Chapter 1

Synthesis:
Cross-national variation in the link between family disadvantage and union formation and dissolution processes*

* This chapter benefited from the feedback of Aat Liefbroer and Harry Ganzeboom.
Abstract

The main objective of this dissertation is to understand the link between family disadvantage and union formation and dissolution processes from a cross-national comparative perspective. According to the Second Demographic Transition theory, it can be expected that the impact of family disadvantage on these union dynamics differs across societal contexts. What are the theoretical and empirical challenges of such a study? I answer these questions through a collection of four independent, but related empirical studies. This introductory chapter synthesizes the research aims, findings, conclusions and discussions of the four studies included in this dissertation.
1.1 Introduction

The family of origin plays an important role in the demographic choices that young adults make. There is a large body of literature linking the socio-economic conditions and living arrangements that young adults experienced during childhood to their timing of demographic choices (e.g. Barber, 2001; Kiernan & Hobcraft, 1997; McLanahan & Percheski, 2008; Sigle-Rushton et al., 2005). Previous studies show, in particular, that in a number of countries, young adults from advantaged or high-status families delay their first co-residential union, their first marriage, and the birth of the first child compared to young adults from disadvantaged or low-status families (e.g. Axinn & Thornton, 1992; Barber, 2001; Dahlberg, 2015; South, 2001; Wiik, 2009). A first and foremost explanation why higher parental socio-economic status delays the demographic choices of their offspring is that the delay is due to the educational level and enrollment of young adults themselves. Higher-SES parents are likely to have higher educational aspirations for their children than lower-SES parents. As a result, children of advantaged families are motivated to invest more and longer in their educational career, which often leads them to delay romantic unions or parenthood at young ages (e.g. Axinn & Thornton, 1992; South, 2001). However, next to this achieved status of young adults, many existing studies indicate that there still remains a significant impact of young adults’ ascribed status (e.g. Dahlberg, 2015; Mooyaart & Liefbroer, 2016; Wiik, 2009). Men and women with higher status parents tend to delay demographic transitions to later ages, even if one takes their level of education and actual enrollment in education into account. Explanations for this remaining link between family (dis)advantage and demographic choices are higher standards regarding their future partner or higher consumption aspirations among young adults from advantaged backgrounds (Axinn & Thornton, 1992; Easterlin, 1980; Oppenheimer, 1988). Another argument could be that high-SES parents socialize their children to enter a romantic union or a marriage at a later age than lower-SES parents (Wiik, 2009). Parents want to have a say in the union formation process, since it is one of the most serious decisions young adults face and which can have enduring negative consequences on the further life course if young adults form a union at an early age. Previous research shows, for example, that those who start a co-residential union young have a higher risk to dissolve that union compared with late starters (Lyngstad, 2006). A possible explanation why high-SES parents are more successful in persuading their offspring to avoid early entry into a union can be that these parents are more
aware of the potential negative consequences of choices made in the early life-course (Wiik, 2009).

Parental status influences not only the timing of demographic events, but also the actual choice of whether or not to make certain demographic choices, like cohabitation or union dissolution. Previous research shows that higher education has been associated with more liberal attitudes and values with regard to the choice to cohabit or to dissolve own’s union (Liefbroer & Billari, 2010; Lyngstad & Jalovaara, 2010). High-SES parents are likely to transmit these values to their children, which can result in a higher probability to cohabit, but also a higher risk to dissolve a union for young adults from advantaged backgrounds.

Family instability, and more specifically, whether parents have separated while their children were young could be another aspect of family (dis)advantage that influences the demographic choices of young adults. Of all the changes in family life during the last century, the increase in the rate of divorce is one of the most far-reaching in its implications and consequences both for adults themselves and for their children (Amato, 2000). Parental separation has often been shown to be a negative and stressful experience for children (Amato, 2000). Previous research shows that children with divorced parents experience more mental and physical health problems than do children from intact families (Amato, 2012). Parental separation is also shown to be an important determinant of several demographic choices of young adults. Individuals who experienced parental divorce, compared with individuals from intact families, are more likely to have nonmarital births, report more problems in their own marriages and are more likely to divorce themselves (Amato, 2014). Moreover, children of divorce often leave their parental home earlier, opt for cohabitation as their type of first co-residential union, and postpone marriage or even decide not to marry compared to young adults from intact families (e.g. Blaauboer & Mulder, 2010; Raab, 2017; Wolfinger, 2003).

