

The transition to first union in western Germany and France

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Introduction

The following work is a study of the transition to first union in France and western Germany - either as non-marital cohabitation or direct marriage - using two national surveys that deal with union and family formation. While cohabitation in western Germany has become a socially accepted, but only short-term prelude to marriage and is often transformed into marriage when couples have a child, in France cohabitation has become an accepted alternative to marriage connected with a high rate of non-marital births. The differences in demographic behavior and the apparent contrast to German family policy provide a strong incentive to study France and western Germany in a comparative perspective.

Many authors argue that the changing life concepts for women, the growth in female economic independence but also women's longer participation in the educational system led to changes in union formation behavior (Becker, 1981; Oppenheimer, 1988; Blossfeld and Huninink, 1991). However, country-specific factors like the welfare regime of a society, specific policies and long-term cultural differences can affect this presumed interrelation. The male breadwinner model with a non-working or part-time working wife is still very frequent in western Germany. For western German women marriage does not only mean a personal commitment but it represents also an institution in which children can be raised and which has provided financial coverage in case of separation until recently. These so-called "child-centered marriages" (Nave-Herz, 1997; Matthias-Bleck, 2006) are explainable through a comprehensive system of historically grown family policies and institutional structures that hamper the economical independence of women. In contrast, the higher share of French women working fulltime, the greater possibilities of getting child care and the higher acceptance of non-marital relationships in law are factors that enable French women to be more independent from their husbands earnings than western German women.

Objective and data

The major objective of this work is to analyze the two most discussed factors that are regarded as responsible for changes in union formation behavior: the impact of women's educational attainment as a predictor for female economic independence and the impact of childbearing on union formation behavior. Two retrospective surveys are analyzed: the German Familiensurvey conducted in the year 2000 and the French Study of Family History

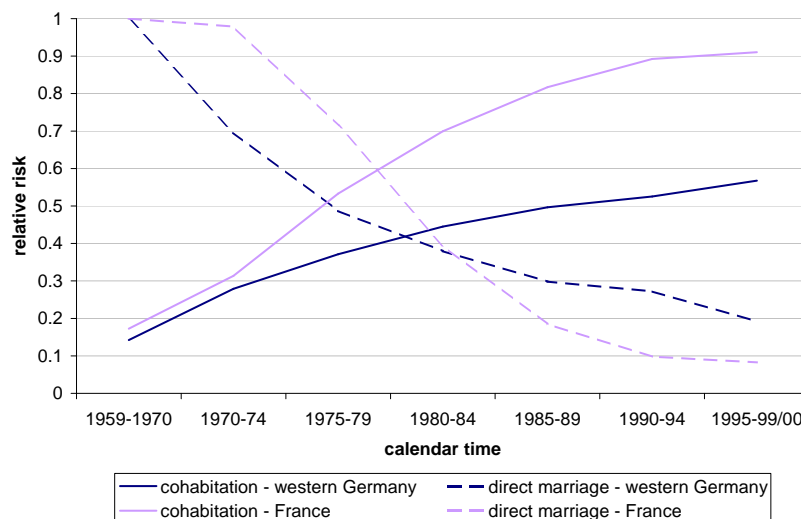
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from 1999 (*Étude de l'histoire familiale* – EHF). Since there are two possible destinations, namely entering direct marriage versus a non-marital cohabitation, a competing risk framework is used. We obtain a sample of 2,964 German women and 133,800 French women who were single and under the risk of a first cohabiting union or a first marriage respectively.

First results

Figure 1 displays the rates of entry into non-marital cohabitation and direct marriage in the periods between 1959 and 1999/2000 for western Germany and France, relative to the risk of marrying directly in the 1959-1970 period. In the extension of the proportional hazard model, we analyze the two competing transitions (entry into marital and non-marital union) jointly. This corresponds to entering the type of decrement as an extra factor in the analysis where the extra factor operates in a two-way interaction with each of the other explanatory variables. The advantage of this procedure lies in the direct comparison of the trends over calendar time across the two competing risks.

