

Changing patterns of union dissolution: a meta-analysis on the role of education

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Abstract

A large body of empirical studies has been conducted with the aim to investigate the role of education for the changes in union dissolution in Europe. These studies led to inconsistent findings, however. This paper aims at assessing the relationship between educational attainment and the incidence of divorce by systematizing the existing empirical evidence on the topic. To this end a quantitative literature review (a meta-analysis) is conducted. It allows us to assess the relationship in a quantitative manner and to investigate its temporal and cross-country variation, net of the across-study differences. The paper contributes to the discussion on the impact of the country context on union dissolution. It also investigates whether a failure to account for some specific information (such as job characteristics or social background) may result in a bias to the estimated effect of education on marriage dissolution.

Background and objective

Europe has been experiencing a rapid transformation in the patterns of union dissolution since several decades. Although there is a lot of cross-country variation in the intensity of the change and the current incidence of various family behaviors, the temporal trend has been everywhere the same: the number of marriages ending in divorce has risen, even in countries with traditionally strong attachment to family and Catholic values (i.e. Southern European countries, Poland).

In general terms, a new behavior in the population does not appear all of a sudden; rather, it emerges among certain population sub-groups first (the so-called trendsetters, or prior adopters), and later, if "appealing", it spreads to others (Rogers 1962; Mahajan and Peterson 1985). Two major explanations of the ongoing transformation of union formation and dissolution were formulated in the literature, the first referring to ideational change (Van de Kaa 2001, Lesthaeghe and Surkyn 2002, Sobotka et al. 2003, Lesthaeghe and Neidert 2006) and the second to the pattern of disadvantage (Perrelli-Harris and Gerber 2010, Perelli-Harris et al. 2010). The first explanation presupposes the ongoing change to have been driven by the highest social strata, may easily choose to dissolve an unsatisfactory union being well-equipped in financial and intellectual resources and. By contrast, the proponents of the second hypothesis see the reasons behind the increase in the incidence of divorce in the increase of structural constraints to family formation, such as legal or economic ones, which can affect behaviors of the less educated members of the society particularly strongly. These persons may experience stronger marital strain because of greater socio-economic hardship that in turn may lead to a marriage breakdown.

Large body of empirical studies has been conducted with the aim to investigate the causes behind the growing incidence of divorce and to test the validity of the two competing hypotheses. Educational attainment, considered as a measure of individual social status, earning potential, labour market performance and intellectual abilities, but also as a marker of individual autonomy and independence of social norms, was one of the major explanatory variables used in statistical models explaining variation in union formation and dissolution. These studies have led to inconsistent findings, however. Whereas in some countries a positive educational gradient in divorce was found (in the Netherlands - Poortman and Kalmijn (2002) and in Italy - De Rose 1992, Vignoli and Ferro 2009), in others a negative relationship was established (Nordic countries - Kravdal and Noack 1989, also when husbands' education is controlled for - Jalovaara 2001, 2003; Lyngstad 2004).

Similarly inconsistent findings were established as regards the relationship between women's education and marital disruption, ranging, for instance, from a positive association for the Netherlands by Poortman and Kalmijn (2002) and for Italy (e.g., De Rose 1992; Vignoli and Ferro 2009), to a negative association for the Nordic countries (Kravdal and Noack 1989), also when husbands' education is controlled for (Jalovaara 2001, 2003; Lyngstad 2004). This variety of empirical results may suggest that the relationship between the social status and the choice of divorce is mediated by country-specific factors, like for instance the country institutional context (i.e. level of public support for lonely mothers, complexity of divorce procedures and related costs) or cultural context (social acceptance for the phenomenon).

Accordingly, the relationship of interest can also change over time. In this respect, the work of William J. Goode (1962, 1970, 1993) has been for decades since its first formulation the most influential reference for those studying the link between marital breakdown and societal factors. He argued that, at least initially, only the most "modern" couples would have the cultural and economic means to afford a divorce. As the social acceptability of divorce increases, the relationship between social status and divorce tends to become less significant and may even reverse its sign, so that, at the end of the process, marriage dissolution could be even more common at the bottom of the social hierarchy. This line of reasoning were further corroborated by the empirical analysis of Blossfeld et al. (1995) and Harkonen and Dronkers (2006).

This paper adds on to the ongoing debate on the relationship between educational attainment and marital disruption, thereby contributing to the discussion on the causes of changing patterns of union dissolution. Its aim is to assess this relationship in a quantitative manner and to investigate its temporal and cross-country variation. It also attempts to shed more light into how the institutional context may shape individual decisions regarding union formation and dissolution in Europe.

Research strategy: a meta-analysis

Instead of performing another comparative analysis on the impact of education on union dissolution we decided to make use of the existing abundance of empirical studies on the topic. To this end, we conducted a quantitative literature overview or in other words a meta-analysis. This methodology, relatively new in social sciences (e.g., Matysiak and Vignoli, 2008), has been developed in order to synthesise, combine, and interpret the abundance of empirical evidence on a certain topic. It offers a clear and systematic way to

compare results of different studies standardised for the country, the method applied, the control variables employed, the sample selected, etc. Meta-analysis bears certain advantages over the standard qualitative literature review as well as over conducting new cross-country comparative analysis that relies on single estimates. First, it allows for a quantitative assessment of the effect of interest, standardised for the across-study differences, which is not possible in the narrative overview (Stanley 2001). Second, the effect estimates obtained through meta-analysis have higher external validity than those obtained in an individual study due to generality of results across various research works (Shadish et al. 2002).

Our study focuses on the impact of education on marriage dissolution. We conducted an overview of available published research concerning Europe, following a three step procedure as recommended by Stuck et al. (1999): first we used Web of Science, a universal research database; second, we checked the references in existing articles; third, we asked experts for their recommendations. Our search was restricted to articles published after 1970. Only longitudinal studies were accepted for the analysis.

In the approach we adopted the single study estimates of the effect of education on divorce constituted statistical units of our observation. In the first step, they were used for obtaining summary indicators that described the magnitude of the relationship of interest. In the second step, these summary indicators were standardised for the across-study differences within a framework of a meta-regression. In this way, we were able to assess the variation in the effects of interest with respect to the contextual settings, net of the differences in the method applied, control variables employed, sample selected, etc. These findings were further juxtaposed with the temporal and cross-country variation in legal regulations relevant for union dissolution in order to shed more light into how the institutional context may shape individual choices. Furthermore, we investigated whether a failure to account for some specific information (such as job characteristics, social background, and so on) may result in the overestimation or and underestimation of the effect of education on marriage dissolution.

Expected findings

The meta-analyses are presently carried out. We expect to find substantial cross-country variation in the effect sizes of our interest and anticipate it will be in line with the cross-country variation in legal regulations on legalization of partnerships, rights and obligations of partners as well as the complexity of divorce procedures. We anticipate negative educational gradient in marital dissolution to be found countries with relatively easy divorce procedures that do not incur high financial costs. Finally, we also expect the

educational gradients in marital disruption to change over time as new forms of unions are becoming more accepted in the society and the legal regulations less restrictive.

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