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The Effects of Children on their Parents' Propensity to Get Separated in Contemporary France

ABSTRACT

This paper offers an empirical test of five rational-choice predictions bearing on the effects of children on their parents' propensity to get separated. It relies on a subsample (N=150,977) of *France's 1999 Family Survey* which enables to study French couples since the 1950s. The questions that are addressed are the following. 1/ Do parents divorce less often if they have more children? 2/ Is parents' risk of divorce affected by the fact that these children are biological children, rather than adopted children or stepchildren? 3/ Do parents divorce more often if they made their first child before getting married? 4/ Is parents' risk of divorce affected by the fact that (at least some of) their children were twins (or triplets, etc.), rather than children born at different times? 5/ Is parents' risk of divorce affected by the fact that they have only boys, or only girls, rather than at least one child of each sex? The results are then contrasted with rational-choice predictions and compared to results gathered from other countries and/or periods.

INTRODUCTION

Among the many possible effects of children on their (married or unmarried) parents' propensity to get separated, one may want to investigate, "all other things equal":

- The effect of the *number* of their children: do parents divorce less often if they have more children?
- The effect of the *origins* of these children: is parents' risk of divorce affected by the fact that these children are biological children, rather than adopted children or stepchildren?
- The effect of the *timing of conception* of biological children: do parents divorce more often if they made their first child before getting married?
- The effect of *multiple births*: is parents' risk of divorce affected by the fact that (at least some of) their children were twins (or triplets, etc.), rather than two children born at different times?
- The effect of the *sex composition* of their children: is parents' risk of divorce affected by the fact that they have only boys, or only girls, rather than at least one child of each sex?

The sociological and demographic research bearing on divorce in many societies throughout time and space has already given satisfying (and, most often, converging) answers to some of these questions. However, the case of contemporary France (since the 1950s) has not received much attention and, perhaps more importantly, some of these questions have not yet been investigated empirically, probably because answering them requires very large samples of data. The aim of this paper is precisely to use (a subsample of) *France's 1999*

Family Survey (N=150,977) to answer these questions; its aim is also to give a plausible, rational-choice explanation to each one of the patterns observed in contemporary France.

THE DATA AND THE STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

The data. *France's 1999 Family Survey* is a retrospective survey which was realized by the French *National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE)* jointly with the March 1999 census. It is based on a sample (representative of the adult population of mainland France on January 1st, 1999) of 380,000 women and men, who answered many questions about their family history. This survey is not only based on a very large sample: the fact that it was realized with the census also makes it particularly reliable. Moreover, this survey contains very useful information not only on married couples, but also on unmarried couples as long as they cohabited for more than 6 months. More precisely, we know if married or unmarried couples got *separated* (independently of any legal procedure), and if married couples got divorced. In this paper, I use exclusively the information on separation, not that on divorce, which seems the best way to study union breakdown of unmarried *and* married couples (some of whom get separated without ever divorcing).

The subsample I use. Three points should be made before I can state precisely the content of the subsample I use. 1/ For my analysis I select only people who, in 1999, are from 18 to 65 years old, who have been involved into at least one union, and whose union breakdown is not due to widowhood. 2/ Some of the people who were surveyed have been involved into two or more couples, which means I have to choose which one of these unions I will analyze. Since these people were asked to give information only about their last partner, and not about their first partner, I will analyze the fate of their last union. As for people who have been involved into only one couple in their life, I will analyze the fate of their unique union. Therefore, I will say I study the fate of “unique or last unions”. 3/ I analyze the probability of union breakdown after 10 years of union – the union starting with cohabitation. This implies that I eliminate those persons whose “unique or last union” started in 1989 or after.

Therefore, the subsample I use contains 150,977 persons (i.e., 150,977 couples, since I study the fate of one union of each of these persons); these persons are representative of 17,486,000 residents of mainland France who were from 18 to 65 years old in 1999, who had already been involved into at least one union and whose “unique or last” union started before 1989 and did not end through widowhood. For the sake of simplicity, I call this sample the “usual sample”.