With regard to young adults’ demographic choices, the focus in this dissertation is on union formation and dissolution, which I will call union dynamics from here onwards. Starting a co-residential union is one of the demographic choices that the majority of young adults make, but the timing, the type of union chosen and also the risk to dissolve a union are socially stratified. It is important to examine to what extent family (dis)advantage influences the union formation and dissolution process of young adults, since it can have potential negative consequences for their subsequent life course. People who enter a co-residential union at an
early age have, for example, a higher risk to dissolve this union (Berrington & Diamond, 1999). Moreover, previous research shows the consequences of unmarried cohabitation; cohabiters enjoy lower health quality, receive less social provisions and are also less committed to their relationship, which results in a higher risk to dissolve a union (e.g. Soons & Kalmijn, 2009). Finally, existing research also shows that people who dissolve a union can experience many negative consequences, such as lower well-being, economic hardship, and loss of emotional support (Amato, 2000).

The first research question this dissertation seeks to answer is:

**To what extent is there a link between family (dis)advantage and union formation and dissolution? And to what extent does this link between family (dis)advantage and union formation and dissolution remain, after taking young adults’ educational attainment into account?**

Answering this first research question will increase our understanding of how social inequalities in the family domain are produced and reproduced, providing fresh insights into one of the key questions in social science.

**Moderating role of the national context**

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 it can be expected to vary across countries, due to cultural, economic and institutional differences between countries. In societies where, for example, the family is more central, the effect of family (dis)advantage can be expected to be stronger than in societies in which individualism plays a greater role (Inglehart, 2006). A similar kind of expectation can also be formulated concerning the economic development of a country; in societies that are economically weaker, family (dis)advantage can be expected to have a stronger effect on demographic choices of young adults (Schneider & Hastings, 2015). This is because young people in these countries are more dependent on their parents and their resources. Welfare arrangements also play an important role here, because if a society has a non-generous welfare regime, young people are generally more dependent on their parents and their resources, so the influence of family
(dis)advantage can be expected to be stronger in these societies (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Bäckman, 2008).

In order to understand the role of demographic choices in producing and reproducing social inequalities from a cross-national comparative perspective, the studies reported in this dissertation, first of all, will establish whether cross-national variation exists in the link between family (dis)advantage and young adults’ union formation and dissolution processes. Moreover, the aim of this dissertation is to improve our understanding of why this cross-national variation in the link between family (dis)advantage and union dynamics comes about. To do so, I will focus on the Second Demographic Transition theory as a key explanation for this cross-national variation. I will elaborate on the choice of this theoretical orientation in the next section. The second research question this thesis, therefore, aims to answer is:

**To what extent does cross-national variation exist in the link between family (dis)advantage and union formation and dissolution? And to what extent can the Second Demographic Transition theory explain this variation across countries?**

Thus, next to the fact that it can be expected that family (dis)advantage influences the union dynamics of young adults, it can also be expected that this influence varies across countries and thus depends on the country in which young adults live.

Combining the family context with the societal context makes this dissertation innovative and relevant. The four studies, included in this dissertation, are one of the few cross-national comparative studies that analyze the link between family (dis)advantage and union formation and dissolution. Moreover, if we understand why family (dis)advantage is more important in some countries than in others, for example, due to differences in cultural norms and values, we have unraveled one piece of the bigger question why the level of social inequality differs considerably across countries.

### 1.2 Second Demographic Transition (SDT) theory

In order to analyze cross-national variation in the link between family (dis)advantage and union dynamics, I derived hypotheses mainly from one well-known demographic theory,
called the Second Demographic Transition (SDT) theory, first proposed by Lesthaeghe and Van de Kaa in 1986. It is called the Second Demographic Transition to mark a distinction with the First Demographic Transition. During the first demographic transition, which began in the early 1800s and continued into the early 1900s in Western industrialized countries, mortality and fertility declined mainly due to industrialization and in particular associated social and economic development, modernization, improvements in food supply and sanitation.

Since the 1960s/1970s, the SDT started and primary trends of this second transition include delays in fertility and marriage and increases in cohabitation, divorce and non-marital childbearing (McLanahan, 2004; Van de Kaa, 1987; Zaidi & Morgan, 2017). The Second Demographic Transition (SDT) theory has often been used to describe and explain cross-national variation in family and living arrangements (Lesthaeghe, 2010; Sobotka, 2008; Van de Kaa, 2001). According to SDT theory, the major demographic changes across Europe and North-America (e.g., decline in marriage rate, growth of cohabitation, and postponement of union formation) in the twentieth century are the result of changes in values and attitudes (Lappegård, Klüsener, & Vignoli, 2014; Lesthaeghe, 2010; Lesthaeghe & van de Kaa, 1986). According to the SDT theory, improved living standards, weakened normative regulation, and increased female autonomy have resulted in an increasing demand for self-development, autonomy and individualism (Lesthaeghe, 2010; Sobotka, 2008; Van de Kaa, 1987; 2001).

