

Diverging destinies in Europe? Education, family structure, and child wellbeing

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Abstract

In this study, I examine the links between educational attainment, single parenthood, and child wellbeing in Western European countries. I address three specific topics. Firstly, using data from the Eurobarometer surveys, I examine trends in single parenthood by (female) educational attainment levels from the mid-1970s to the 2000s. Secondly, I use panel data from the European Community Household Panel to construct synthetic cohort estimates of children's probabilities of experiencing single parenthood across their childhood (0-15 years) according to mother's educational attainment levels. Finally, I ask whether these class-biased family structures shape overall levels of and class differences in child disadvantage. I find major cross-national differences in levels, trends, and educational gradients of experience of single parenthood. However, assuming no such differences would change class differences (measured by mother's education) in and overall levels of child well-being only to a limited extent, thus underlying more fundamental sources of child disadvantage.

Background and objective

The “diverging destinies” thesis of widening class cleavages in family forms and dynamics (McLanahan 2004) has received increasing attention. Although most of the related research has been American, a number of cross-national studies have suggested similar developments also in other countries (Härkönen and Dronkers 2006; Perelli-Harris et al 2010). Despite these studies, there remains nevertheless limited understanding of the scope and the implications for children's well-being, of class-biased family change from an international perspective.

This study has three objectives. Firstly, I want to document the extent to which single parenthood—the family form most often associated with welfare deficits—has increased in different European countries in an education-biased fashion in line with the diverging destinies thesis. Secondly, I examine children's cumulative exposure to single-parenthood by mother's educational level in West-European countries and the role educational differences in single parenthood play on children's experience of single parenthood at the population level. Thirdly, I analyze the importance of “diverging destinies” on children's well-being and inequalities between children. If experience of single parenthood is more common among children of less-educated mothers, this might enforce already existing differences in child well-being and resources.

Data and methods

I use two sources of data: The Mannheim Eurobarometer Trend Files and the European Community Household Panel (Eurostat 2003a).

The Mannheim Eurobarometer Trend Files include data from the annual Eurobarometer surveys—conducted in the member states of the European Community (later, European Union)—from 1975 onwards. These data are suitable for examining change in the educational gradients of single parenthood from a cross-national perspective. By pooling data from different years, one reaches high enough case numbers to analyze this family form that remained rather rare until recent years and decades. A limitation is that these data are only available for countries that were EC or EU members at the time.

The European Community Household Panel (ECHP) was a cross-national household panel collected between 1994-2001 in the then fifteen members of the European Union. It includes demographic and economic information of the households and is thus well-suited for our purposes. These data are used to construct period life table estimates of children's experience of single parenthood according to their mother's educational attainment levels. They are also used to measure deficits in child welfare. Here, I present results of child poverty (measured as equivalence scaled incomes below 50 % of the median).

Results

In this extended abstract, I present results for four countries, selected to represent different West European welfare regimes (Esping-Andersen 1999). These countries are Germany, Denmark, United Kingdom and Italy.

Trends in single motherhood by educational attainment

Figure 1 (see below) presents the trends in single motherhood by educational attainment levels in the four countries. One can immediately see the remarkable cross-national differences. The United Kingdom provides the clearest example of diverging destinies European style. Whereas single parenthood was uncommon, and educational differences negligible in the early 1970s, the rates of single parenthood had increased remarkably by the late 1990s in particularly among the least educated. Similar patterns, although with more complicated trends, were found from Denmark. A negative educational gradient has also opened up in (West) Germany. At the other end, single parenthood in Italy remains uncommon and the educational gradients that exist are in the opposite direction.

Cumulative experience of single parenthood across the childhood

The first three rows of Table 1 show the share of children born to single mothers and the estimated share of children that experienced single parenthood till they were 15 years old. These rates reflect the patterns presented in Figure 1. However, they also give additional information on how unpartnered motherhood and parental separation produced the gaps in experience of single motherhood by maternal education. In the United Kingdom, where births to unpartnered women are common, these gaps exist already from the beginning and widens only somewhat (in percentage point terms) during the 15 years. In Denmark, the gap widens more from birth to age 15; in other words, educational gradients in parental separation play a bigger role in experience of single parenthood. In Germany, the gaps are not aligned in gradient-like fashion at birth, but by age 15, experience of single parenthood follows a (weak) educational gradient. In Italy, the positive educational gradient of unpartnered births widens

due to educational gradients in parental separation. Finally, the last two rows show the estimates of actual exposure to single parenthood at ages 0 and 15, and what the share would be were rates of exposure the same for everyone as for children of highly educated mothers. In the UK and Denmark, the negative educational gradients in single parenthood imply an “excess” exposure of about 10 % points, whereas in Germany this excess is much lower, and in Italy experience of single parenthood would actually be less common in this scenario.

Table 1 Mother’s education and cumulative experience of single parenthood, %

<i>Country</i>	UK		Denmark		Germany		Italy	
	0	15	0	15	0	15	0	15
Low	28	61	14	26	14	28	6	15
Middle	17	56	7	37	10	30	4	12
High	11	40	4	45	16	33	4	9
All	18	51	7	35	12	30	5	11
Stand.	10	39	4	26	14	28	6	15

Educational gradients in single parenthood and child poverty

Children living with single parents have higher poverty risks in all four countries (not shown). The difference is the smallest in Denmark (5 % vs 2 %), but large in Germany (24 % vs 7 %) and the United Kingdom (34 % vs 16 %). This suggests that educational gradients in single parenthood can contribute to educational differences in child poverty.