In this sample, one finds 52,8% of females and 85,3% of people born in mainland France; 92,4% of these individuals have experienced only one union, and 50% of them started their “unique or last union” since 1975; 10 years after the start of their union, 92,3% of these unions had been transformed into marriages, and 4,8% had broken down.

The dependent variable of the logistic regression models: it is a nominal, dichotomous variable indicating whether the partners were still together, or had separated, after 10 years of cohabitation. Thus, my analyses will determine what factors influenced the odds of separation of couples after 10 years of cohabitation.

As to the independent variables, we may make a distinction between the five independent variables in which I am interested, and the independent variables which I use as control variables.

Independent variables of interest.

1/ The total number of children (either biological or adopted or stepchildren) who resided in the couple's household during its first ten years of union: none; 1; 2; 3; 4; 5 or more.

2/ The composition by origin of the children who resided in the couple's household during its first ten years of union: only biological children; only adopted children; only stepchildren; at least one biological child and at least one adopted child; at least one biological child and at least one stepchild; at least one adopted child and at least one stepchild; at least one biological child, at least one adopted child and at least one stepchild.

3/ Premarital conception: yes; no.

4/ Multiple births: yes; no.

5/ Sex composition of all the children who resided in the couple's household during its first ten years of union: only boys; only girls; at least one child of each sex.

Independent variables used as control variables:

- 5-year period of the start of the union : during the 1950s ; 1960-1964 ; 1965-1969 ; 1970-1974 ; 1975-1979 ; 1980-1984 ; 1985-1988.
- woman's age at the time when she started to cohabit with her partner : 19 or less ; 20-24 ; 25-29 ; 30-34 ; 35-39 ; 40-49 ; 50 or more.
- age difference between partners : none ; male is 1 or 2 years older; female is 1 or 2 years older; male is 3 to 5 years older; female is 3 to 5 years older; male is 6 to 9 years older; female is 6 to 9 years older; male is at least 10 years older; female is at least 10 years older.
- size of the city of residence of the couple: rural village; 2,000 to 9,999 inhabitants; 10,000 to 49,999 inhabitants; 50,000 to 199,999 inhabitants; 200,000 inhabitants or more.
- region of residence of the couple : Ile-de-France ; North (Nord-Pas-de-Calais, Picardie) ; East (Alsace, Lorraine, Franche-Comté, Champagne-Ardenne) ; West (Haute-Normandie, Basse-Normandie, Bretagne, Pays de la Loire, Poitou-Charentes) ; Center (Centre, Auvergne, Limousin, Bourgogne) ; Southwest (Aquitaine, Midi-Pyrénées, Languedoc-Roussillon) ; Southeast (Rhône-Alpes, Provence-Alpes-Côte-d'Azur, Corse)
- ethnic origins of the partners : male and female born in mainland France ; male and female born in the French overseas territories ; male and female born in the Maghreb ; male and female born elsewhere in Africa ; other endogamous matchings ; male from mainland France and female from the French overseas territories; male from mainland France and female from the Maghreb; male from mainland France and female from elsewhere in Africa; male from the French overseas territories and female from mainland France; male from non-EU European countries and female from mainland France; male from the Maghreb and female from mainland France; male from the Maghreb and female from non-EU European countries; male from elsewhere in Africa and female from mainland France; other exogamous matchings.
- socioprofessional positions of the partners: one-income hypergamous matching; two-income hypergamous matching; one-income hypogamous matching; two-income hypogamous matching; other heterogamous matchings; high-level homogamous matching; low-level homogamous matching; homogamous matching of self-employed workers or farmers; homogamous matching of nonworking individuals. [I call "homogamous" unions with two mates at roughly the same level of the occupational hierarchy, and "heterogamous" unions with two mates at different levels of the occupational hierarchy; heterogamous unions can thus be "hypergamous" if it is the male who has the higher level or "hypogamous" if it is the female; and homogamous unions can be either "high-level" or "low-level" according to the mates' ranks in the occupational hierarchy.]
- previous marital histories of the partners : none of the partners had married at least once before entering the union ; one of the partners had married at least once before entering the union ; both of the partners had married at least once before entering the union.
- marital history and status of the couple: still not married (after 10 years of union) ; married before cohabiting ; married directly at the start of the union ; married 1 or 2 years after the start of the union; married 3 to 9 years after the start of the union; married at an unspecified date.

