

Understanding the diversity of family life courses in contexts of increased union instability (INSTABLEFAM)

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Summary: Increased rates of union dissolution in recent decades challenged the pervasiveness of the traditional nuclear family consisting of a stable (marital) union with children and fuelled debates about the overall importance of the family in individual life courses. This project starts from the premise that union dissolution per se marks the start of a further chapter in an individual's family life. Research evidence on the dynamics of repartnering, remarriage, or childbearing in subsequent unions suggests that nowadays a non-trivial share of family transitions are occurring after an episode of union instability. However, the associated research literature remains fragmented and uses point-in-time approaches to examine family processes, providing inadequate answers on the extent to which and how increased union dissolution underlies reductions in the time people spend in stable relationships as adults, and in turn, in the number of children they have, among other relevant questions.

The first aim of this project is to shed more light on these dynamics by mapping the recent diversity in family life courses associated to increased union instability. To this end, this research innovates by adopting a diachronic approach and methodology that acknowledges the interdependence between union dissolution and the subsequent family behaviours. We argue that increases in union instability have generated a diversity in contemporary family life courses and with regards to family patterns that follow union instability episodes. The second aim of this project is improving our understanding of the antecedents of this diversity by examining the role of the accumulation of social disadvantage over the life course and its reproduction from the prior generation for family trajectories following union dissolution. We argue that the well-established links between earlier experiences of socio-economic disadvantage and union dissolution may extend to the subsequent family trajectory. The third aim of this project is improving our understanding of the role of the national context of opportunities by examining variations in the diversity in family life courses across the national cases of Germany, Poland, Sweden, Spain and the United Kingdom. National case selection is based on context variation that enables meaningful comparison based on factors that are known to affect family trajectories of men and women, including among others the characteristics of male and female employment, policies that support work-family balance, and dominant gender ideologies.

For the analyses we deploy methods for life course and longitudinal analysis on largely comparable, nationally representative datasets with complete family histories for adult men and women and a full set of relevant predictors from the Generations and Gender Program, national household panel studies and national fertility surveys. Results from this project will improve and nuance our understanding on recent family dynamics that are pivotal factors influencing demographic trends and individuals' wellbeing.

Key words: Union dissolution; Family; Life course; Longitudinal data; Spain; Cross-national comparisons; Social disadvantage; Sequence analysis.