These value changes manifested themselves in various demographic changes, like increased acceptance of cohabitation, below-replacement fertility and rising divorce rates. Moreover, due to these value changes, important socializing institutions, such as the church and the family, have lost some of their grip on their members and wider society (Lesthaeghe, 2010; Sobotka, 2008). Processes of individualization and secularization imply that individuals enjoy more freedom of choice and attach greater importance to self-fulfillment, self-development and autonomy (Lesthaeghe, 2010). Due to this focus on autonomy, young adults may have become less responsive to their parents’ preferences and less dependent on their parents’ resources. It can, therefore, be expected that the impact of family (dis)advantage on their offspring’s union dynamics is weaker in more secularized and individualized societies.

The SDT theory argues that all countries will experience the consequences of growing individualization, secularization 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 (Lappegård et al., 2014; Sobotka, 2008). Earlier research shows that Sweden and Norway are SDT-forerunners (e.g., high cohabitation and divorce rates and high level of individualistic values), followed by Western, Eastern and Southern European countries (Lesthaeghe, 2010; Sobotka, 2008). Figures 1.1 and 1.2 show two SDT-indicators for 25 European countries from the ESS (2006), both related to unmarried cohabitation. The proportion of adults who cohabit as their first co-residential union is used as an institutional indicator (Figure 1.1), while the proportion of people who disapprove of unmarried cohabitation is used as an attitudinal indicator (Figure 1.2). For both figures, the SDT pattern is clearly visible. In Northern European countries the cohabitation rate is highest (more than 0.80, thus over 80%), followed by Western, Eastern and Southern European countries. Moreover, in Northern European countries, few people disapprove of unmarried cohabitation (less than 10%), while especially in Eastern European countries this proportion still above 0.30.

Both figures show considerable cross-national variation with regard to the demographic changes that all Western countries have experienced. Some countries are further advanced in these demographic changes, as suggested by the SDT theory, than other countries. Because of these country differences with regard to the SDT, the general cross-national hypothesis examined in this dissertation is 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 countries where the SDT and related individualization processes are more advanced, young adults can become detached from their disadvantaged family background, and develop themselves and make their own choices, while in countries where the SDT and individualization are less advanced, young adults are still very dependent on their parents and their preferences and resources. Therefore, I expect a weaker link between family (dis)advantage and union dynamics in countries where the SDT is more advanced. In all four studies of this dissertation this general hypothesis is tested, with every study including a different indicator for family (dis)advantage (e.g. parental SES and parental separation) and/or union dynamics (e.g. first union formation, marriage formation and union dissolution). Moreover, in each study a different SDT-indicator is used.
Figure 1.1. The proportion of adults who cohabit as their first co-residential union, born between 1960 and 1980.

Source: European Social Survey, 3rd wave (2006), own calculation. Cartography: Peter Ekamper / NIDI.

Figure 1.2. The proportion of adults who (strongly) disapprove unmarried cohabitation.

Source: European Social Survey, 3rd wave (2006), own calculation. Cartography: Peter Ekamper / NIDI.
1.3 Data & Methods

Data
In this dissertation, 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) and the first wave of the Generations and Gender Programme (GGP, see for more information Fokkema et al., 2016). Moreover, in some studies I added data on two additional countries, namely the United Kingdom and the United States, from the Harmonized Histories (HH) dataset which are made comparable to the GGP data (Perelli-Harris, Kreyenfeld & Kubisch, 2010).

In the first study of this dissertation, I used the ESS data. This dataset includes 25 European countries and consists of detailed information about parental socio-economic status (both education and occupation) and the timing of first union formation. Because the GGP has more detailed information about the whole partnership history of respondents, this dataset is used in the remainder of the studies (study 2 - 4) included in this dissertation. Moreover, information about parental separation and individuals’ own union dissolution was only available in the GGP data, making it the natural choice for study 3 and 4.