THEORETICAL PREDICTIONS AND EMPIRICAL RESULTS

- **The effect of the number of children on the propensity to get separated**

Prediction. As a rule, rational-choice theory predicts that couples will get separated all the more often since partners invested less resources (time, money, energy, etc.) into their relationship, because investments into a relationship increase the expected benefits of the continuation of this relationship (“loyalty”, in Hirschman’s terms) compared to the expected benefits of the termination of this relationship (“exit”). Especially important are investments into union-specific capital, i.e., investments into faculties and specific relationships that are particularly valuable in one specific union, and only imperfectly transferable to other unions or to the state of singlehood. Typically, the one parent who would not get the custody (usually, the father) has a disincentive to get separated from his partner if he prefers to see his children every day (or if he prefers not to pay any alimony); the more children he has had, the more pleasure he would lose by getting separated, and therefore the less often he should decide or agree to get separated. This is the (main) reason why, according to rational-choice theory, couples should separate less often if they have had more children.

Empirical test.

Odds ratios of union breakdown after 10 years of union, according to the number of children who resided in the couple’s household.

		Without any control variable	With all control variables
Total number of children in the household	1	<i>Reference</i>	<i>Reference</i>
	2	0,333***	0,352***
	3	0,193***	0,207***
	4	0,182***	0,180***
	5 or more	0,163***	0,154***

Field : couples of the “usual sample” who accommodated at least one child in their household (N=138,748).

*Significant (<.05) **Highly significant (<.01) ***Very highly significant (<.001)

Conclusion. Couples break down all the less often since *more* children (biological or adopted or stepchildren) resided in their household. This result remains true in the presence of many control variables, notably the type of children who resided in their household. This pattern conforms to rational-choice theory’s prediction.

- **The effect of the type of children on the propensity to get separated**

Prediction. Given that adopting a child usually requires more time and energy (and money) than making one, rational-choice theory predicts that additional *adopted* children should reduce the propensity of parents to get separated even more than additional *biological* children.

But what about *stepchildren*, i.e., the biological children of only one of the partners of the couple? Given that stepchildren are not really an element of investment for the non-parent

partner, rational-choice theory predicts that additional stepchildren should reduce the couple's propensity to get separated less than biological children.

Empirical test.

Odds ratios of union breakdown after 10 years of union, according to the type of children who resided in the couple's household.

		Without any control variable	With all control variables
Composition of the children present in the household	All biological	<i>Reference</i>	<i>Reference</i>
	All adopted	0,304**	0,366**
	All stepchildren	4,025***	2,273***
	Biological and adopted	1,036	1,159
	Biological and stepchildren	4,297***	2,648***
	Adopted and stepchildren	5,963**	3,648*
	Bio., adopted and stepchildren	4,430	2,770

Field : couples of the "usual sample" who accommodated at least one child in their household (N=138,748).

*Significant (<.05) **Highly significant (<.01) ***Very highly significant (<.001)

Conclusion. Couples break down more often if the children who resided in their household were stepchildren rather than biological children, and biological rather than adopted children. This result remains true in the presence of many control variables, notably the number of children who resided in their household. For example, "all other things equal", having only adopted children rather than only biological children reduces the odds of union breakdown by 2,7 (1/0,366≈2,7), while having only stepchildren rather than only biological children increases the odds of union breakdown by 2,2. This pattern thus conforms to rational-choice theory's prediction.

