What are the risks, for children, of family disruption? European comparisons

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Short abstract (150 words)

This study applies an original approach by adopting the children's standpoint to observe changes in family trajectories, to measure changes in the risk of family disruption (i.e. parental separation) by child's age and cohort, and to identify the parental characteristics associated with the highest risk of childhood exposure to disruption. Data from the GGS surveys conducted in the 2000s in several European countries can be used for these analyses as they include complete family event histories of adult respondents (birth of children, union formation, separation). Pursuing research already carried out in France, we broaden the comparison to other European countries in the Generations and Gender programme (Belgium, Italy, Norway, the Netherlands) to identify the countries where the risk of childhood exposure to parental separation is highest, and to see whether the characteristics of the most unstable parental couples are shared across countries.

Long abstract

Objectives, sources and methods

This study has a three-fold objective:

- To reconstitute the children's family trajectory by their situation at birth (both parents present, lone mother, parents married or otherwise, etc.);
- To measure changes in the risk that children born to a couple will experience parental separation during their childhood, and compare the frequencies of family disruption in different European countries;
- To see whether the parental sociodemographic characteristics associated with the highest risk of childhood exposure to family disruption are the same in different countries (for example, the effect of marriage, non-marital cohabitation, educational level, age at union formation, the existence of children from a previous union, etc.).

In particular, we want to find out whether differences between married and unmarried parents are narrowing, and whether the effect of educational level is identical in all countries (Kennedy and Thomson, 2010).

This work is based on data from the GGS surveys conducted in Europe in the 2000s, looking at the question from the children's viewpoint. In addition to France, we include Belgium, Italy, Norway, the Netherlands, but not Germany as the data on unions are not suitable for our study (Kreyenfeld, M. et al., 2010). We reconstitute the family event history of children from their birth up to age 10, using the conjugal life-event history of their mother. We use the mothers' responses rather than those of the father, which tend to be less reliable (Breton and Prioux, 2009 ; Breton, Popova and Prioux, 2009).

The risk of family disruption by age and cohort is calculated by means of life tables from different birth cohorts. We then model the risk of disruption before age 10 using a logistic regression to verify the effect of the various characteristics of the parental couple, all other things being equal.

Initial findings

1) The children's first ten years

FIGURE 1: DISTRIBUTION OF CHILDREN BY TYPE OF FAMILY TRAJECTORY BEFORE AGE 10.

Everywhere, the proportion of children who lived with both parents up to age 10 is decreasing. In the youngest cohort, the proportion remains highest in Italy (89%). In the other countries, it ranges between 71% in Belgium and 79% in France (fig. 1).
It is the "children whose parents separate" category that is increasing most strongly, and for a growing percentage of them parental separation is followed by the mother's repartnering before the child's tenth birthday. This is the case for almost half of them in the youngest cohort, compared with around one-third in the oldest one. Among children born to a lone mother, whose proportion is generally low, the majority have a mother who (re)partners before their tenth birthday, except in Belgium, where the majority of these children live in a lone-parent family up to age 10.
All in all, children's family trajectories are becoming increasingly complex in all countries, with growing numbers of children living in lone-parent and reconstituted families. The phenomenon is slightly less prevalent in France than in Belgium or Norway, and remains rare in Italy.

2) Children born to a couple

FIGURE 2 : PROPORTION OF CHILDREN BORN TO A COUPLE AND STILL LIVING WITH BOTH PARENTS, BY AGE AND COHORT

With the increase in separations, the proportion of children who have never experienced family disruption at a given age decreases from one cohort to the next. The decrease is similar in Belgium, France, the Netherlands and Norway (around 8% fewer at age 10 over 20 cohorts), but only half as large in Italy. (Fig. 2). The decline is less strong in more recent generations, excepting in Norway.

3) Characteristics associated with risks of family disruption

The proportion of children whose parents are already separated at age 10 (excluding death of a partner) is modelled for two groups of cohorts in each country. The main variables entered into the model are:

- Union status (marital or non-marital union) at the time of child's birth;
- Existence or not of at least one child from a previous union of the mother or father;
- Mother's level of education (that of the father is not recorded in all surveys);
- Whether the majority of the mother's childhood was spent with her biological parents;
- Religious affiliation, if any;
- An indicator of the mother's relatively early age at union formation and at first birth in that union, taking account of her educational level.

These variables are those generally known to be associated with differentials in the probability of separation and they are available in the GGS survey.

