

**Examining the gap between first and higher-parity cohabiting births:
findings from across Europe**

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Abstract: Although cohabitation has rapidly become a common setting for childbearing in European countries, the percent of first births within cohabitation is substantially higher than that of higher parity births. Using harmonized union and reproductive histories from 10 countries in Europe, we analyze the potential reasons for this gap: 1) marriage between first and subsequent births and 2) lower overall fertility among long-term cohabitators. We also examine whether entering cohabitation after bearing a child as a single or divorced mother or may increase the percent of higher order births within cohabitation. By comparing changes in union status between first and second births, as well as analyzing women's partnership trajectories after a first birth, we will investigate how nonmarital fertility and the meaning of cohabitation differ across countries.

Cohabitation has become a common setting for childbearing in most European countries (Kiernan 2004, Perelli-Harris et al 2009a). This trend has been well documented with basic analyses of all births within cohabitation, but most recent in-depth analyses have focused on the partnership context of first births (see for example, Andersson and Philipov 2002, Perelli-Harris et al 2009a, Perelli-Harris et al 2009b, Kiernan 2004). However, a high percent of first births within cohabitation does not necessarily mean that cohabitation is a preferred setting for long-term childrearing. In fact, in most countries of Europe, the percent of births within cohabitation is much higher for first births than for higher parity births (Perelli-Harris et al 2009a) (see Figures). This discrepancy suggests that cohabitation cannot in any contemporary country setting be considered “indistinguishable from marriage” (Heuveline and Timberlake 2004). Marriage may be the preferred union for raising children, or, alternatively, cohabiting unions - even after childbearing - may be qualitatively different. In this paper, we investigate the reasons for the gap between first and higher parity births within cohabiting unions in order to add to our understanding of how cohabitation differs from marriage, especially with respect to the childbearing process. This provides important insights into the nature of nonmarital childbearing, and how it differs across Europe.

Two processes could account for the gap in the percentage of first and higher parity births that take place within cohabitation: 1) cohabiting couples could marry between the first and second or subsequent births; and 2) cohabitators could be more likely to have only one birth relative to married women. The importance of each is likely to differ cross-nationally. On the other hand, other factors could work to increase the percentage of higher-parity births within cohabitation and would need to be offset by the first two processes. These include the likelihood of 1) divorced mothers entering cohabiting unions and having subsequent children; and 2) women who were single at the time of their first birth entering a cohabiting union prior to second birth. All four processes should be examined in order to account for cross-national variation in the gap between first and higher order births to cohabiting mothers.

Focusing on 10 countries broadly representing different regions of Europe, this study provides a cross-national perspective on nonmarital fertility with an emphasis on the role of cohabitation. The paper extends previous work on the trends and correlates of nonmarital childbearing (Perelli-Harris et al 2009a, Perelli-Harris et al 2009b). As in those studies, we analyze the rich reproductive and union histories of the Generations and Gender Surveys (GGS) in Bulgaria, France, Hungary, Italy, Norway, Romania, Russia, and Germany and the British Household Panel Survey in the U.K., and the Fertility and Family Survey in the Netherlands. We expect that the reasons for the gap between first and higher parity births in cohabitation will differ across countries, based on the characteristics of cohabiting couples and the relative social acceptance of cohabitation as a setting for childrearing (Perelli-Harris et al 2009a). For example, we expect that France and Norway, where marriage is primarily irrelevant for first births, will have a greater proportion of births converting to marriage, compared to the UK, which has a history of births to single mothers and unstable unions, and cohabitation is closer to a “dating relationship.”

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Marriage between first and second births. Because marriage has traditionally been the conventional setting for childrearing, pregnancy and childbirth still often prompts marriage in many countries (Perelli-Harris et al 2009a). The transition from cohabitation to marriage indicates that marriage remains an important institution for raising children. In some countries, family policies encourage marriage by extending

greater rights to married fathers or granting tax benefits to married couples. In addition, marriage also represents a public statement of the couple's commitment to one another and their child. Thus, even if the social meaning of cohabitation continues to shift over time, norms about marriage as the conventional setting for raising children may be stronger in some countries than others (Kiernan 2004).