- **The effect of a premarital conception on the propensity to get separated**

Prediction. Rational-choice theory sees premarital conception as an indicator of the fact that the couple got married precipitously in order to "legitimate" their child; this should have reduced the partners' length of search for a suitable mate, which in turn should produce disproportionately sub-optimal matches, i.e., couples which should get separated more often than average. Therefore, a selection effect should be associated with premarital conception, making it increase the risk of separation.

Empirical test.

Odds ratios of union breakdown after 10 years of relationship, according to the occurrence of premarital conception.

	Without any control variable	With all control variables
No premarital conception	<i>Reference</i>	<i>Reference</i>
One premarital conception	1,268***	1,640***

Field : couples of the "usual sample" who married and had at least one child (N=126,142).

*Significant (<.05) **Highly significant (<.01) ***Very highly significant (<.001)

Conclusion. Couples break down more often if they had a premarital conception, and this result remains true (actually, becomes even truer) in the presence of many control variables. This pattern conforms to rational-choice theory's prediction.

- **The effect of multiple births on the propensity to get separated**

Prediction. Multiple births too can be analyzed as an unforeseen event, which should create tensions in the couple because raising twins creates a higher-than-expected level of financial stress and domestic work.

Empirical test.

Odds ratios of union breakdown after 10 years of relationship, according to the occurrence of multiple births.

	Without any control variable	With all control variables
No multiple birth	<i>Reference</i>	<i>Reference</i>
At least one multiple birth	1,324*	1,820***

Field : couples of the "usual sample" who accommodated at least two children in their household (N=105,933).

*Significant (<.05) **Highly significant (<.01) ***Very highly significant (<.001)

Conclusion. Couples break down more often if they had at least one multiple birth, and this result remains true (actually, becomes even truer) in the presence of many control variables, notably the number and type of children who resided in the couple's household. This pattern thus conforms to rational-choice theory's prediction.

- **The effect of the sex composition of children on the propensity to get separated**

Prediction. This explanatory variable is, without doubt, the one for which a plausible, rational-choice prediction is the hardest to give. If at least one parent invests more into children of one sex, couples who do not have any children of this sex should get separated more often; for instance (Basu, Das Gupta 2001), in countries where parents can see boys as better old-age insurances than girls (because only them work for money), or in (patrilineal) societies where a man has to have a boy in order to transmit his goods and prerogatives to the next generation, couples who do not have any boy should get separated more often. However, in countries such as contemporary France, in which parents no longer see their children as a way to make sure they can live decently when they can no longer work, and in which no goods or prerogatives are transmitted from a father to his son, for what reasons would parents prefer boys, or girls, or a mix of boys and girls?

One could imagine that mothers prefer to have only girls instead of only boys, and that fathers prefer to have only boys instead of only girls, notably because some leisure activities are gendered, so that it is sometimes easier for a parent to take time with a child of his or her own sex. This would mean that the sex composition of children that would best reconcile the partners' different sex preferences would be a mixed one. Or alternatively, one could imagine that both mothers and fathers prefer to have at least one child of each sex, so that they can experience the different kinds of relationships a parent can have with a boy and with a girl. This would mean that the partners would both have a preference for a mixed-sex parity.

Empirical test (1).

Odds ratios of union breakdown after 10 years of relationship, according to the sex composition of the children who resided in the couple's household.

		Without any control variable	With all control variables
Sex composition of children	Only boys	<i>Reference</i>	<i>Reference</i>
	Only girls	0,955	0,913
	Both boys and girls	0,740***	0,781***

Field : couples of the “usual sample” who accommodated at least two children in their household (N=105,933).