TABLE 1 : PROBABILITY OF PARENTAL SEPARATION BEFORE AGE 10– REGRESSION - SEMI-LOG MODEL

In practically all countries, it is the existence of a half-sibling at the time of the child's birth (i.e. the father or mother already has a child from a previous union) which exposes a child to the

highest risk of parental separation: having already experienced a separation after the birth of a child, or having had a child outside a union increases the risk that children of a subsequent union will experience another break-up (Table 1.).

Not being married at the time of the child's birth has an almost equally strong effect, indicating that marriage plays a strongly protective role, even in Norway and France, where non-marital unions with children are now very common. The effect is strongest in Italy, however, where non-marital unions are still infrequent.

The mother's family situation during childhood (experience of parental separation) is also an important factor in all countries, attesting to the role of transmission of behaviours.

By contrast, the mother's educational level plays a generally weak role, with the children of less educated mothers having a slightly increased probability of experiencing parental break-up. Italy is an exception, however. As divorce is still rare and tends to concern mainly the higher social categories, the probability of family disruption increases strongly with the mother's educational level.

In France, Norway and the Netherlands, a mother's relatively young age at entry into union and at first birth in this union is associated with a higher risk for the child of parental separation before his or her tenth birthday.

Last, children whose mother reports no religious affiliation are generally at slightly higher risk of parental separation.