Nonetheless, marriage does not necessarily take place before or shortly after the first birth. Perelli-Harris et al (2009a) show that in the latest period observed (generally 2000-04) the vast majority of women who gave birth within cohabitation remained within cohabitation for the first year of their child's life. Across Europe, the percent ranged from 74% to 94%; only in Germany did only 55% of women stay within cohabitation one year after the birth (although the German GGS data may be prone to error – Kreyenfeld and Kubisch 2009). In the current study, we are interested in what happens to those families over the longer term and how this relates to the nonmarital fertility profile of different countries. Analyzing the percent of cohabiting unions that convert into marriage between a first and second birth will help shed light on whether cohabitation is perceived as a normative setting for childrearing, and how this differs across countries.

Fewer higher-parity births among cohabiting couples. Union context may influence whether those with one child go on to have additional children, either because the quality of cohabiting and marital unions may differ – even resulting in union dissolution - or because cohabitators may be less interested in childbearing and rearing. Union dissolution influences the exposure to risk of having an additional child; women who are not in union are much less likely to want to take on the responsibility of childrearing alone. Studies from a number of countries show that cohabiting unions are less stable than marital unions, even among unions with children (Liefbroer and Dourleijn 2006, Heuveline, Timberlake, and Furstenburg 2003, Kiernan 2002, Kiernan 2004). In addition, Perelli-Harris et al (2009) provide some clues as to how union dissolution differs across countries in the first year after birth. The percent of cohabiting unions that dissolved in the first year after birth ranged from about 2% in the Netherlands to 12% in Russia (the German GGS shows that about 13% of cohabiting unions dissolved in the first year after birth, but this result is subject to data error). This finding indicates that the stability of cohabiting relationships differs greatly across countries which may have implications for the likelihood and the timing of a transition to a second birth.

Even when cohabiting unions do not dissolve, they may be more tumultuous, with less long-term commitment than marital couples. Studies in the U.S. show that cohabiting women are more likely than married women to be unhappy or dissatisfied with their current situation (Brown and Booth 1996; Brown 2003), and cohabiting women suffer higher rates of physical violence and emotional abuse (DeMaris 2000; Kenney and McLanahan 2006). Of course, cohabitation may be subject to selection effects - with cohabitators more predisposed to negative behaviors - rather than the nature of the cohabiting union itself creating the instability. Nonetheless, poor relationship quality may discourage couples from having another child.

Alternatively, cohabiting couples may be less focused on family life and more oriented towards self-actualization and individualism, as argued by proponents of the Second Demographic Transition (Lesthaeghe and Neidert 2006). Cohabitators may be more likely to eschew parenthood in favor of prolonged education and a stable, fulfilling career. Thus, cohabiting couples may have fewer children, because they are satisfied with only one child, given the competing alternatives of career and individual achievement. To the extent that the characteristics of cohabiting couples differ cross-nationally, the importance of either of these two explanations is likely to differ as well.

Entrance into a new cohabiting union. The previous explanations focus on why the percent of first births within cohabitation is greater than the percent of higher-order births, but other countervailing processes also need to be considered. It is important to examine the importance of entry into cohabitation following divorce, as well as transitions from single (first) motherhood to cohabitation. In the former situation, two processes may occur: 1) individuals may become jaded with the official institution of marriage and prefer to cohabit in subsequent relationships, and 2) they may want to have at least one shared child in subsequent partnerships (Vikat, Thomson and Hoem 1999; Jefferies, Berrington and Diamond 2000). Also, after the birth of their first child, single women may begin to live with partners who were non-residential at the time of the birth (or with new partners), in order to share resources and childcare responsibilities, and provide for greater father-child bonding.

DATA

The analyses employ several datasets that include retrospective union and fertility histories (see Appendix 1). The data for Romania, Russia, West Germany¹, Hungary, Norway, France, and Italy come from the Generations and Gender Surveys, which interviewed nationally representative samples of the resident population in each country. Developed by an international team of experts, the GGS questionnaire in each country was intended to follow a standard format, but several countries had to incorporate it into existing surveys. The other data sources are similar in that they also included retrospective birth and union histories, however survey designs differed. The Dutch data come from the 2003 FFS and surveyed women aged 18-62. The data for the U.K. is from the British Household Panel Survey and required a slightly different dataset construction (see Appendix 1 for details). In the analyses for this paper, we limit the sample to women aged 15-44 between 1970 and the latest date of observation in each country (usually around 2004).