*Significant (<.05) **Highly significant (<.01) ***Very highly significant (<.001)

Conclusion (1). Couples break down more often if they have only boys or only girls rather than at least one child of each sex, and this result remains true in the presence of many control variables, notably the number and type of children who resided in the couple’s household. Another study about France (Calot, Deville 1971) had found that women from the 1892-1916 generations were less likely to have a third child if the first two were of the same sex, whatever this sex, thereby suggesting a preference for a mixed-sex parity.

However, if on average couples prefer children of both sexes, it could happen that this is not the case of certain couples, notably couples in which one of the partner comes from a strongly patriarchal society. To check this hypothesis, I conducted logistic regression models on various subsamples of the the population who resided in France in 1999, and the most significant results are the following.

Empirical test (2).

Odds ratio of union breakdown after 10 years of relationship according to the sex composition of the children who resided in the couple’s household and the ethnic origins of the partners : a synthesis of the significant results.

		Only boys	Only girls	Both girls and boys
<i>Ceteris paribus</i> test on couples of the “usual sample” who accommodated at least 2 children and whose male comes frome...	Mainland France (N=83,689)	<i>Reference</i>	0,858	0,734***
	Maghreb (N=7,084)	<i>Reference</i>	1,842*	0,909
	Asia (N=1,011)	<i>Reference</i>	11,744*	0,869
<i>Ceteris paribus</i> test on couples of the “usual sample” who accommodated at least 2 children and whose female comes frome...	Mainland France (N=86,145)	<i>Reference</i>	0,881	0,785***
	Southern Europe (N=4,032)	<i>Reference</i>	0,680	0,424*
	Maghreb (N=6,405)	<i>Reference</i>	1,824*	0,693

*Significant (<.05) **Highly significant (<.01) ***Very highly significant (<.001)

Conclusion (2). There do exist (statistically significant, and sociologically meaningful) differences in the effects of the sex composition of children on the couple’s risk of divorce depending on the ethnic origins of the partners.

Couples whose male or female comes from mainland France, and couples whose female comes from Southern Europe break down less often if they have boys *and* girls rather than only boys or only girls; thus, these couples seem to prefer mixed-sex parities to other sex compositions. This confirms that in contemporary Western societies couples prefer to have children of *both* sexes (Hank, Kohler 2000), a phenomenon which could be explained either by the fact that each parent prefers to have at least one child of his/her own sex, or by the fact that both parents prefer to have a mixed-sex parity rather than only boys or only girls.

Couples whose male or female comes from Maghreb and couples whose male comes from Asia break down more often if they have only girls, rather than only boys or both boys and girls; thus, these couples seem to prefer to have at least one boy rather than none. The preference for boys in many traditional societies from Maghreb and Asia is well-known, and it can be explained by the fact that boys are better old-age insurances than girls and by the fact that in patrilineal societies men must have at least one boy in order to transmit their goods and prerogatives to the next generation. However, why would such preferences remain despite the fact they no longer seem functional in contemporary Western societies?

DISCUSSION : A COMPARISON BETWEEN THE REGULARITIES OBSERVED IN CONTEMPORARY FRANCE AND THOSE OBSERVED IN OTHER PLACES OR IN OTHER TIMES