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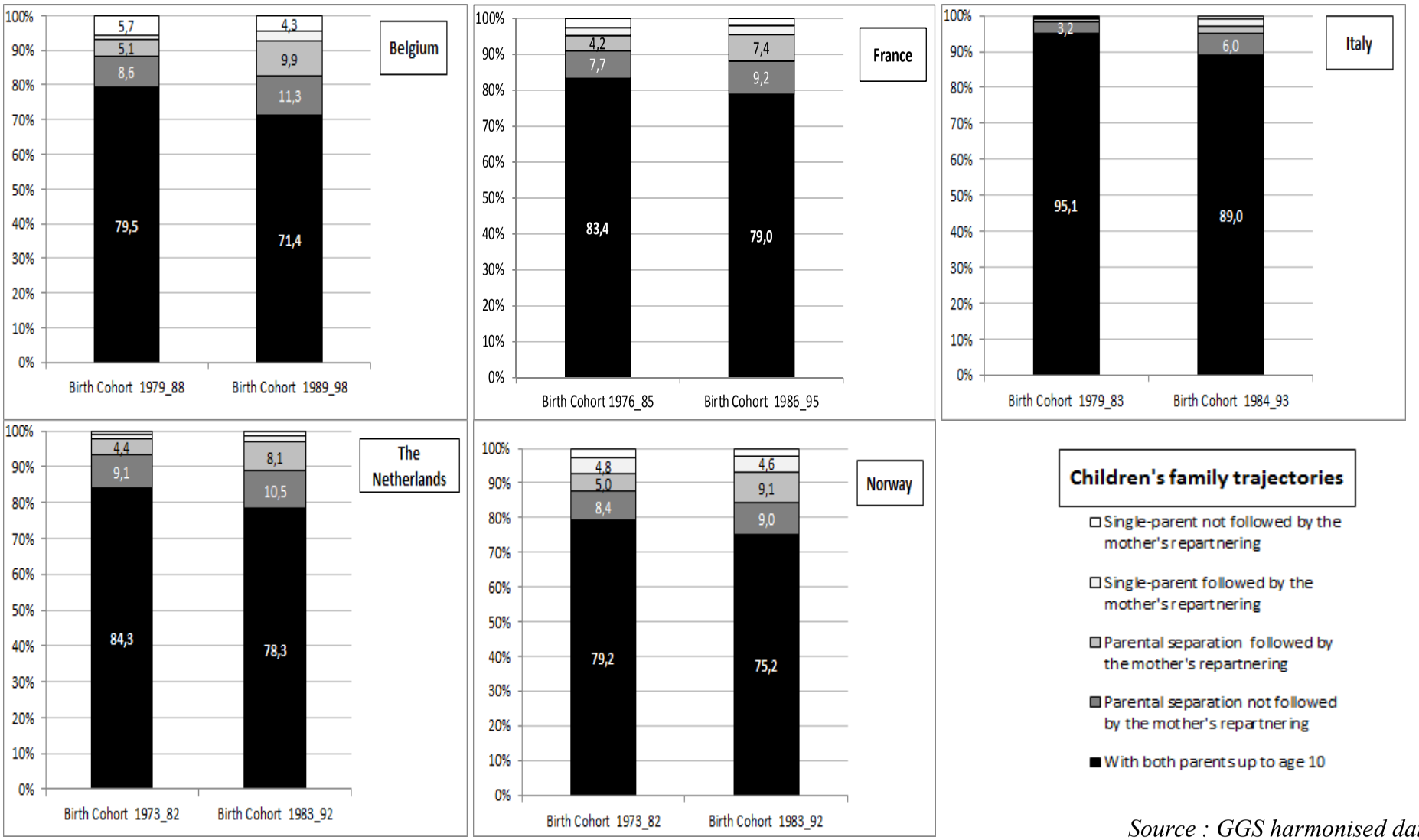
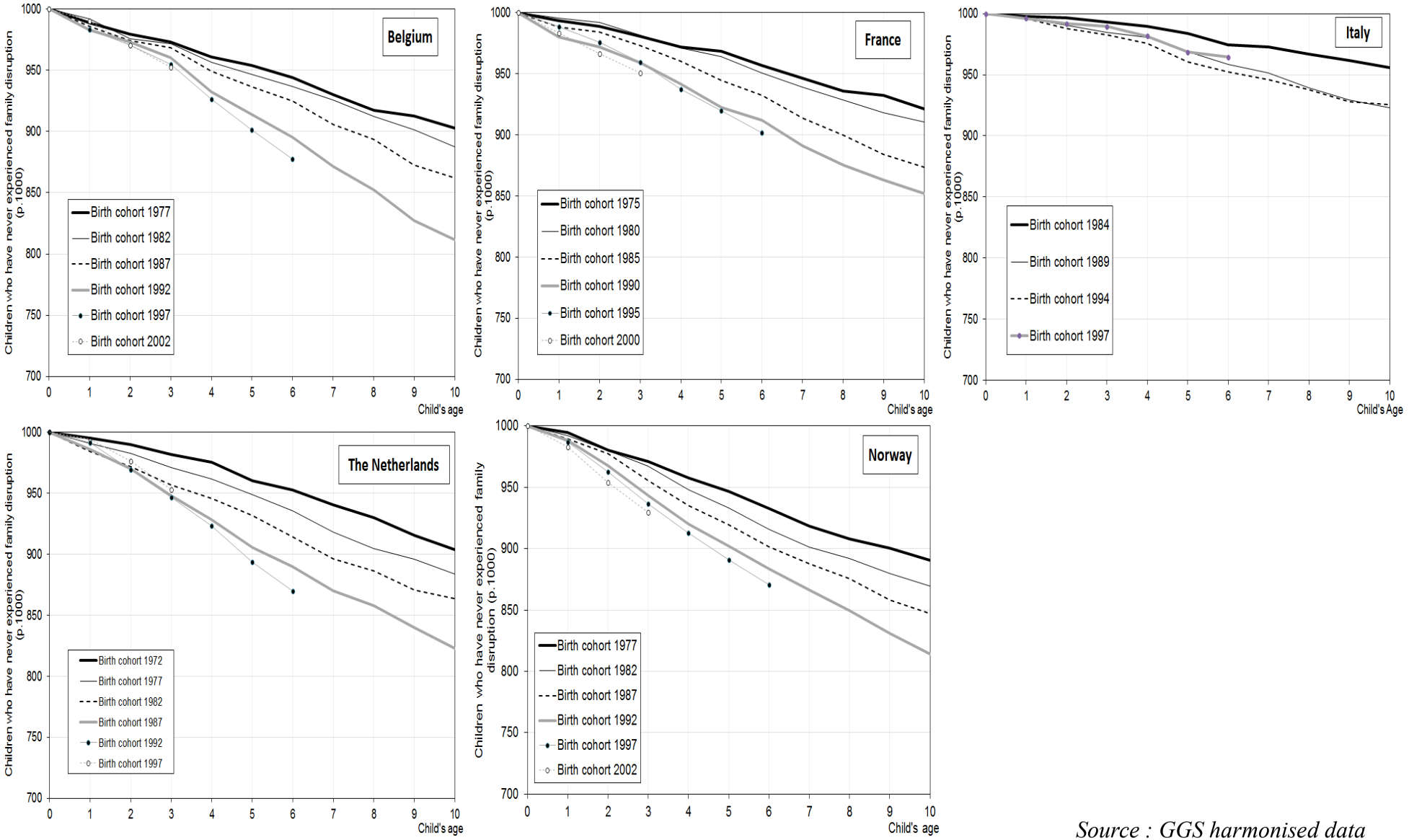
FIGURE 1: DISTRIBUTION OF CHILDREN BY TYPE OF FAMILY TRAJECTORY BEFORE AGE 10.