The definition of union dynamics in this dissertation
In three out of the four studies in this dissertation, union formation is the main dependent variable, but this variable is measured slightly different in each study (see also Table 1.1). In Study 1, I analyze the timing of young adults’ first co-residential union (irrespective of whether it is cohabitation or marriage) and the type of this first union (cohabitation or marriage). In Study 2, I focus on the timing of first marriage, but taking into account whether or not young adults cohabited before entry into marriage. In Study 3, I examine all these different measures of union formation, namely first co-residential union, the type of first union as well as first marriage in combination, but focus on parental separation, rather than parental SES as the key indicator of family (dis)advantage. In Study 4 of this dissertation, I focus on another aspect of union dynamics, namely union dissolution, or more precisely, the dissolution from a childbearing union.
The definition of family (dis)advantage in this dissertation

Although family (dis)advantage of young adults is the central concept throughout this dissertation, I focus on different aspects of this concept in the different empirical studies. In all four studies, I use the socio-economic status of parents as an indicator of family (dis)advantage. In Study 1, I measure parental SES by the occupation and education of both father and mother. In the second and the fourth study I only use the education of both parents as an indicator for parental SES, because the occupation of parents was not available for all the countries included in these studies. In Study 3, parental separation is the main independent variable measuring family disadvantage, but parental education is also included in all models. Next to parental education as the main independent variable, parental separation is also included in the fourth study.

Methods

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. The motivation for using meta-analytical tools is the relatively modest number of countries (N < 30) included in my empirical analyses. The standard error (SE) of country-level effects is underestimated in standard multilevel models if the number of countries is small, resulting in too many incorrect rejections of a true null hypothesis (Bryan and Jenkins, 2016). The meta-analytical tools that I use offer a more conservative test of our hypotheses than the multilevel approach.

As suggested by Bryan and Jenkins (2016), I use a two-step method, which is elsewhere known as meta-analysis (Snijders & Bosker, 2012). In the first step, I perform separate analyses for each country and use all these country-specific estimates and SEs to perform a meta-analysis of variance to test whether cross-national variation exists in the link between family (dis)advantage and union dynamics (Harris et al., 2008). In a second step, if substantial variation across countries is found, a meta-regression is performed to examine to what extent this cross-national variation can be explained by including several country-level indicators (Harbord & Higgins, 2008).

Only in study 3 do I use country fixed-effects models (thus, including country-dummies) instead of meta-analytical tools to study how the country context influences the relationship between parental separation and union formation. In this study, we are not only interested in
the differences between countries, but we also take the temporal dimension (change over historical time) into account.

1.4 Overview of dissertation

Table 1.1 provides an overview of the empirical studies in this dissertation. For each study, the table states the co-author(s), the dependent and independent variables, the data and methods used and the main conclusions.
Table 1.1 Overview of dependent and independent variables, data and methods used and conclusions per study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Co-Author(s)</th>
<th>Dependent variable</th>
<th>Independent variables</th>
<th>Data</th>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Conclusions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>A.C. Liefbroer &amp; H.B.G. Ganzeboom</td>
<td>Timing of first co-residential union &amp; type of first union</td>
<td>Parental SES (parental occupation &amp; education)</td>
<td>ESS (25 countries)</td>
<td>Meta-analytical tools</td>
<td>The higher parental SES, the later young adults enter their first union (mainly driven by direct marriage), even after controlling for own education. This link varies across countries and can partly be explained by the SDT and the educational expansion in a country.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>A.C. Liefbroer &amp; H.B.G. Ganzeboom</td>
<td>Timing of first marriage</td>
<td>Parental SES (parental education)</td>
<td>GGP &amp; Harmonized Histories (20 countries)</td>
<td>Meta-analytical tools</td>
<td>Young adults from advantaged backgrounds delay their first marriage. However, once young adults start to cohabit, parental SES does not affect the timing of marriage anymore. This link varies across countries, but this variation cannot be explained by the SDT.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>J. Härkönen &amp; J. Dronkers</td>
<td>First co-residential union, type of union &amp; first marriage</td>
<td>Parental separation</td>
<td>GGP &amp; Harmonized Histories (16 countries)</td>
<td>Fixed effect model (with country dummies)</td>
<td>Children of divorce enter marriage later and more often choose for cohabitation as first union than children from intact families. Moreover, the association between parental separation and partnership formation depends on the importance of marriage as the context for intimate and family life which varies across countries and over time. Children of divorce have been early adapters in the SDT developments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>J. Härkönen</td>
<td>Risk to dissolve a childbearing union</td>
<td>Parental SES (parental education)</td>
<td>GGP &amp; Harmonized Histories (17 countries)</td>
<td>Meta-analytical tools</td>
<td>Young adults from advantaged backgrounds have a higher risk to dissolve a union, even after controlling for important mediators like individuals’ own education. This link varies across countries and this variation can be explained by the SDT.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1.5 Main results

In this section, I summarize the main findings and conclusions from the four empirical studies included in this dissertation.

