

Children's experiences of mothers' partnership dissolution and re-partnering: differences between union types and cohorts

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ABSTRACT

The diffusion of non-marital cohabitation and childbearing are well-known phenomena of recent changes in fertility and partnership behaviour in Europe. Hungary has also witnessed profound demographic changes, especially after the transition. Partnership dissolution and the re-partnering of parents have important implications for the lives of children involved.

We investigate changing partnership behaviour from the point of view of children and focus on children's experiences of single parenthood and stepfamilies. How often do children born in cohabitation or marriage experience the dissolution of their parents' union? How often do children live in stepfamilies due to the re-partnering of their mother? Have the experiences of children changed since the 1980s?

The first and the fourth waves of the Hungarian Generations and Gender Survey (2001 and 2012) are used for the analysis. A child database has been created (n=8244) by restructuring the partnership and fertility histories of female respondents, and two synthetic cohorts (1981–1988 and 2005–2012) are compared. We look at the life course of children between aged 0 and 15 with the help of the life table method (cumulative survival functions).

Our results show that changes in partnership behaviour have crucial impact on children's experiences of family life. During the analysed period the ratio of children born in cohabitation has increased from 3% to 35%. The ratio of children experiencing the dissolution of their parents' relationship has doubled since the 1980s (from 18% to 36%). Children born in cohabitation experienced partnership dissolution more often than children of married couples in both periods. Between 2005 and 2012, 40% of children experienced living in a single-mother family and 16% experienced living in a step-family, while between 1981 and 1988 the corresponding figures were only 21% and 12%, respectively.

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BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The diffusion of non-marital childbearing and out-of-wedlock births are well-known phenomena in the demographic behaviour of Europe (Kiernan 2004; Perelli-Harris et al. 2012; Heuveline – Timberlake 2004). Divorce has increased in most European countries (Heuveline – Timberlake 2004; Kalmijn 2007; Sobotka – Toulemon 2008). Cohabitation is generally more fragile than marriage, even if the couple has common children (Andersson – Philipov 2002; Heuveline – Timberlake – Furstenberg 2003; Liefbroer – Dourleijn 2006; Manning – Smock – Majumdar 2004). If partnerships become more fragile, single-parent families and multi-local parent-child relations also become more common.

Hungary has also witnessed profound changes in demographic behaviour. These changes already started before the transition and were the most turbulent in the 1990s (e.g. Spéder 2005; Aassve et al. 2006; Spéder et al. 2009; Thornton – Philipov 2009; Őri—Spéder 2012). Both childbearing and partnership formation are characterized by postponement. The popularity of marriage has decreased: now 20% of partnerships are unmarried cohabitations and only 30% of first unions are marriages. The total divorce rate has stabilized at around 0.46, with a decreasing proportion of divorcing couples with young children. In the meantime, the prevalence and fragility of cohabitations have increased. In 2012, 42% of children were born outside of marriage, most of them in cohabiting unions.

After separation or divorce many people establish a new union sooner or later. Second and higher-order unions are more likely to be cohabiting than marital (Skew et al. 2009; Sweeney 2010). Consequently, formerly single-parent families become two-parent ones, with one biological and one step-parent living with the children. In many cases the new couple has common children as well (Griffith et al. 1985; Vikat et al. 1999; Billari 2005). In recombined families children may face difficulties when keeping contact with the non-resident parent (usually the father), forming a relationship with the co-resident step-parent and with possible step- and half-siblings.

Changing partnership and fertility behaviour is usually studied from the perspective of the adult population, who are the actors of these events. However, partnership dissolution and re-partnering have important implications for the lives of children involved. Literature on the inter-generational transmission of disadvantage claims that childhood family structure has a crucial impact on the future integration of children into adult society (e.g. McLanahan – Bumpass 1988; McLanahan – Sandefur 1994; Amato 2000; Ginther – Pollak 2004). For example, it has an effect on the educational attainment of the children, their chances of finding a stable employment, their risks of substance abuse, and how and when they form their own families. It is not family structure as such that plays a role but changes in the sets of roles of the family members, conflicts, potential financial problems and critical interactions may leave permanent marks on the lives of children.

