

Are first co-residential partnerships changing across Europe?

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Abstract

Over the past few decades, the form, function, and meaning of first co-residential partnerships has changed dramatically across Europe. First partnerships used to start with marriage and were the primary setting for raising children, often lasting till the death of one partner. However, the increase in divorce, nonmarital cohabitation, nonmarital childbearing, and re-partnering has altered the nature of first partnerships, raising questions about their role in the lifecourse today. As cohabitation has become the main way of entering partnership, studying cohabitation solely in reference to marriage (i.e. time to marriage) or whether partnerships are cohabiting or married is insufficient to capture the changing nature of first partnerships. Here we use newly available Harmonized Histories data from the Generations and Gender Surveys (GGS) Round II, conducted between 2020-23 in 12 countries, which allows us to trace changes across birth cohorts- 1970-74, 1975-59, 1980-84 - who have yet to be studied as closely as older cohorts. We analyse standard indicators to understand first partnerships: timing, duration, and variation, and relative to marriage and childbearing. We find the mean age of first partnerships remains relatively young in most countries at around age 25 and the speed of entry into partnership is similar across countries. Most first partnerships continue to be relatively long lasting and are either intact or convert to marriage within 5 years, although there is variation across countries. Taken as a whole, this study paints a broad picture of first partnership formation in contemporary Europe.

Introduction

Over the past few decades, the form, function, and meaning of first co-residential partnerships (henceforth, referred to as partnerships) has changed dramatically across Europe (Perelli-Harris et al. 2014, Hiekel et al. 2014). First partnerships used to start with marriage and be the primary setting for raising children, often lasting until the death of one partner (Perelli-Harris and Lyons Amos 2015, Perelli-Harris et al. 2012). However, the increase in divorce, nonmarital cohabitation (henceforth cohabitation), nonmarital childbearing, and re-partnering (Perelli-Harris and Kuang 2024, Berghammer and Sobotka 2021) has altered the nature of first partnerships, raising questions about their role in the lifecourse today. As cohabitation has become the main way of entering partnership, studying cohabitation solely in reference to marriage (i.e. time to marriage) or whether partnerships are cohabiting or married is insufficient to capture the changing nature of first partnerships. Instead of solely interrogating cohabitation versus marriage, we focus instead on first partnerships more broadly. We ask, are first partnerships still primarily long-term relationships, albeit starting with cohabitation and including a longer time to childbearing? Or do they tend to be short-lived relationships without children? Given overall delays in the transition to adulthood such as delayed marriage and childbearing, has first partnership formation also been delayed?

Background

From the 1960s, first marriage rates dropped sharply across Europe, leading to a long-term pattern of delayed marriage. Marriage is no longer a life event for young adults in their 20s; the mean ages at first marriage are over 30 across Europe, for men and women (Sobotka and Berghammer 2021). But while marriage has been delayed across Europe, it is less clear if partnership more generally has been similarly delayed and what country differences may be.

Today, most partnerships start as cohabitation. Historically, cohabitation was a short and unstable living arrangement that usually resulted in separation or marriage within 2-3 years, lasting for a median duration of 2.4 years across several high-income countries (Heuveline and Timberlake 2004). In the UK, first co-residential partnerships among younger cohorts born in the 1980s were more likely to end in separation than marriage, unlike older cohorts born in the 1970s (Pelikh et al. 2022). In Sweden, cohabiting couples whose partnerships began 2012-2022 were much less likely to either marry or have children, suggesting less inclination for higher levels of commitment (Cantalini et al. 2024). On the other hand, in the US, first cohabitations formed since the turn of the century have increased in duration compared to those formed in the mid-1980s (Lamidi et al. 2019), as well as cohabiting couples from the 1970s birth cohorts in Austria, Belgium, France, the Netherlands, and Norway, who spend 3-4 years in cohabitation, before marrying or separating (Hiekel 2014).

While existing typologies of partnership typically contrast and compare marriage and cohabitation, we aim to create new typologies, which extend the conceptualization of first partnership to reflect important dimensions such as timing, duration, transition to marriage, and having children (i.e. early, short-lived with no marriage or children; delayed, long-lasting, with marriage and children). This gives key insight into the role of first co-residential partnerships and their evolving dynamics.

