

Repartnering after Union Dissolution. A Study of Same-Sex and Different-Sex Couples in Austria

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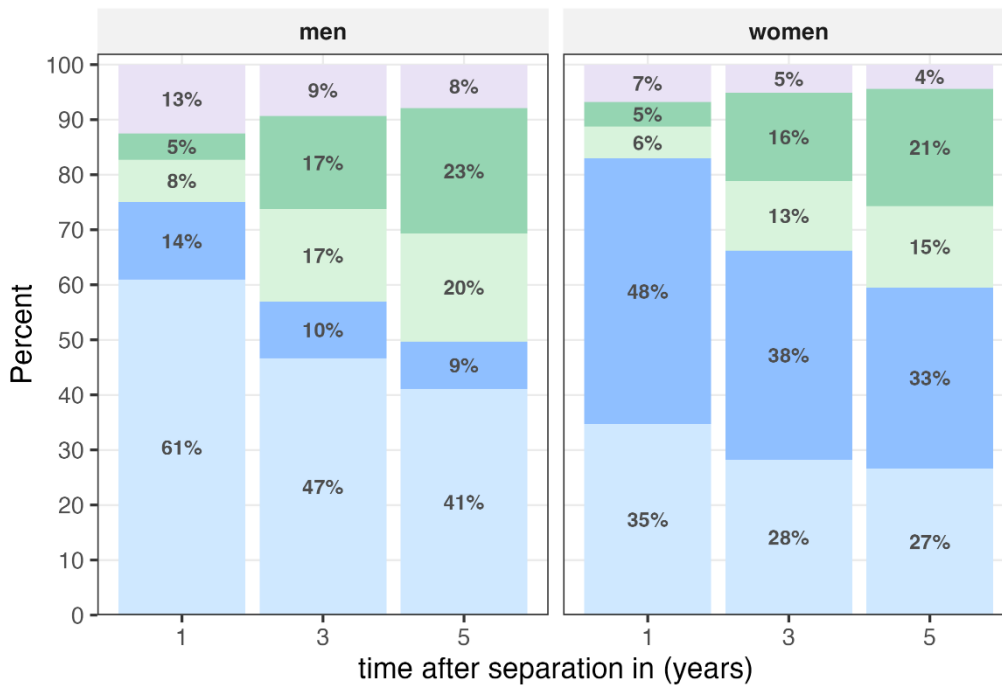
Extended abstract

Repartnering following the end of a romantic relationship has become commonplace in most Western societies (Raley and Sweeney 2020). However, the phenomenon has mainly been studied among different-sex couples, with little research focusing on same-sex partnerships (for an exception, see Ophir and Boertien 2024). In this paper, we examine the prevalence and speed of repartnering among same-sex and different-sex couples in Austria, a conservative European welfare state characterised by a strong emphasis on family and traditional gender roles. As Austria enabled registered partnerships for same-sex couples in 2010 and marriage in 2019, it offers a unique opportunity to include a complete sample of married and registered same-sex couples in the analysis. The modified male breadwinner model (Daly 2011) continues to dominate the division of labour among heterosexual couples in Austria, with women often working part-time. This is even more pronounced in couples with children (Statistics Austria, 2024). This marks a high vulnerability of women and leads to strong gendered economic consequences after union dissolution and high economic losses of women's income after divorce and separation. Here, repartnering can mitigate for losses. Same-sex couples, however, are less constrained by gender roles and are less homogamous in terms of age and education (Schwartz and Graf 2009; Verbakel and Kalmijn 2014), suggesting that social and legal contexts play a mediating role in repartnering behaviour. Previous research from other countries has documented a negative age effect indicating that repartnering is more prevalent among younger persons compared to older ones (e.g., Lin et al. 2022; Zilincikova and Schnor 2021). Furthermore, a so-called motherhood gap in the likelihood of repartnering, especially for lower-educated women, shows that the probability of repartnering is negatively associated with parenthood and with the level of education for women (Di Nallo et al. 2023; for Austria, see Zartler and Berghammer 2013). Regarding gender differences, higher repartnering rates for men have been found (Wu and Schimmele 2005). In same-sex couples, however, evidence from a British study suggests that repartnering rates are higher in female-same-sex couples than in male ones (Ophir and Boertien 2024). Building on this body of work, this study addresses three key research questions: First, what is the prevalence and speed of repartnering after dissolution of marriage and registered partnership for different and same-sex couples in Austria? Second, how does the prevalence and speed of repartnering differ by socio-economic characteristics, namely gender, age, education, and the presence of children? Third, how does repartnering affect people's standard of living in terms of household income and homeownership status, again distinguishing between different and same-sex couples as well as between different socio-economic sub-groups? This study makes three main contributions to the literature. First, it provides new evidence for Austria by using newly available Austrian register data (2011–2021). Second, it includes same-sex couples—a group often neglected in previous research due to limited data availability. Third, it offers a nuanced picture of repartnering in Austria, examining differences across gender, age, education, and family type.