In the present paper we investigate how the changing partnership behaviour of parents influences family composition from the viewpoint of children. Our research questions are the following:

1. How often do children born in cohabitation and in marriage experience the dissolution of their parents' union and the formation of a single-parent family in Hungary?
2. How often do children live in stepfamilies due to the re-partnering of their parents?
3. Have the experiences of children changed between the 1980s and the 2000s? During this period non-marital cohabitation and out-of-wedlock births have turned from rare and highly selective phenomena to widely accepted and practiced family forms. As a result, has cohabitation become more similar to marriage in its chances of dissolution, or are children more affected now than they were 20–25 years ago?

By focusing on children's experiences of single parenthood and stepfamilies, we can gain important information not only on children's family context but also on how married and cohabiting unions have changed in Hungary. The comparison of two synthetic cohorts allows us to reflect on how the societal transition has affected children's life course. Moreover, we wish to join the line of research that investigates children's family circumstances with the use of large-sample survey data that are representative of the adult population (e.g. Heuveline et al. 2001; Heuveline – Timberlake 2002; Andersson 2002; Andersson – Philipov 2002; de Vaus – Gray 2004; Philipov – Jasilioniene 2007; Mureşan 2007; Blau – van der Klaauw 2008; van Gaalen – van Poppel 2009; Kennedy – Thomson 2010; Turunen 2011; van Poppel et al. 2013). Compared to these papers, the novelty of our research is that we look at differences by union type, we analyse change over time, and we offer deeper analysis of a single country.

DATA AND METHODS

The first (2001/2002) and the fourth (2012/2013) waves of the Hungarian Generations and Gender Survey are used for the analysis. The data includes monthly information on the timing of major life events. A child database has been created by restructuring the partnership and fertility histories of female respondents. The units of analysis are children born after 1966. All biological children of the female respondents are included who lived with their mother when they were born and who were aged 15 or less during either of the two synthetic cohorts (1981–1988 and 2005–2012).³ Overall, our database includes 8,244 children born to 5,713 mothers. Weighting is used so that the sample represents children born between 1966 and 2012.

We look at the life course of children between aged 0 and 15. Observations are censored at interview, the death of the child or when the child left the mother's household. We use life table method. Cumulative survival functions show how many children experienced an event or transition by certain ages. We also gain information on the time they spent in certain states. (For a detailed description of the method, see Andersson and Philipov 2002).

³ The sample that we use for the analysis does not include children who never lived with their mother or whose mother died. Single-father families are also excluded because their number would have been very low in the sample.

In the analysis the period just before the transformation (1981–1988) is compared to the recent years (2005–2012), by which the transitory era with turbulent changes in partnership and fertility behaviour had ended. That is, we compare two regimes. The 1980s was characterised by relatively early and widespread marriage, 89% of the couples got married without prior cohabitation, and divorce rates were already high. By the first decade of the 2000s non-marital or pre-marital cohabitation as the first union has become the norm. Marriage rates have radically decreased, divorce rates have increased, and out-of-wedlock births have become socially accepted.

RESULTS

The partnership context of births

Results indicate that the majority of children were born in marriage during both periods – 94% in 1981–1988 and 58% in 2005–2012 –, even though the ratio of non-marital births has increased (6% vs. 41%), mainly due to the spread of childbirth in cohabiting unions (Table 1). While only 3% of children were born to cohabiting parents in the 1980s, the corresponding figure is 35% in the new millennium. Moreover, single motherhood has also become somewhat more frequent.