Research questions

We seek to understand the role of these first relationships, their cross-national variation, and whether they have changed across cohorts. To do so, we answer the following questions. What is the age of first partnership formation and has this changed across cohorts? Are these co-residential partnerships long term or short-lived? Do these partnerships include having children? And finally, do these partnerships transition to marriage?

Data and Methods

We use the standardized partnership histories from nationally-representative Generations and Gender Surveys Round II (GGS II), called the Harmonized Histories (<https://www.ggp-i.org/data/harmonized-histories/>). The GGS has been conducted in numerous countries, but here we study Austria, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the UK, because surveys in these countries have readily available partnership histories for GGS II. Conducted between 2020 and 2023, the surveys interviewed men and women aged 18-69 in Czechia; 18-49 in Denmark; 18-54 in Finland and Norway, and 18-59 in the remaining countries. We selected men and women who provided data on their partnership histories, whether they have ever had a partner or not. Conventional analyses of partnership dynamics typically use life-table methods (Andersson et. al 2017), which account for the time at risk of experiencing a partnership event, which we also apply, in addition to cross-sectional analysis.

Table 1 – Survey years, age at interview for different birth cohorts, and sample sizes

Country	Survey year	Oldest in sample (i.e. 1970 cohort)	Youngest in sample (i.e. 1984 cohort)	n
Austria	2022-23	52 to 53	38 to 39	2,918
Croatia	2020-22	50 to 52	36 to 38	3,209
Czechia	2020-22	50 to 52	36 to 38	2,072
Denmark	2021	51	37	3,530
Estonia	2021-22	51 to 52	37 to 38	3,538
Finland	2021-22	51 to 52	37 to 38	1,161
France	2024	54	40	3,722
Germany	2021-22	51 to 52	37 to 38	9,058
Netherlands	2022-23	52 to 53	38 to 39	2,627
Norway	2020	50	36	1,957
Sweden	2021	51	37	3,086
UK	2022-23	52 to 53	38 to 39	2,785

Preliminary Findings

The mean age of first partnerships remains relatively young in most countries at around age 25, across cohorts (Figure 1). While marriage has been postponed, partnership has not. When we focus on the youngest cohort (1980-84), we find that the rate of transition into partnership by age is relatively similar between countries (Figure 2a 2b). While there is cross-national variation in the share of those who ultimately enter a co-residential partnership, the rate appears relatively similar between countries. Finally, Table 1 presents for the 1980-84 birth

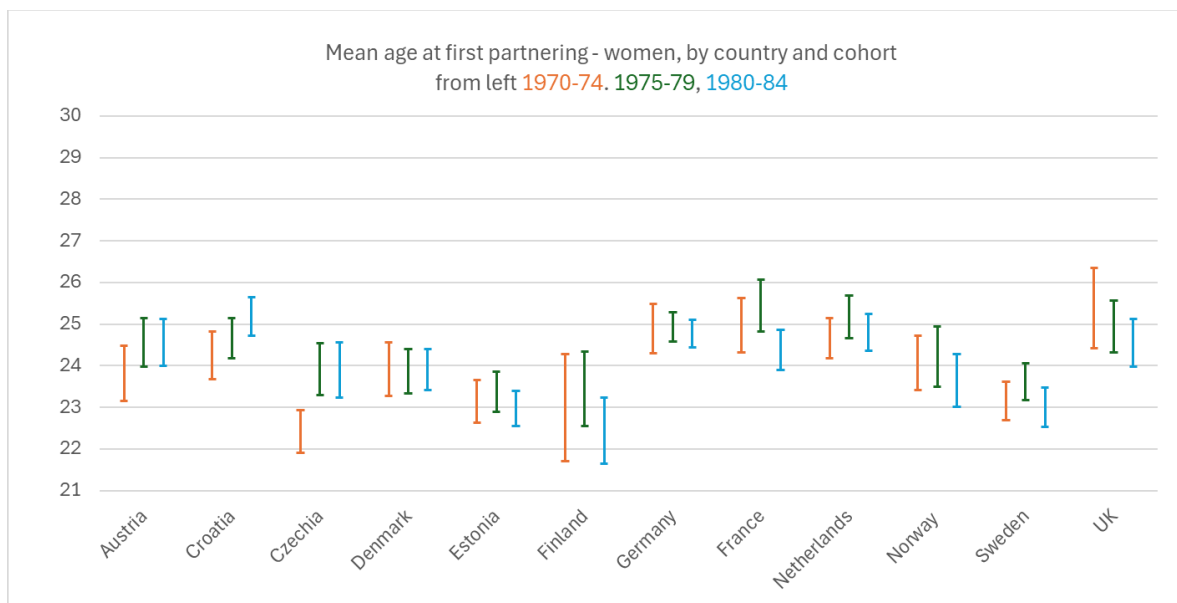
cohort both cross-sectional and life table estimates for marriage and separation, with respect to the first partnership. The majority of partnerships do begin with cohabitation but direct marriage has not disappeared entirely, most notably in Croatia. First partnerships tend to be relatively long lasting relationships, and most are either intact or convert to marriage within 5 years, although there is variation across countries. A larger share of partnerships do dissolve by 10 years; however, the majority do not.