Study 1: Parental SES & union formation

This study examines how parental SES, measured by an index based on information about parental education and occupation, influences entry into a first union. We look at the timing of this first union, and whether young adults enter it by marriage or by unmarried cohabitation. With regard to the link between family (dis)advantage and the timing of entry into a union, we argue that young adults from high-status families will enter into their first co-residential union later than young adults from low-status families and results from Study 1 show that this is indeed the case. With regard to the type of first union, we expect that the association between parental SES and the timing of first union will be stronger for direct marriage than unmarried cohabitation. This study confirms this expectation; the delaying effect of parental SES on the timing of first union is mainly due to young adults who marry directly. In general, there is almost no effect of parental SES on the timing of first union if this union is a cohabiting relationship.

The first interesting finding from this study is that the strength of the link between family (dis)advantage and first union formation varies considerably across countries. But how can this variation across countries in the link between family (dis)advantage and union formation be explained? Based on the SDT theory, we hypothesize that the impact of family (dis)advantage on union formation will be weaker in countries that are more advanced in the SDT. Within this study, we use three country-level SDT indicators as possible explanations for the cross-national variation, namely the country-specific prevalence of cohabitation, level of religiosity and the country-specific age-norm of leaving the parental home. Some of these SDT-indicators indeed explain some of the cross-national variation in the link between family (dis)advantage and union formation (namely the prevalence of cohabitation and the age norms of leaving the parental home), while the level of religiosity did not explain the observed cross-national variation. Differences in the timing of first union between young adults from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds are smaller in countries were cohabitation is
more common. Moreover, the higher the age-norm of leaving the parental home, the bigger the differences in the timing of first union between young adults from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds.

Often, an individual’s own educational attainment is suggested to be an important mediator in the link between parental SES and the timing of first union and this study finds support for the importance of this factor. Still, even after controlling for individuals’ own educational level and educational enrollment, the results of this study still show a significant, though somewhat reduced, delaying effect of parental SES on the timing of first union. However, once own education and enrollment are included as mediators into the models, the variation across countries completely disappears. Thus, country differences in achieved educational level are also an important explanation for the cross-national variation in the link between parental SES and first union formation.

**Study 2: Parental SES & marriage formation**

In the second study, we analyze the link between parental SES, measured by parental education, and the timing of first marriage. We argue that young adults from high-status families will enter into their first marriage later than young adults from low-status families. The results show that young adults from advantaged backgrounds not only delay their first union (as shown in Study 1), but also delay first marriage compared to young adults from disadvantaged backgrounds. Since we know from the first study that individuals’ own education is an important mediator, we also included this indicator into the models of Study 2. Results show, in general, that the higher young adults’ educational level is, the more they delay entry into a first marriage. In line with Study 1, this study also shows that even after taking individuals’ own level of education into account, higher parental SES still leads to postponement of the timing of first marriage. Moreover, considerable cross-national variation in the link between parental SES and marriage formation remains, also after controlling for young adults’ own educational attainment. This finding is in contrast with Study 1, but we have to keep in mind that Study 1 made use a different dataset and included more countries than Study 2.

Another question that is examined in this study is whether parents’ SES only influences their children’s marriage timing as long as they are not cohabiting with a partner, or that parental SES still matters even after their children have started to cohabit. It has become
increasingly common to cohabit prior to marriage, which makes it interesting to include the cohabitation history into the link between parental SES and marriage timing. It can be expected that the impact of parental SES is weaker after young adults cohabit. Life events, such as obtaining a job and leaving the parental home, often change the relationship between parents and their children. When young adults live together with their partner and form their own household, they become usually less dependent on their parents. This study shows indeed that the impact of parental SES on marriage timing significantly weakens once young adults start to cohabit.