Despite slightly different survey designs, information on births and union formation is relatively comparable. Questions about cohabitation could be interpreted differently in different settings, but the questions generally relate to co-resident relationships with an intimate partner. In some of the GGS surveys (and the BHPS), the question specifically refers to cohabiting relationships that last more than three months; in Italy, however, there is no minimum length of cohabitation specified. Most surveys included retrospective histories of women in their 60s and 70s, therefore the analysis of childbearing in the 1970s captures nearly complete childbearing histories. Retrospective histories, however, are subject to recall error, especially for cohabiting unions which tend to be less stable (Heuveline, Timberlake, and Furstenberg 2003). In addition, sampling designs differed across countries, and we weighted the data where appropriate.

ANALYTIC PLAN

To understand the relative importance of each of the processes that account for differences in the distribution of mothers' union status between first and higher order births, we will use two different types of analysis – one that focuses on union status at time of higher order births and another that focuses on first-time mothers. We will begin by analyzing all second and higher order births in five-year periods from 1970-2004. For each time period, we will calculate 9 transition probabilities from union

¹ We exclude East Germany from the analyses, because the pattern of nonmarital childbearing differs radically from that in the West (Konietzka and Kreyenfeld 2002), and sample size is too small to consider each region separately. Also, comparisons with vital statistics suggest that the German GGS understates fertility in the older cohorts and underreports partnerships. Thus, we restrict the German analyses to the period 1990-2004 and urge caution in interpreting the German data for single women.

status at first birth to union status at subsequent births. These figures will provide important, initial evidence of which transitions are most likely to occur given a particular union status at the time of the first birth. In particular we will show whether mothers who were married at the time of their second or higher parity birth were predominantly married at the time of their first birth, or whether relationship transitions such as marriage after cohabitation, entrance into cohabitation after divorce, and entrance into cohabitation after a first birth as a single mother play an important role. Moreover, we will estimate the average birth interval for each of the nine transition categories, and the extent to which differences in the tempo of fertility explains the distribution of union status between first and higher-parity births.

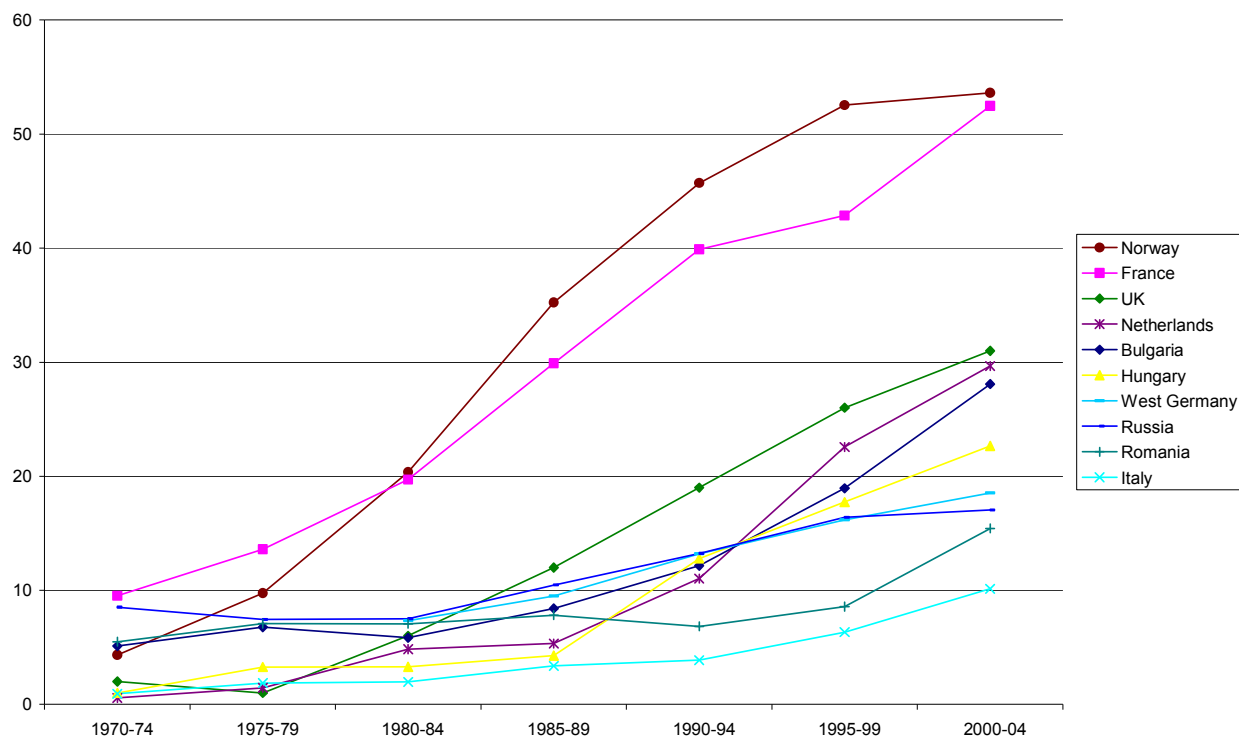
This information, while important, does not tell us how many mothers fail to go on to have a subsequent birth and how this differs by union status. Thus, in our second analysis we will explore the trajectories individual women follow after having a first birth and how those trajectories differ across our 10 countries. Then for a given time period (which will be informed by our birth interval analysis), we will estimate the percent of cohabiting women who have a second birth within cohabitation, the percent who enter marriage before having a second birth, and the percent that do not have a birth. These statistics, when compared with similar estimates for single and married first-time mothers will provide insights into the gap between first and higher-parity births within cohabitation.