Figure 1: First union formation intensities by type of union and calendar time, western German and French women



Sources: Familiensurvey 2000 and *Étude de l'histoire familiale* 1999, own calculations

Note: (1) Dependent variable: transition to first union measured since age 15 (2) Rates calculated in a joint model of the two transitions (3) Reference category: direct marriage in the period 1959-1970 (4) Controlled for age of woman

From the beginning of the 1980s onwards, cohabitation has become the most common type of first union in western Germany. It is four times higher in the last observed period, 1995-2000, than in the period before 1970. Rates of direct marriage, however, dropped by 80%. We conclude that despite the strong increase in cohabiting unions, cohabitation cannot compensate for the steep decrease in direct marriage rates starting in the 1970s. While direct marriage rates decreased by 30% at the beginning of the 1970s compared to the reference category in western Germany, we do not observe such a drastic increase during that time for France until the period 1975-1979. At the end of the 1970s, cohabitation has become the most common type of first union also in France. Nowadays, the increase in cohabitation

intensities fully compensates for decreasing marriage rates; it even led to higher partnership rates in principle in France.

Our results confirm the prevailing existence of child-centered marriages in western Germany. Direct marriage rates increase strongly during pregnancy and decrease after the birth of the child. However, there are changes over time (Table 1): while marriage remains and even becomes more important for founding a family, the birth of a child is not as strongly related to marriage anymore as it has been in previous times. Childbearing within cohabitation has been increasing also in western Germany: women of the birth cohort 1975–1982 had a five times higher risk to get a child within a non-marital union than women from the birth cohort 1944–1954. However, in comparison to France this risk is still quite low. There, the risk of becoming mother within a consensual union is 11 times higher for the youngest birth cohort than for the oldest cohort of French women (Table 2). Pregnancy even led to 28 times higher rates of entering cohabitation (4.08 times higher in western Germany).

Table 1: Relative risk of entering first union by cohabitation according to pregnancy–motherhood–status by birth cohort, western German women

	<i>childless, not pregnant</i>	<i>childless, pregnant</i>	<i>mother</i>
1944–1954	1 (ref)	2.38 **	2.49 ***
1955–1964	2.09 ***	3.84 ***	1.75 **
1965–1974	2.42 ***	4.55 ***	3.15 ***
1975–1982	2.36 ***	4.08 ***	4.97 ***

Sources: Familiensurvey 2000, own calculations

Note: (1) Controlled for age, cohort, level of religiosity, parental divorce, parental education, education and activity status (2) missing values are not shown but were controlled for (3) *** $p \leq 0.01$; ** $0.01 \leq p \leq 0.05$; * $0.05 \leq p \leq 0.10$

Table 2: Relative risk of entering first union by cohabitation according to pregnancy–motherhood–status by birth cohort, French women

	<i>childless, not pregnant</i>	<i>childless, pregnant</i>	<i>mother</i>
1944–1954	1 (ref)	4.99 **	1.59 ***
1955–1964	2.59 ***	9.72 ***	2.73 **
1965–1974	4.09 ***	16.82 ***	4.90 ***
1975–1980	4.62 ***	28.34 ***	11.01 ***

Sources: Étude de l’histoire familiale 1999, own calculations

Note: (1) Controlled for age, cohort, education and activity status (2) missing values are not shown but were controlled for (3) *** $p \leq 0.01$; ** $0.01 \leq p \leq 0.05$; * $0.05 \leq p \leq 0.10$

Regarding education, we discovered that highly educated French women have a significantly higher risk of starting their first union as non-marital cohabitation compared to direct marriage than all other educational groups. The positive influence of education has remained constant over time. In western Germany, we do not find such a clear effect of education. Educational enrollment seems to matter more than attainment: we find high risks of cohabitation for women who are enrolled in education during their 20s - students have a higher risk of entering their first union as cohabitation and a very low risk of marrying directly

than women who left education. However, their relative risk of marrying directly is more than twice as high at ages 30-34 compared to women with a vocational degree (on a 95% significance level). This points to a *catch-up effect* for highly educated women: women with a completed university degree who did not enter a first marriage during their studies more often choose to marry directly after they have finished their studies than medium educated women.