

Single motherhood and education: changes in the educational gradient across European countries since the 1970s

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Abstract

Along with the rise in divorce rates in the past decades, the prevalence of single parenthood has increased as well. Across European Union 28 countries, 14% of households with dependent children were single parent households in 2016, mostly headed by mothers (Eurostat 2018). Single parent households typically have fewer financial and time resources than couple households (Brown 2004; Craig & Mullan 2012; Maldonado & Nieuwenhuis 2015), which makes family structure a topic of social relevance. From an inequality perspective, it is crucial to know which socio-economic groups in society are more likely to be single parents and how this has shifted over time. This study hence addresses trends in the education level of single mothers across eight European countries (Austria, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Norway, Poland and the United Kingdom) since the 1970s. Compared to previous research on this topic (e.g. Härkönen 2017) we look at a longer time series and examine how the educational gradient in single motherhood varies across the family life course (operationalized by children's age). In doing so, we are able to assess whether single motherhood is rather due to a divorce/separation or due to being single at the time of childbirth.

This research is inspired by Sara McLanahan's concept of "diverging destinies" (McLanahan 2004). This concept relies on the observation that family behavior connected to lower resources (e.g. single parenthood, low maternal employment, less time with children) has disproportionately caught on among less educated persons, while their higher educated counterparts more often perform family behavior by which they keep or gain resources (e.g. stable marriages, high maternal employment, more time with children). In consequence, the life chances of children who have parents with different educational backgrounds have increasingly diverged. The growing educational gap in single motherhood and other family behaviors has been well documented for the United States (McLanahan & Jacobsen, 2015), while

there is much less evidence for European countries. However, we may expect different patterns, as the US seems to be rather specific with regard to single motherhood (very high rate, low level of welfare provision, intertwined with race). In addition, a cross-national analysis allows us to address the different cultural and institutional frameworks.

The analysis is based on censuses and labour force surveys (both national and EU-LFS) from the 1970s to 2015. It uses logistic regression analysis with single vs. partnered mothers as dependent variable. In order to address our research question, we include different interactions between time period, education and age of the youngest child.

Preliminary findings show that the education gap in single motherhood has increased across all eight countries, but most strongly in Ireland and the United Kingdom. Moreover, births to low educated single mothers have become particularly widespread in the English-speaking countries, but also in Poland.

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