To aid in the interpretation, we will conduct several supplemental analyses. For example, we will look at the relative importance of union dissolution as a factor that delays or hinders subsequent childbearing. In addition, we may employ event history models to better inform our understandings of the differentials in fertility tempo by union status at first birth. Throughout, similarities and differences across countries will be assessed with reference to previous literature on cross national differences in the meaning and role of cohabitation. Finally, by examining different time periods we hope to explore cross national differences in the development of nonmarital childbearing.

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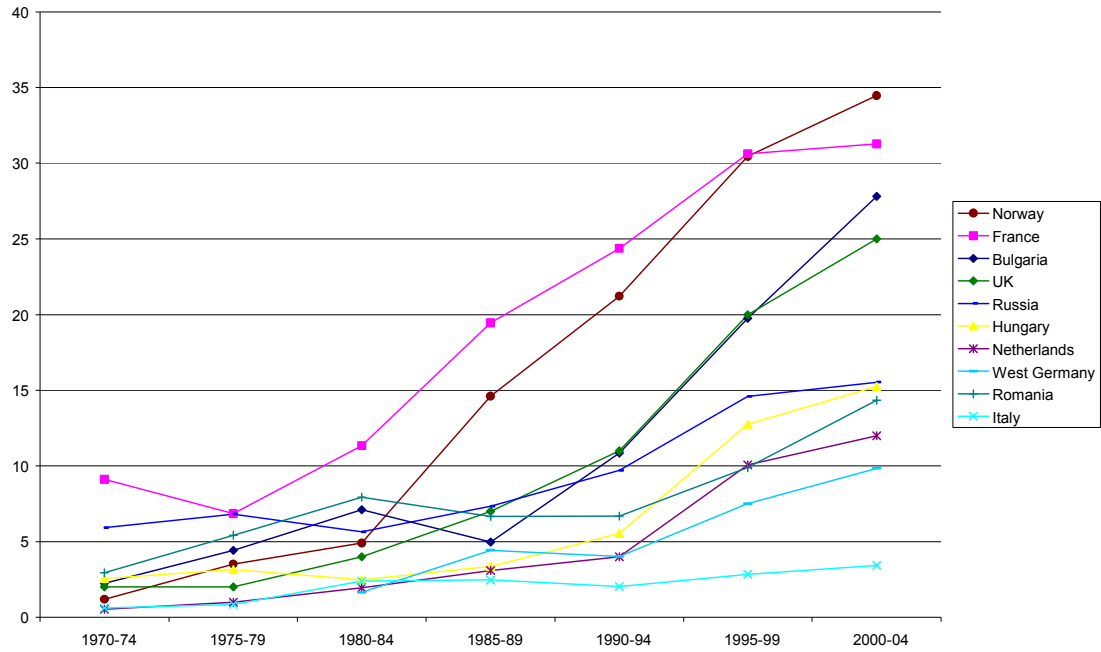
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**Figure 1. Percent of first births within cohabiting unions, women aged 15-44
1970-2004**