Given the different meaning of cohabitation across countries, cross-national variation can be expected in the link between parental SES and first marriage. We use cluster analysis to construct a country-level cohabitation typology, based on four SDT-related items (prevalence of cohabitation, proportion of nonmarital births, proportion of people who married or dissolve their union within two years). The cluster analysis indicated four different clusters of countries, namely (1) cohabitation as prelude to marriage, (2) cohabitation as trial marriage, (3) cohabitation as alternative to marriage and (4) cohabitation as the norm. These clusters strongly align with the stages of the cohabitation transition as suggested by other existing studies, as well as with the SDT-country pattern. However, the constructed cohabitation typology could not explain the cross-national variation in the link between parental SES and marriage timing.

Study 3: Parental separation & union formation

In Study 3 we focus on another family disadvantage indicator, namely parental separation and how this indicator affected the union formation process of young adults. First of all, we expect that having separated parents, so coming from a disadvantaged background, is associated with lower rates of marriage and higher rates of cohabitation, which is in line with existing studies on this topic. Children of divorce are suggested to be the “forerunners” of family change (SDT developments, like increase in cohabitation and nonmarital birth) or the deinstitutionalization of marriage. However, few studies have analyzed these relationships over time or across countries and no studies have systematically analyzed contextual factors that might moderate this relationship. In this study we analyze two possible contextual factors, namely the overall incidence of parental separation and non-marital birth rates (as indicator for the strength of the institution of marriage). We expect that differences in
partnership formation patterns by parental separation are small when marriage is highly normative, and cohabitation is viewed as a marginal phenomenon. When cohabitation becomes more acceptable, the gaps would grow if children of divorce are indeed the forerunners of this change. However, when cohabitation as first union form becomes next to universal, the differences by parental separation can again diminish. With regard to marriage, we have similar expectations; the gaps in foregoing marriage are expected to be minor when marriage is strongly institutionalized, but widen when its grip on family life weakens. The prevalence of parental separation can also modify the differences in partnership formation patterns by parental separation. According to the “waning effect” argument, the effect of parental separation is expected to be weaker when parental separation is more prevalent. Children of divorce may differ less from those from intact families in characteristics that predict partnership formation patterns once parental separation is a more common experience.

Results from Study 3 show that children of divorce are more likely to have cohabited and less likely to have married, whether directly or overall, than young adults from intact families. Moreover, the findings of this study do not support the waning effect hypothesis, but support the “forerunner” hypothesis. Children of divorce have higher rates of cohabitation when marriage is more institutionalized (measured by low non-marital birth rates), but this gap becomes smaller as young adults from intact families catch up in their rates of cohabitation. This study also shows that children of divorce have been forerunners in the retreat from marriage. When marriage is institutionalized, children of divorce may even have higher rates of marriage than those from intact families, but as the deinstitutionalization of marriage proceeds, children of divorce are among the first ones to retreat from it.

Study 4: Parental SES & union dissolution

Many previous studies focused on the intergenerational transmission of divorce, both in single countries and from a cross-national comparative perspective. However, only a few studies analyzed the link between parental SES and the risk to dissolve a union and these studies were all conducted in single countries. Therefore, in the last study of my dissertation I focus on the link between parental SES, as indicator of family (dis)advantage, and union dissolution, or more specifically, the risk to dissolve from a childbearing union in 17 different countries. Parental SES is measured by parental education. We study the dissolution of first childbearing
unions, since this indicator is a better measure of family instability than divorce, given the high cohabitation rates in the countries we analyze. It can be expected that individuals from advantaged backgrounds have a higher risk to dissolve their union, due to class-related sociocultural factors or due to the financial support from these parents. These sociocultural factors from the higher-class backgrounds are related to a “bourgeois culture” in which divorce is more accepted. Moreover, better-educated parents are in a better situation to financially support their children if they dissolve their union.

First of all, results from this study show that parental SES still influences the risk to dissolve a union, next to some important mediators, namely young adults’ own educational status, parental separation and the timing of union formation. Adults with highly educated parents have a higher risk to dissolve a union than adults with lower educated parents.

With regard to the cross-national perspective, we expect that the link between parental SES and union dissolution is weaker in countries with a generous welfare state, because parental financial support is less needed in these countries. Moreover, we expect that this link is also weaker in countries where divorce is more common (high divorce rates). The results of this study show that the strength of the link between family (dis)advantage and union dissolution varies considerably across countries. This is in line with earlier research on the link between own educational attainment and family dissolution, although the variation found in Study 4 appears less dramatic than the one between own education and family dissolution. Although the size of the relationship between parental education and family dissolution varies considerably, it is generally positive whereas the educational gradient of family dissolution has more clearly varied both in size and in sign.