Future work

In our next steps, we will advance our event history approach to incorporate childbearing and we will continue to separately examine the likelihoods and speeds of three transitions - separation, marriage, and birth. We will also expand the study to include additional GGS countries, such as Argentina, Belarus, Hong Kong, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Taiwan, Uruguay, Moldova. Finally, we will create graphical representations of main findings to serve as an up-to-date reference for contemporary partnership dynamics and resource for family demography researchers.

Figures

Figure 1 – Changes in mean age at first partnership by cohort, among those who were in a partnership by the time of the survey (1a women, 1b men)



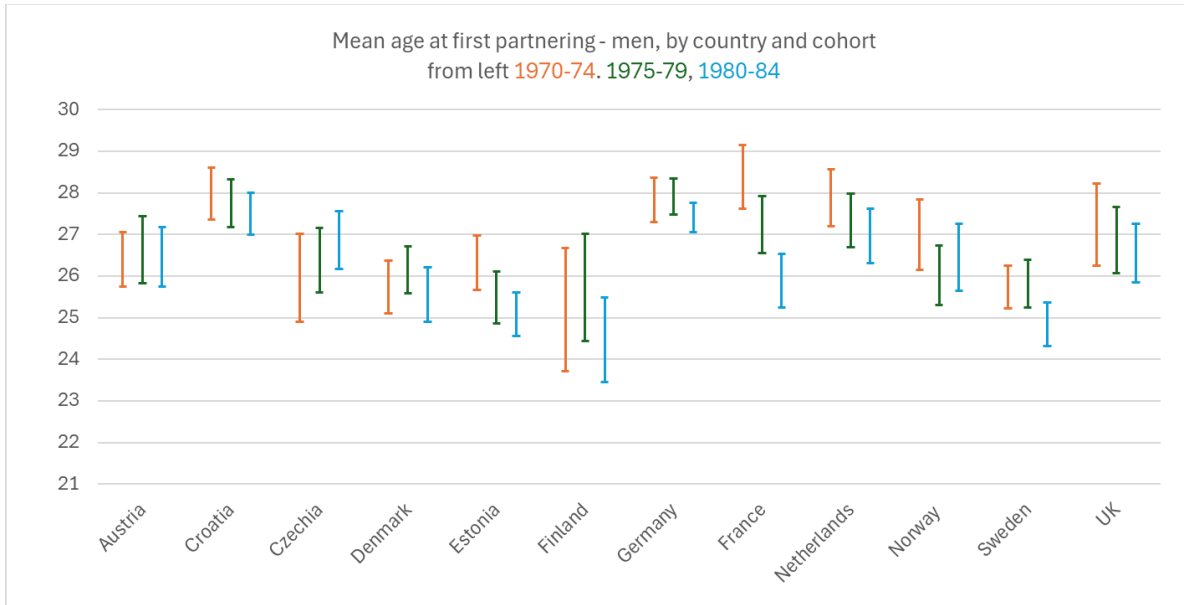


Figure 2 – Cumulative share of ever partnered women, by age group and country, 1980-84 cohort only (2a women, 2b men)