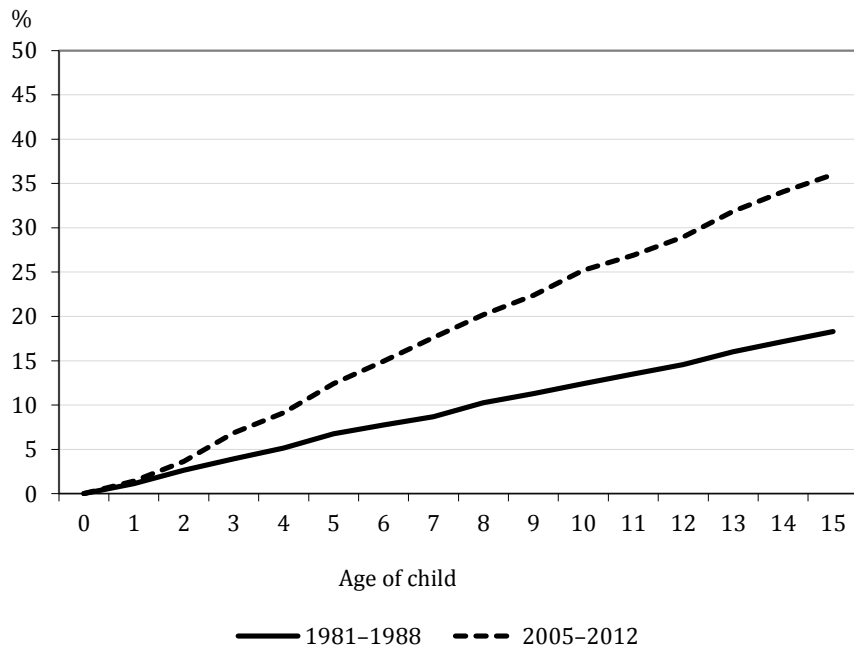
Table 1. The distribution of births by the mother’s partnership status in two synthetic cohorts (%)

	1981–1988	2005–2012
Born to lone mother	3.6	6.9
Born in cohabitation	2.8	34.7
Born in marriage	93.6	58.3
Total	100.0	100.0

Children’s experience of partnership dissolution

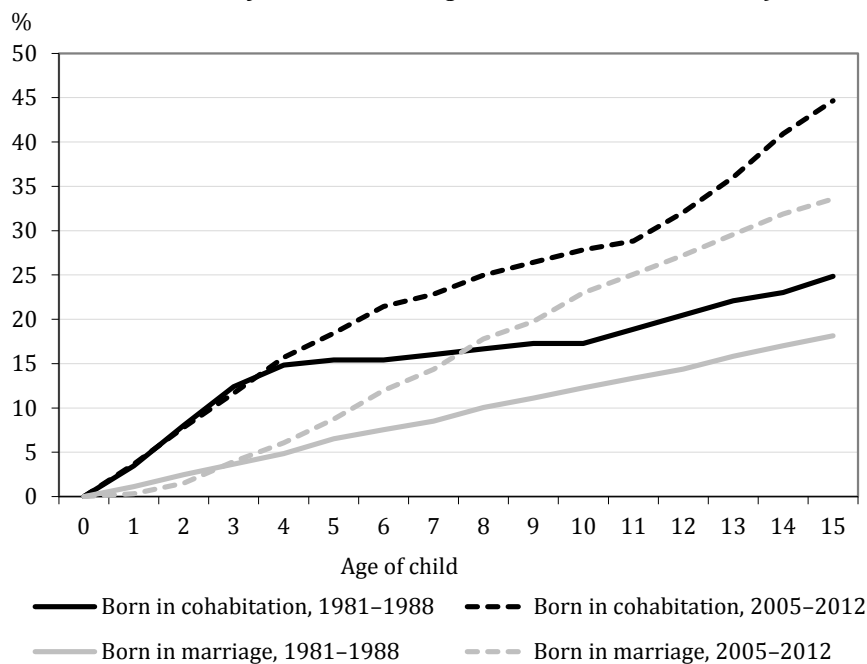
By the age of 15, 18% of children experienced the dissolution of their parents’ relationship and lived in single mother families in the 1980s. By the 2000s the overall rate of parental separation has doubled (36%) (Figure 1). High divorce rate and the growing popularity of cohabitation help us understand that more and more children experience the dissolution of their parents’ union.

Figure 1. The cumulative percentage of children who experienced parental separation by synthetic cohort (for children born in union)



If we compare the two synthetic cohorts, we can see that children born in cohabitation experienced partnership dissolution more often than children of married couples in both periods (Figure 2). The interesting thing is that while the ratio of children born in cohabitation has radically increased, the experiences of children of married and cohabiting parents remain distinct. Furthermore, the probability of experiencing parental separation has increased equally for children born in cohabitation and in marriage.