Source : GGS harmonised data

FIGURE 2: PROPORTION OF CHILDREN BORN TO A COUPLE AND STILL LIVING WITH BOTH PARENTS, BY AGE AND COHORT – A 9 COHORTS RUNNING AVERAGE



Source : GGS harmonised data

TABLE 1 : PROBABILITY OF PARENTAL SEPARATION BEFORE AGE 10– REGRESSION - SEMI-LOG MODEL

		Belgium				France				Italy		Netherland				Norway			
		Birth Cohort 1979_88		Birth Cohort 1989_98		Birth Cohort 1976_85		Birth Cohort 1986_95		Birth Cohort 1984_93		Birth Cohort 1973_82		Birth Cohort 1983_92		Birth Cohort 1973_82		Birth Cohort 1983_92	
		Param.	*sign.*	.	*sign.*	*Param.*	*sign.*	.	*sign.*	*Param.*	*sign.*	*Param.*	*sign.*	.	*sign.*	*Param.*	*sign.*	.	*sign.*
Intercept		-2,58	***	-2,38	***	-2,78	***	-3,09	***	-2,11	***	-0,77	***	-0,62	***	-2,55	***	-2,45	***
Parental union's tempo *	Union and birth relatively early	0,22	-	0,10	-	0,55	**	0,80	***	-0,12	-	0,26	-	0,25	-	0,69	***	0,70	***
	Union relatively early and birth relatively late	1,04	***	1,00	***	-0,05	-	0,71	***	-0,11	-	0,52	***	0,21	-	0,25	-	0,76	***
	Union relatively late and birth relatively early	-0,62	*	-0,25	-	-0,18	-	0,64	***	-0,23	-	-0,19	-	-0,23	-	-0,34	-	0,01	-
	Union and birth relatively late	*Ref*		*Ref*		*Ref*		*Ref*		*Ref*	-	*Ref*	-	*Ref*	-	*Ref*		*Ref*	
Mother's highest education level ++	*Low*	*-0,26*	-	*0,20*	-	-0,21	-	0,32	*	-1,43	***	*-0,15*	-	*0,10*	-	0,34	**	-0,02	-
	Medium	*Ref*		Ref		*Ref*		Ref		*Ref*	-	*Ref*	-	Ref	-	*Ref*		Ref	
	High	-0,56	**	-0,08	-	-0,20	-	0,18	-	0,12	-	-0,04	-	-0,07	-	-0,01	-	-0,40	***
Parental home during most of childhood	*Living with both of biological parents*	*Ref*		*Ref*		*Ref*		*Ref*				*Ref*	-	*Ref*	-	*Ref*		*Ref*	
	Not living with both of biological parents	0,51	-	0,82	***	0,69	***	0,58	***			0,26	-	0,47	***	0,12	-	0,73	***
Union status at birth	*Marital union*	*Ref*		*Ref*		*Ref*		*Ref*		*Ref*	-					*Ref*		*Ref*	
	Non-marital union	1,36	***	0,88	***	1,16	***	0,87	***	2,17	***					0,89	***	0,79	***
Existence of a half-sibling at the time of the child's birth	*No half-sibling*	*Ref*	-	*Ref*	-	*Ref*		*Ref*		*Ref*	-	*Ref*	-	*Ref*	-	*Ref*		*Ref*	
	Half-sibling(s) from the mother	*0,41*	-	0,62	*	*1,23*	***	*1,83*	***	3,09	***	0,67	***	0,71	***	0,96	***	1,00	***
	Half-sibling(s) from the father	1,71	***	1,17	***	1,04	***	0,79	***			0,86	***	0,28	-	0,28	-	0,79	***
Religion	*Religious affiliation*	Ref		Ref		*Ref*		*Ref*				*Ref*	-	*Ref*	-	*Ref*		*Ref*	
	None	0,69	***	0,58	***	0,65	**	0,40	**			0,26	**	0,19	**	0,40	-	0,90	***
Size / % of concordants pairs		982	79,5%	1 077	75,8%	1 428	65,8%	1 626	66,4%	1 433	66,3%	1 215	71,7%	1 524	62,0%	1 985	62,0%	2 497	68,2%

* taking account of educational level and country

++ low = Isced 0,1,2 / Medium = Isced 3,4 / Isced 5,6

*** p<1% ** 1%<=p<=5% * 5%<p<10% not available

significant and positive effect; significant and negative effect

Source : GGS harmonised data