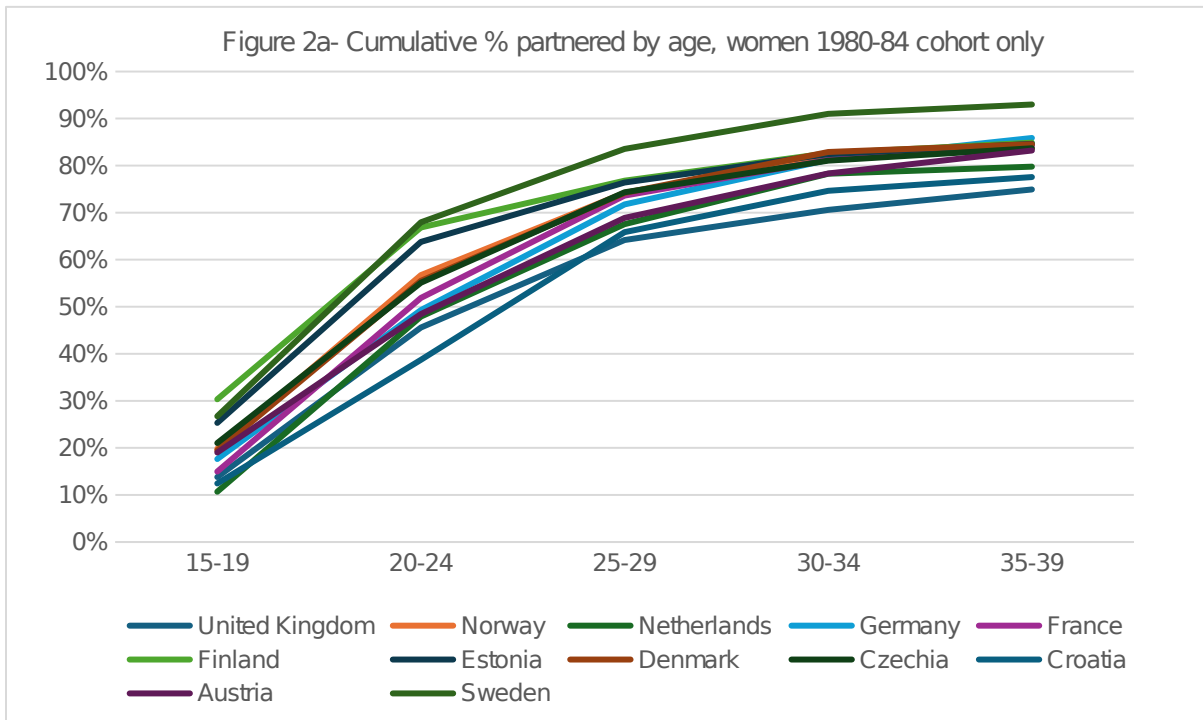


Figure 2b - Cumulative % partnered by age, men 1980-84 cohort only

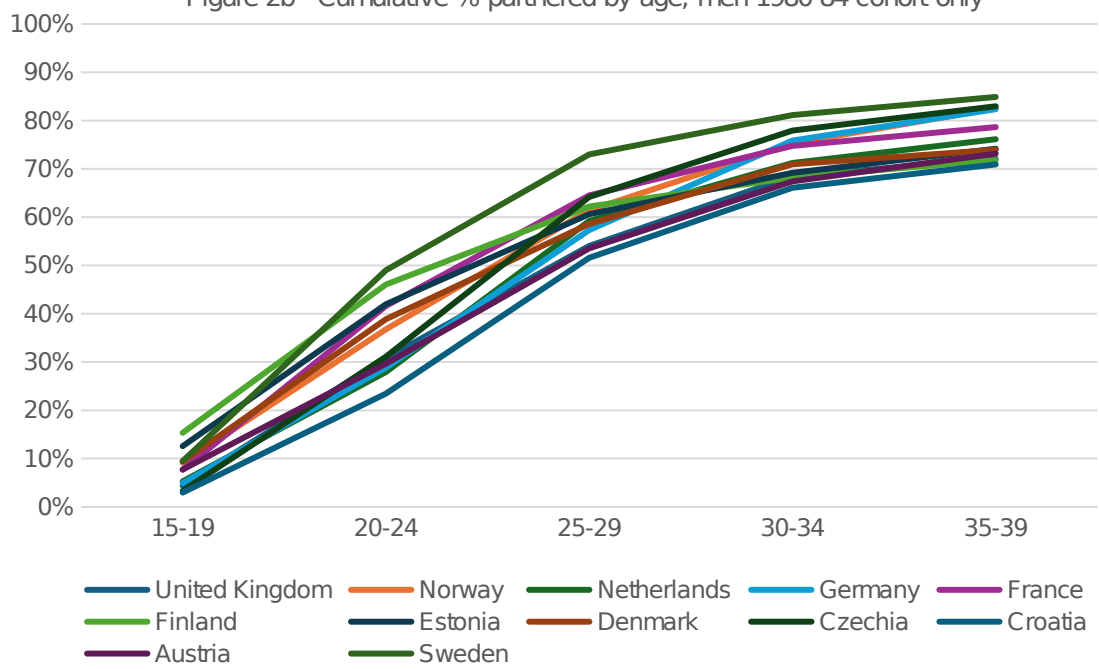


Table 2 – First partnership descriptive & life table statistics for 1980-84 cohort (1a women, 1b men)- Marriage is the main event, separation is the competing event, censor at time of interview for those who neither marry nor separate

Women		Among ever partnered						
		% Ever partnered	% Direct Married	% Ever married 1st partner within 5 years	% Ever married 1st partner within 10 years	% Separated from 1st partner within 5 years	% Separated from 1st partner within 10 years	% Still with first partner but did not marry by 5 years
Austria	86%	13%	35%	53%	20%	27%	45%	20%
Croatia	81%	37%	81%	88%	4%	6%	15%	6%
Czechia	86%	9%	38%	48%	18%	27%	44%	24%
Denmark	87%	6%	37%	55%	26%	32%	37%	13%
Estonia	88%	6%	33%	43%	22%	30%	45%	27%
Finland	87%	11%	30%	46%	30%	38%	40%	16%
France	87%	9%	41%	55%	13%	18%	45%	27%
Germany	89%	16%	44%	60%	23%	29%	33%	11%