Figure 2. The cumulative percentage of children who experienced parental separation by birth context and synthetic cohort (for children born in union)



Let us look at differences by birth context in more detail (Table 2). We differentiate between two types of marriages: direct marriage with no prior cohabitation and marriage after cohabitation. They differ from each other in their chances of dissolution, and they probably involve different value orientations and attitudes as well. The ratio of direct marriages within all marriages has decreased from 89% to 43% since the 1980s. Direct marriage is not only increasingly uncommon and thus more and more selective but also the least likely to dissolve. Table 2 shows that the rate of parental separation has increased the least in this group. By contrast, if parents lived together for some time before they got married, their union is just as likely to dissolve as in the case of non-married parents. From this respect, cohabitation has not become more similar to marriage but the other way around.

Table 2. The percentage of children who experienced parental separation by age 15, by detailed birth context and synthetic cohort (for children born in union)

	1981-1988	2005-2012
Born in cohabitation	24.9	44.7
Born in marriage	18.1	33.6
direct marriage	17.4	26.9
marriage after cohabitation	27.9	45.1
Born in union, total	18.3	36.0

Children’s experience of step-family formation

We look at two ways through which single-parent families may become two-parent ones: lone mothers finding a partner and separated or divorced mothers establishing a new partnership. In the 1980s 86% and in the 2000s 60% of children born to lone mothers experienced living with a stepfather at some point during their childhood (Figure 3). Finding a partner is the most likely when the child is young. If the parents’ relationship had dissolved, about half of children experienced the re-partnering of their mothers within 9 years in the 1980s and one third of children did so in the 2000s (Figure 4).

Overall, the likelihood that a child experiences living with a stepfather has decreased. There are several possible explanations for this phenomenon. The social norm against lone motherhood and the norm favouring two-parent families may have weakened. Maybe it is easier for mothers to maintain a LAT relationship in the new millennium. The financial difficulties of lone motherhood may have decreased, or maybe more people take into consideration the difficulties that may arise in the everyday life of a stepfamily.

Figure 3. The cumulative percentage of children in step-parent families (for children born to lone mother)

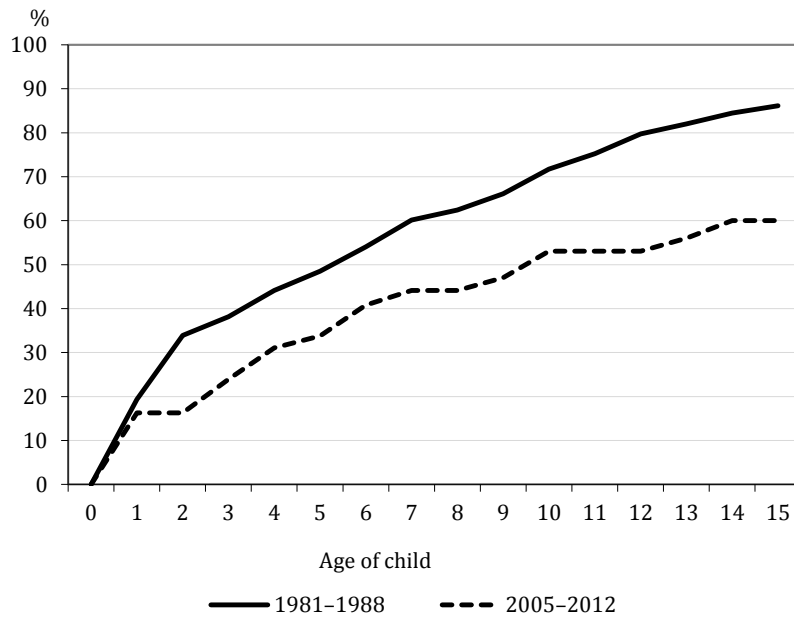
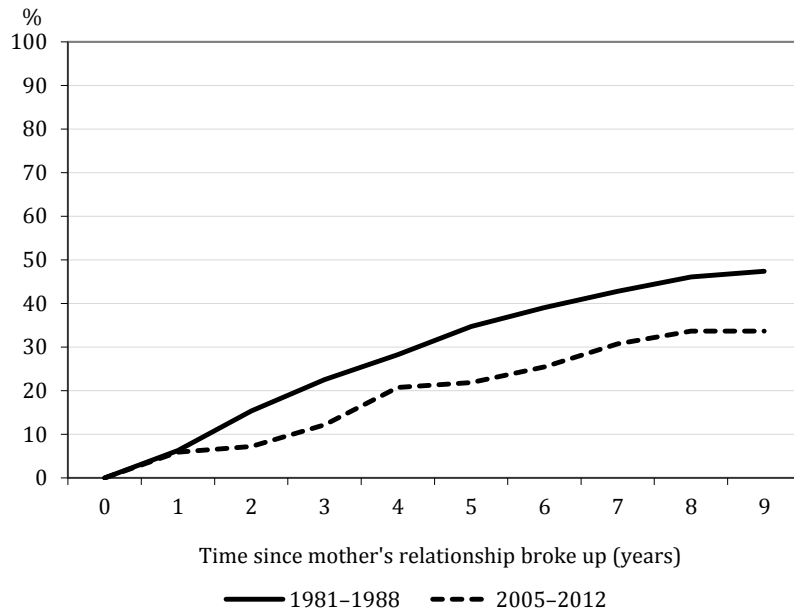