Study 4 also shows that the cross-national variation could be explained by a SDT-indicator, namely the average crude divorce rate. The strength of the link between parental SES and union dissolution is weaker in countries where the divorce rate is higher (so in countries that are further advanced in the SDT). Another country-level indicator, namely the generosity of the welfare state, could not explain the cross-national variation in the link between parental SES and union dissolution.

Existing research on the link between education and family dissolution showed a changing educational gradient in family dissolution, which could be either in the parental or

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1 After excluding Russia from the sample, since this was an outlier with regard to the crude divorce rate.
in the filial generations. Therefore, we also analyze, next to the variation across countries, whether the link between parental SES and family dissolution changed over time. However, only in six countries we found that the impact of parental SES on union dissolution became less positive or even negative over time.

1.6 Conclusions & Discussion

In this dissertation, I analyze the link between family (dis)advantage and union formation and dissolution from a cross-national comparative perspective. The focus of this dissertation is on two general research questions, namely

“To what extent is there a link between family (dis)advantage and union formation and dissolution? And to what extent does this link between family (dis) advantage and union formation and dissolution remain, after taking young adults’ educational attainment into account?”

and

“To what extent does cross-national variation exist in the link between family (dis)advantage and union formation and dissolution? And to what extent can the Second Demographic Transition theory explain this variation across countries?”

Research on the social stratification of union formation and dissolution focused largely on individuals’ own educational attainment and enrollment as important determinants (e.g. Blossfeld & Huinink, 1991; Härkönen & Dronkers, 2006). With regard to the first research question, I can conclude that next to individuals’ own education, also family (dis)advantage or family background is important in explaining the processes of union formation and union dissolution. 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. However, this difference between young adults from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds regarding marriage timing disappears once young adults start to cohabit. Moreover, this dissertation shows that parental SES not only influences union
formation, but also union dissolution. Individuals from advantaged backgrounds have a higher risk to dissolve their union than the ones from disadvantaged backgrounds. The results from the four studies show that parental SES does not only influence the demographic choices of young adults because children of high SES parents obtain higher educational levels (and thereby make other demographic choices). There are more reasons why children from disadvantaged and advantaged backgrounds behave differently on the partner market (think of differences in norms and values, parental preferences, but also parental resources).

Another family (dis)advantage indicator analyzed in this dissertation is parental separation and results show that this indicator also influences the union formation process. Children of divorce prefer unmarried cohabitation as first union and delay marriage compared to the ones from intact families. By controlling for parental SES, it is likely that the link between parental separation and union formation does not only derive from economic deprivation. Rather, differences in union formation between children from divorced and intact families are likely to result from differences in norms, values and preferences as well.

As already mentioned, demographic choices made during young adulthood can have potential negative consequences for the subsequent life course. Young adults who enter a co-residential union at an early age have, for example, a higher risk to dissolve this union (Berrington & Diamond, 1999). This thesis shows that these demographic choices, that can result in negative consequences later in life, are not always related to young adults from disadvantaged family backgrounds. Study 4, for example, shows that adults with high educated parents have a higher risk to dissolve a union. Moreover, findings from Study 3 show that young adults with separated parents delay first marriage, although this postponement can also result in no marriage at all, which can have negative consequences such as less improved health and less commitment to the relationship.

Although the results of all four studies in this dissertation show that family (dis)advantage is an important determinant of union formation and dissolution processes, we still do not know what the exact mechanisms are that play a role in the link between family (dis) advantage and demographic choices. In this dissertation, I tested for one potential mechanism, namely the intergenerational transmission of education, and results show that this mechanism only partly explains the link between family (dis)advantage and union dynamics. Previous research suggests some other important mechanisms that might explain this link, like the socialization of norms and values, more liberal attitudes or more resources.
Do high status parents socialize their children to start, for example, a romantic union at a later age? Do high-SES parents have more liberal attitudes towards cohabitation and union dissolution, which they transmit to their children and result in a higher probability to cohabit or to dissolve a union for young adults from advantaged backgrounds? Or does it have to do with the (financial) resources that parents have and transmit to their offspring? Many follow-up questions related to potential mechanisms between family (dis)advantage and union dynamics of which we do not yet know the answer, but which would be very interesting for future research, could be formulated. However, to date, there is only limited data available in which detailed questions are asked about these potential mechanisms, especially at the country-comparative level. Thus, I would like to see more questions related to possible mechanisms such as the transmission of norms, values and attitudes included in major data collection projects like the ESS and the GGP.