Netherlands	82%	11%	37%	51%	16%	23%	47%	27%
Norway	86%	11%	24%	39%	30%	37%	46%	24%
Sweden	93%	9%	23%	39%	32%	42%	45%	19%
UK	78%	12%	51%	63%	23%	29%	26%	8%
Men		Among ever partnered						
		% Ever partnered	% Direct Married	% Ever married 1st partner within 5 years	% Ever married 1st partner within 10 years	% Separated from 1st partner within 5 years	% Separated from 1st partner within 10 years	% Still with first partner but did not marry by 5 years
Austria	76%	12%	37%	56%	19%	25%	44%	19%
Croatia	73%	27%	81%	88%	4%	6%	15%	6%
Czechia	87%	12%	50%	65%	18%	24%	32%	12%

Denmark	76%	8%	34%	56%	23%	30%	43%	14%
Estonia	75%	9%	31%	41%	23%	30%	47%	29%
Finland	75%	6%	27%	43%	27%	34%	46%	23%
France	82%	10%	33%	53%	15%	21%	52%	26%
Germany	86%	12%	44%	62%	23%	26%	33%	12%
Netherlands	78%	14%	39%	50%	14%	18%	47%	32%
Norway	85%	8%	31%	43%	20%	29%	49%	28%
Sweden	85%	7%	25%	41%	32%	42%	43%	17%
UK	73%	19%	48%	61%	23%	27%	29%	12%

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