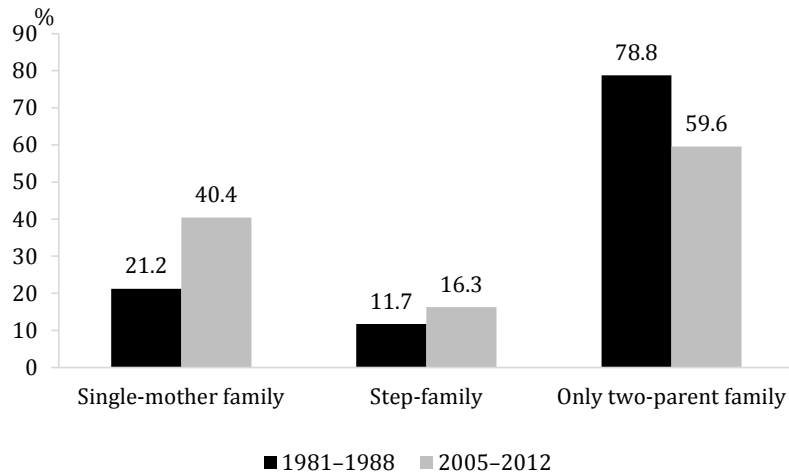
Figure 4. The cumulative percentage of children in step-parent families (for children born in union)



Children's experience of living in different types of families

Despite the increasing rates of partnership dissolution and divorce, most children still live with their biological mother and father during the first fifteen years of their lives (Figure 5). The ratio of children who experienced living in a single-mother family for a shorter or longer time has doubled (21% vs. 40%) due to the increasing rates of parental separation and lone motherhood. Living in a single-mother family has become a frequent experience. The ratio of children who live in step-families has also increased (from 12% in 1981-1988 to 16% in 2005-2012) but to a lesser extent than single-mother families.

Figure 5. Ratio of children experiencing different family forms by age 15



Overall, the experience of children has become more heterogeneous (Figure 6 and 7). Children still spend the majority of their first fifteen years with both of their biological parents (87% vs. 77% of the time), who most often are married to each other (86% vs. 61% of the time). Living with cohabiting parents has become an important part of life for many, especially for children under six. Many cohabiting parents either separate or get married as the child ages.

On average, children spent less time living with both biological parents in 2005-2012 than twenty years earlier. In 1981-1988 children spent 8% of their first fifteen years in a single-parent family; in 2005-2012 the corresponding figure was 16%. The ratio of living in a re-constructed family was around 5-6% in both cohorts. One may note that time spent in stepfamilies has not changed while the probability of lone- and single-mother families to become stepfamilies has decreased. It is because the latter decrease has been counterbalanced by the increasing share of single-mother families.

