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Summary

The main objective of this dissertation is to understand from a cross-nationally comparative perspective the link between family disadvantage and processes of union formation and dissolution. Previous studies show, in particular, that in a number of countries, young adults from advantaged families delay their first co-residential union, their first marriage, and often choose for cohabitation instead of marriage as first union compared to young adults from disadvantaged families. Thus, first of all, I analyze to what extent there is a link between family (dis)advantage and union formation and dissolution. In this dissertation, I focus on two indicators of family disadvantage that could influence union formation and dissolution of young adults, namely parental socio-economic status, measured by parental education and/or parental occupation (**Chapter 2, 3 & 5**) and parental separation (**Chapter 4**). With regard to union formation, I focus on both the timing of first co-residential union as well as the type of first union (**Chapter 2 & 4**), and the timing of first marriage (**Chapter 3 & 4**). Regarding union dissolution, which is the focus of **Chapter 5**, I analyze the dissolution from a childbearing union.

Second, a limitation of most existing research is that it has mostly examined the link between family (dis)advantage and union dynamics within a single societal context, while the link can be expected to vary between countries, due to cultural, economic and institutional differences between them. I focus on the Second Demographic Transition theory as a key explanation for this cross-national variation. According to the Second Demographic Transition theory, it can be expected that the impact of family disadvantage on union dynamics differs across societal contexts. The SDT theory argues that all countries will experience the consequences of growing individualization and the weakening of family ties, but starting at different points in time and with different speeds of diffusion. Because of these differences in the onset and speed of diffusion of these demographic and value-related changes, countries vary in the extent to which SDT-related values and behaviors have been adopted at a given point in time. Thus, in general, it can be expected that the impact of family (dis)advantage on young adults' union dynamics is weaker in countries that are further advanced in the SDT than in countries that are less advanced in the SDT. In more SDT-advanced countries, processes of individualization have progressed, making family ties less important. In each study a different SDT-indicator is used to test this general hypothesis.

In the four empirical studies, I used two large-scale and cross-national comparative datasets to answer the research questions, namely the third wave of the European Social Survey (ESS, 2006/2007 in **Chapter 2**) and the first wave of the Generations and Gender Programme (GGP, in **Chapter 3, 4 & 5**). Methodologically, a major innovative aspect of this dissertation is that I use meta-analytical tools instead of multilevel models to describe and explain cross-national variation in the link between family background and union formation and dissolution (see **Chapter 2, 3 & 5**).

The results for all four studies in this dissertation show, first of all, that family (dis)advantage, next to individual's own education, is an important determinant of union formation and dissolution processes. Young adults from disadvantaged backgrounds, for example, enter their first co-residential union, and their first marriage at an earlier age than the ones from advantaged backgrounds (**Chapter 2 & 3**). Moreover, children of divorce prefer unmarried cohabitation as first union and delay marriage compared to the ones from intact families (**Chapter 4**). Results with regard to union dissolution show that individuals from advantaged backgrounds have a higher risk to dissolve their union than the ones from disadvantaged backgrounds (**Chapter 5**).

The innovative aspect of this dissertation is the cross-national comparative perspective and the results of all four studies show that it is indeed important to take into account in which country young adults live when analyzing the link between family (dis)advantage and union dynamics, since this link varies considerably across countries. Moreover, results from this dissertation show that the Second Demographic Transition theory could partly explain the considerable cross-national variation in the link between family (dis)advantage and union dynamics. The country-specific cohabitation rate as SDT-indicator, for example, explains part of the cross-national variation in the link between parental SES and union formation (**Chapter 2**) and the divorce rate explains the cross-national variation in the link between parental SES and union dissolution (**Chapter 5**). However, one of the conclusions of this dissertation is that the SDT theory is not the complete explanation for the cross-national variation in the link between family (dis)advantage and union dynamics. On the one hand, the SDT offers a good explanation for part of the analyzed relationships, on the other hand it shows that it is more complicated than only related to the country-specific demographic and value changes, resulting from processes of individualization of secularization.