trend has slowed considerably in recent cohorts. In Russia, risks have increased sharply for children born since the early 1980s (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Proportion of children whose parents are already separated at each age by birth cohort, in the absence of mortality (per 100 children born to a cohabiting or married couple)



Population: Children born between 1970 and 2000 whose mother was living in a couple the year of their birth.

Interpretation: in France, among children born in 1971-1975 to a cohabiting or married couple, 5% experienced parental disruption before age 7, versus 12% of children born in 1991-1995. In Russia, the percentages are 10% and 20%, respectively, for the same cohorts of children.

Sources: Breton, Popova and Prioux (2009) based on data from ERFI/GGS1 2005 (France), and GGS 2004 (Russia).

Characteristics associated with risks of family disruption

The proportion of children whose parents are already separated (excluding father's death) at certain ages is modelled. The main variables entered into the model are:

- Child's year of birth
- Mother's age at union formation
- Age difference between parents
- Union status (marital or non-marital union) at the time of child's birth
- Duration of union at time of the couple's first birth

- Existence or not of at least one child from a previous union of the respondent or her partner.
- Mother's level of education (that of the father is not recorded in the survey)
- Whether the majority of the mother's childhood was spent with her biological parents
- Mother's degree of religiosity

These are variables generally known to be associated with differentials in the probability of union dissolution and that are available in the GGS survey.

In Russia, as in France, it is the existence of a half-sibling at the time of the child's birth (i.e. the father or mother already has a child from a previous union) which exposes a child to the highest risk of family disruption: having already experienced a separation after the birth of a child, or having had a child outside a union increases the risk that children of a subsequent union will experience another break-up. In France but not in Russia, not being married at the time of the child's birth has an almost equally strong effect, indicating that marriage plays a protective role in France but not in Russia. The mother's family situation during her childhood also plays a role, though a smaller one, in both countries, and in Russia the risk of parental breakup increases slightly with the mother's educational level.

Other parental characteristics – higher age at entry into union, longer union duration at the time of the birth, religious practice – reduce the risk of family disruption.

Hence in France, as in Sweden (Kennedy and Thomson, 2010) and the United States (Manning et al., 2004), being born to an unmarried couples is always associated with a higher probability of parental separation, but this is not the case in Russia. In the French data, the mother's educational level does not appear to play a role, while in Russia the effect is the reverse of that observed in Sweden, where children whose mother has a degree in higher education are less likely to experience parental breakup (Kennedy and Thomson, 2010).

Analysis of the GGS surveys in other countries will enable us to verify the link between risks of family disruption for children and these two variables, and to explore the reasons behind these differences between countries.

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