Another innovative aspect of this dissertation is the cross-national comparative perspective in the link between family (dis)advantage and union formation and dissolution processes. As already mentioned, it can be expected that this link varies across countries, due to economic, cultural and institutional differences between countries. For example, in more individualistic countries or economically well-developed countries, it can be expected that family (dis)advantage plays a less important role, since young adults are often less dependent on their parents and their resources. This dissertation shows 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. This finding of cross-national variation is related to the second research question of this dissertation, in which I not only focus on whether there are differences between countries, but also on how this cross-national variation can be explained. In three of the four studies in this dissertation, I use meta-analytical tools to first analyze whether there is cross-national variation and if so, in a second step test whether this cross-national variation can be explained by country-level indicators. The advantages of these meta-analytical tools are that these analyses can also be done with a small number of countries and that the country differences are clearly and graphically displayed.

In this dissertation, I have used the SDT theory as the major source of explanation to explain cross-national variation in the relationship between family background and union formation and dissolution processes. In my study, I use a variety of SDT-related indicators. In
my view, this variety is important as the SDT-theory emphasizes change in multiple demographic processes. Therefore, indicators of several of these processes are included in this dissertation as possible explanations for the cross-national variation in the link between family (dis)advantage and union dynamics. Results from the four studies show that some SDT-indicators could indeed explain (part of) the considerable cross-national variation in the link between family (dis)advantage and union dynamics. The country-specific cohabitation rate, for example, explains part of the cross-national variation in the link between parental SES and union formation (Study 1) and the divorce rate explains the cross-national variation in the link between parental SES and union dissolution (Study 3).

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. In Study 2, for example, the cohabitation typology based on four SDT-related items, does not explain the link between parental SES and marriage timing and in Study 3, the overall prevalence of parental separation was not an explanation for the link between parental separation and union formation. This dissertation shows that 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 just focusing on the country-specific demographic and value changes, resulting from processes of individualization of secularization. Next to these country-level indicators that focus more on the cultural change in norms and values of people in a country, institutional and also economic country-level indicators might also play a role. Results from Study 1 show, for example, that, next to SDT-related indicators, also the educational expansion of a country explains the link between parental SES and union formation. The SDT theory already suggests that demographic changes are driven by both cultural (values) as well as structural factors (such as the rise of higher education) (Lappegard et al., 2014). More specifically, Lesthaeghe (2010) highlighted change in the educational composition of western societies as a major contributor to the SDT process, but this has not been analyzed yet. Moreover, Mills and Blossfeld (2013) argue, for example, that the degree of economic uncertainty that young adults face when they make demographic choices, such as union formation and dissolution, is also important. It can be expected that the lower the degree of uncertainty, the less young adults depend on their parents. This level of dependence on the family of origin and the uncertainty that young adults face, are linked to the country-specific culture, but next to this also to the economic possibilities and
institutional support from the state. In general, SDT critiques (e.g. Mills & Blossfeld, 2013; Zaidi & Morgan, 2017) have argued that the SDT-theory has ignored the role of domestic path-dependent institutions, like the welfare regime, the employment systems and the educational system. Cross-national differences in family patterns are accounted for by differences in these path-dependent institutions. In countries with social-democratic regimes young adults make the transition to partnership easier than in countries with conservative welfare regimes. Moreover, educational systems differ in the amount of time spent in schools and the link to the labor market. All these factors influence the degree to which young adults face uncertainty and exacerbate inequality by offering more opportunities to young adults from advantaged backgrounds.

The last thing we have to keep in mind regarding the SDT-theory is that this theory is a developmental theory, so an important question is also to know what is happening over time, in addition to the country differences found in this dissertation (Thornton, 2013). Next to the country differences, it can also be expected that the impact of family (dis)advantage on union dynamics varies between birth cohorts. In Study 1, 3 and 4, I also analyze the change over time in the impact of family (dis)advantage on union dynamics, but in the majority of the studies it is not the main focus, since this impact did not change that much over time. Moreover, many relevant macro-level indicators did not go that far back in time, which makes it harder to analyze the change over time. In general, the results of the four studies show that the differences between countries in the link between family (dis)advantage and union dynamics looks more important than the differences in this link over time. However, it would be interesting for future research to also include the temporal dimension, next to the cross-national dimension, especially if more data over a bigger time span is available. There is a clear need for more longitudinal analyses on this topic, so that it is possible to better disentangle the temporal and cross-national dimensions.