Figure 6. The distribution of time children spent in different types of families by age 15, 1981–1988

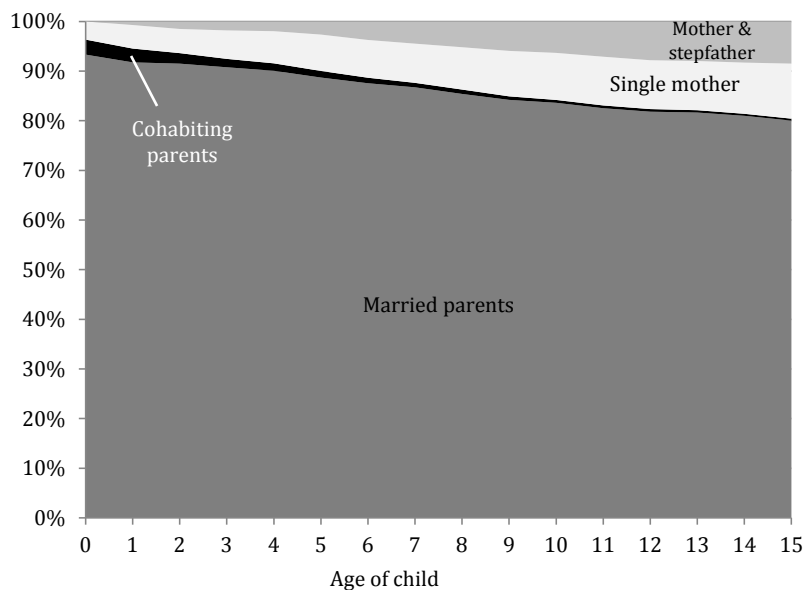
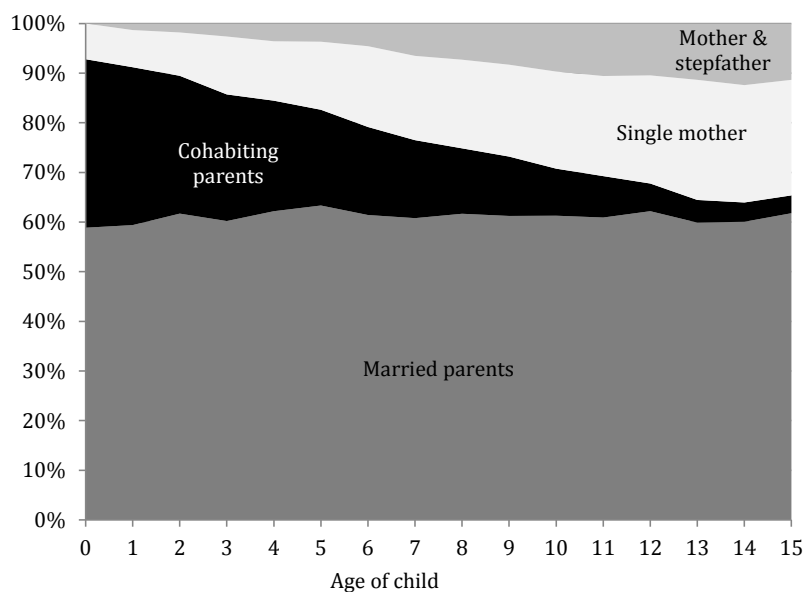


Figure 7. The distribution of time children spent in different types of families by age 15, 2005–2012



SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Changes in partnership behaviour have crucial impact on children’s experiences of family life. In Hungary the ratio of children born in cohabitation has increased from 3% to 35% since the 1980s. The ratio of children experiencing the dissolution of their parents’ relationship has doubled, from 18% to 36%.

There has been a general decrease in union stability, affecting married and cohabiting parents alike. From this perspective, cohabitation and marriage have neither diverged nor converged – but direct marriages and marriages with prior cohabitation have diverging destinies. Married parents are more likely to divorce if they cohabited before

marriage, while direct marriage (marriage with no prior cohabitation) is the least likely to dissolve and an increasingly uncommon and selective phenomenon. It seems that the stability that marriage offered for children now applies only to direct marriages.

Single mothers are less likely to form a new union now than they did in the 1980s. In 1981–1988 about 12% of children and in 2005–2012 about 16% of children experienced living in a stepfamily, and the time spent in such a family has hardly changed. This phenomenon may be explained by changing social norms and expectations, the increasing difficulties of re-partnering in general, the spread of LAT relationships, or the decreasing financial difficulties of single motherhood.

While a relatively high proportion of children experience living in single-parent or step-parent families, the ratio of time they spend in such living arrangements during their first fifteen years is lower. In the new millennium children still spend the majority of their first fifteen years with both biological parents. However, children's experiences have become more heterogeneous, partly because many live with cohabiting parents, especially when they are young, and partly because single-mother families have become more common.

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