Table 2 presents the estimates of actual child poverty rates according to mother’s education, and child poverty rates standardized assuming that all children had the same probability of living with a single mother as those with highly educated mothers.

We see that despite big differences in the experience of single parenthood according educational attainment levels, these differences do little to increase overall child poverty rates, nor do they affect differences in child poverty according to mother’s educational attainment.

Table 2 Mother’s education and child poverty: Actual rates and rates standardized to the family structures of the highest educated, %

<i>Country</i>	UK		Denmark		Germany		Italy	
	Actual	Stand.	Actual	Stand.	Actual	Stand.	Actual	Stand.
Low	28	27	4	4	17	17	25	26
Middle	16	16	2	2	8	9	8	7
High	13	13	2	2	3	3	4	3
All	21	20	3	2	9	10	17	16

Conclusions

These preliminary results showed that: a) there are wide cross-national differences in the educational gradients in single parenthood in Europe, b) these gradients have increased the overall experience of single parenthood in some, but not all countries, and c) these differences do not, however, play an important role in shaping child poverty levels according to maternal education. Other factors than demographic ones are responsible for these.

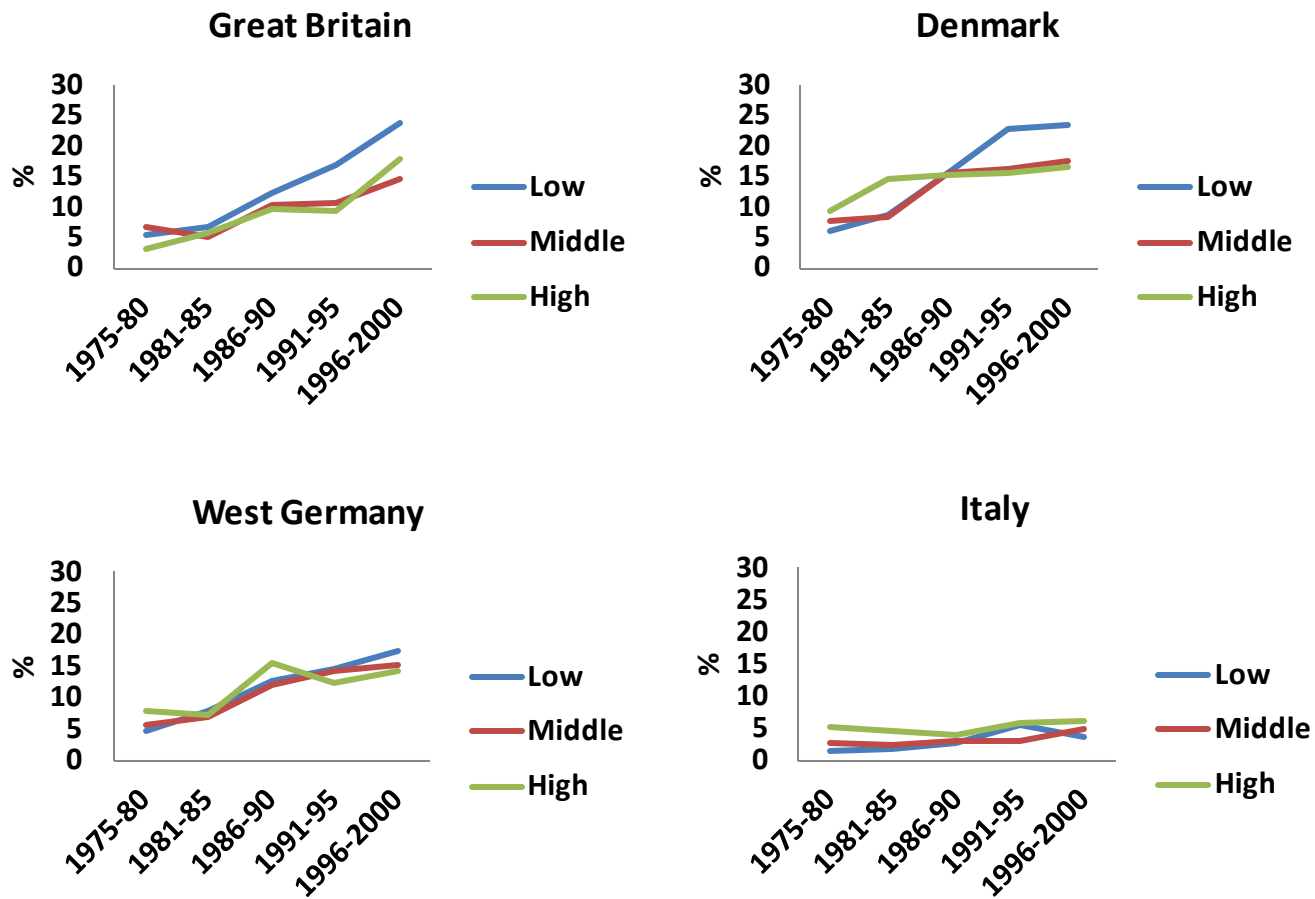


Figure 1 Education and single motherhood in four European countries, 1975-2000.