The effect of the number of (biological) children. The fact that couples divorce (or separate) more frequently if they have less children is observed in many societies: France between 1792 and 1802 (Ronsin 1990), France in the early 1880s (Ronsin 1992), Hungary from 1894 to 1948 (Karady 1985), France in the 1960s and 1970s (Festy 2000; Commaille, Boigeol 1973) and since then (Traag *et al.* 2000), Great Britain from the 1950s to the 1970s (Murphy 1985), Germany (Diekmann, Engelhardt 1999) and China (Yi *et al.* 2002) from the 1950s to the 1980s, Egypt in the early 1980s (Fahmi 1987), Togo in the 1980s (Locoh, Thiriart 1995 ; Thiriart 1998), the cities of Dakar and Bamako (Antoine 2002), contemporary rural Malawi (Reniers 2003), the contemporary Netherlands (Kalmijn *et al.* 2004), contemporary Germany (Wagner, Weiss 2002), contemporary Sweden (Walke 2002), contemporary Canada (Wu, Balakrishnan 1995), the United States until the 1980s (White 1990), Denmark (Svarer 2002) and Norway (Lyngstad 2004 a ; Lyngstad 2004 b ; Hansen 2005) and Sweden (Liu, Vikat 2004) in the 1980s and 1990s, and still other societies. Nevertheless, there may exist some exceptions to this strong regularity, such as in the United Kingdom in the 1990s (Chan, Halpin 2005 ; Chan, Halpin 2002 ; Böheim, Ermisch 1999). One may notice, by the way, that one of the reasons why homosexual unions break down more often than heterosexual ones in Norway and Sweden in the 1990s and early 2000s (Andersson *et al.* 2004) may be that homosexual couples do not make children, while (at least some) heterosexual ones do.

The effect of stepchildren. The fact that the existence or presence of stepchildren tends to increase, or not to decrease, the risk of divorce (or separation) is also documented, and was observed in Denmark (Svarer 2002), Norway (Lyngstad 2004 a ; Lyngstad 2004 b) and Sweden (Liu, Vikat 2004) in the 1980s and 1990s, and in contemporary Australia (Bracher *et al.* 1993).

The effect of premarital conception. Premarital conception was shown to increase the risk of divorce (or separation) in Great Britain from the 1950s to the 1970s (Murphy 1985), in France in 1970 (Commaille, Boigeol 1973 ; Boigeol, Commaille 1974), in Puerto Rico at the end of the 1970s and in the early 1980s (Canabal 1990), in the United States in the 1980s and earlier (White 1990), and in Norway in the marriage cohorts from 1975 to 1999 (Lyngstad 2004).

The effect of multiple births. I know only one study (Walke 2002) which has already tested empirically the potential effect of multiple births on the risk of divorce (or separation); it shows that having twins, rather than two spaced births, slightly increases the risk of divorce in contemporary Sweden. The “unanticipated event” mechanism could also explain why couples divorce more often if they have more than 4 children (rather than from 1 to 4), or if the time interval between births is very short, in Great Britain from the 1950s to the 1970s (Murphy 1985); however, it seems that couples do *not* separate more often if their economic situation got *unexpectedly* worse in the United Kingdom in the 1990s (Böheim, Ermisch 1999).

The effect of the sex composition of children. This field of research has not yet led to converging results: despite extensive knowledge about the existence of parents’ sex preferences for their children (Basu, Das Gupta 2001; Marleau, Saucier 2001), little is known about their effect on divorce. In China from the 1950s to the 1980s (Yi *et al.* 2002), having only girls does raise the risk of divorce of couples with three children or more. A study bearing on the United States during the 1960s and 1970s (Morgan *et al.* 1988) also found that having one boy rather than one girl, or two boys rather than two girls, lowered the divorce risk. However, another study showed that in the 1990s neither in the United States, Canada nor in any analyzed European country did having girls rather than boys raise the divorce risk. And still another study showed that in some contemporary Western countries (Hank, Kohler 2000) people preferred to have *both* boys and girls, rather than only boys or only girls; according to this study, French people did not seem to display any sex preference; if the explanation I proposed to explain the fact that French people tend to separate less often if (*ceteris paribus*) they have children of both sexes is right, then the finding of this study is clearly at odds with ours.

CONCLUSION

The main empirical results concerning the effects of children on their parents’ propensity to get separated in France since the 1950s tend to bolster rational-choice theory’s predictions.

However, in 20th-century France, one can find an interesting pattern about divorce that seems to be at odds with rational-choice predictions. Indeed, most of the time, it is women, rather than men, who file for divorce, while financially and on the remarriage market women probably have more to lose from divorce than men. So, what can it be that motivates women to file for divorce more often than their husbands?

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