Theoretically, this research is framed within the life course approach, which highlights how individual lives are shaped by linked lives, timing, and transitions across social institutions (Findlay et al. 2015). This perspective helps us understand how family dynamics and partnership transitions evolve within broader social and institutional contexts. In addition, marital search theory (Oppenheimer 1988) assumes that individuals' partner searches are guided by the principle of maximizing resources, with the duration and success of the search depending on personal characteristics and resource needs. People facing economic strain—such as low-income or single mothers—may lower their expectations and enter new partnerships more quickly. Repartnering thus represents not only a social and emotional process but also a potentially strategic one. It can help regain lost resources through shared housing and expenses, access to a partner's social networks, or the pooling of childcare and domestic responsibilities. In contexts like Austria, where gendered labour market structures persist, repartnering may therefore serve as an adaptive response to financial vulnerability after separation or divorce. We answer our research questions drawing on Austrian register data and, in line with the theoretical frameworks presented above as well as previous empirical evidence, we expect first that repartnering rates (defined as forming a new cohabiting partnership irrespective of formal marriage or registered partnership) are more prevalent and happen earlier among the different-sex couples than among same-sex couples; Second, we expect that the prevalence and timing of repartnering differs by gender and with regard to age, education, and the presence of children. Finally, we expect that repartnering results in improvement of standards of living, which is larger for women than for men and less pronounced for homosexual individuals.

A major innovation of this study is the use of newly accessible Austrian register data, enabled since 2022 and covering the period 2011–2021. These data provide comprehensive information on the entire resident population and include detailed records on both partners' demographic and economic characteristics, partnership histories, and housing conditions. This population-wide coverage enables the analysis of small and hard-to-study subgroups—such as same-sex couples—that are typically underrepresented in survey data, enabling a more inclusive understanding of contemporary partnering dynamics. We will compute event history models to analyse the likelihood and time to re-partner after union dissolution, separately for men and women in different-sex couples, and for same-sex couples. We stratify our sample by gender, age, educational level and parenthood and include covariates like employment status, urban-rural areas of living, alongside partnership characteristics such as partnership duration, and dissolution year. The analysis is carried out in four steps: First, a descriptive analysis documents trends in repartnering rates and timing after union dissolution for same- and different-sex couples. Second, event history analysis estimates the likelihood and speed of repartnering for same- and different-sex couples. Third, subgroup analysis, Estimating stratified event history models by age, educational level and parenthood, again separately for same- and different-sex couples to identify patterns of social inequality in repartnering dynamics (Expected). Finally, an analysis of people's standards of living after union dissolution for different sub-groups.

Preliminary results on different-sex couples indicate that repartnering is more common among younger persons and that men re-partner quicker and more frequently than women (see Fig 1).



Household composition

- living alone
- sole parent
- with new partner without children
- with new partner with children
- other

Figure 1: Re-partnering rates for man and women in different-sex couples after separation from cohabitation, marriage, or registered partnership.

We could also show that repartnering is particularly significant for women as a means of compensating for economic losses following divorce or separation (see Fig 2). For men, repartnering has minimal economic consequences and is more consistent across educational strata.

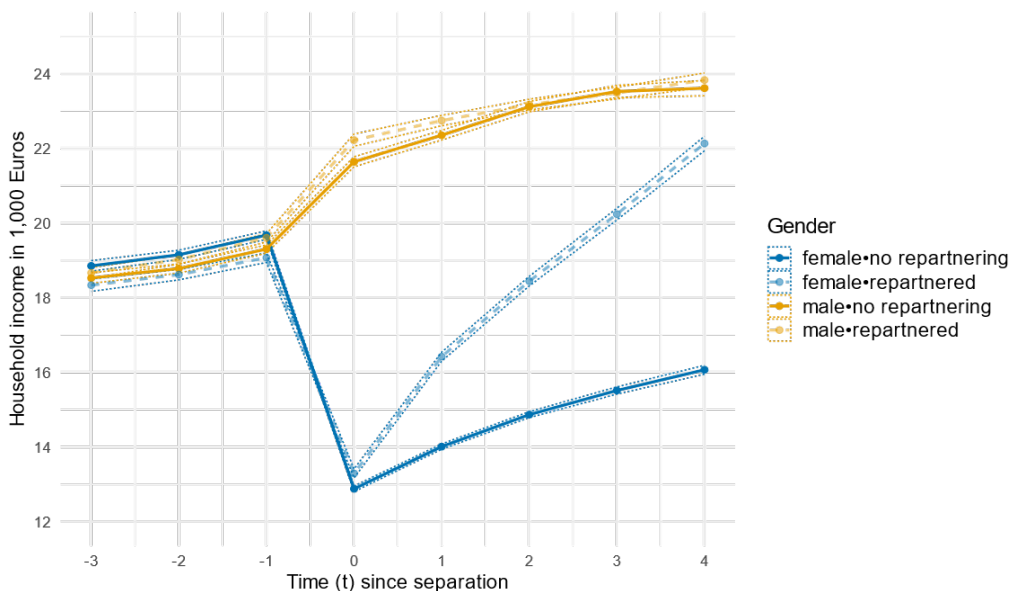


Figure 2: Household income changes for men and women by repartnering

Note: Fixed-effects predictions (95% CIs). Sample: under 50, living with a new partner. Ns denote person-years (Women/Men) — Left: 182,942 / 140,275; Right: 106,974 / 108,029.

Next steps will be to identify the population of same-sex couples and estimate the event-history analysis for the sub-groups. This study contributes to the broader understanding of family dynamics in conservative welfare states, shedding light on the living situation of same-sex couples in Austria. In sum, this study provides the first population-wide evidence on repartnering in Austria using newly available register data, extends previous research by including same-sex couples, and offers a comprehensive, gender-sensitive analysis of how social and economic inequalities shape repartnering trajectories. Through this, it advances our understanding of how individuals navigate family transitions in changing social contexts.

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