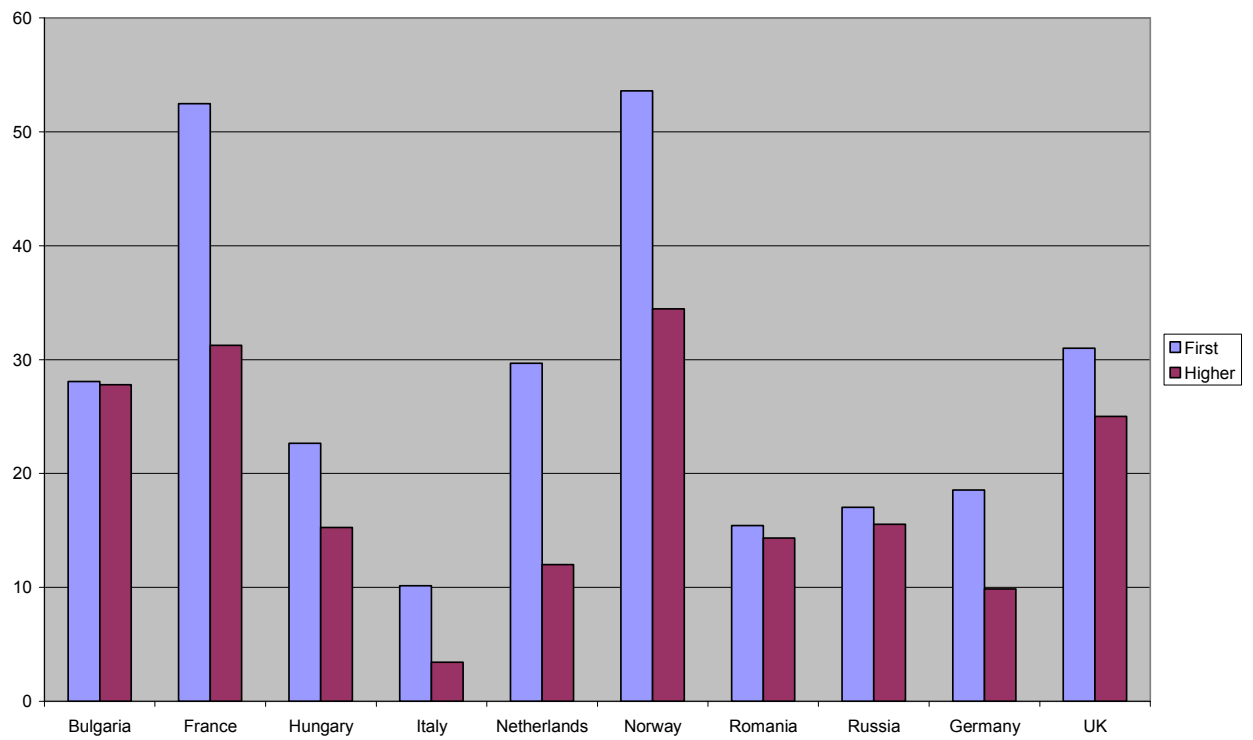
Source: Nonmarital childbearing network Harmonized Histories

Figure 2. Percent of second and higher-parity births within cohabiting unions, women aged 15-44, 1970-2004



Source: Nonmarital childbearing network Harmonized Histories

Figure 3. The percentage of first and higher-order births to cohabiting women in 2000-04



Source: Nonmarital childbearing network Harmonized Histories

Appendix A. Description of datasets

	Dataset title	Year	Age range interviewed	Total N of women	N of All Births included	N of first births	Latest date included
France	Generations and Gender Survey	2005	18 - 79	5708		2602	2004
West Germany^a	Generations and Gender Survey	2005	18-79	5407	2311	1098	2004
Hungary	Generations and Gender Survey	2001-02	18 - 75	8861	10984	5342	2001
Italy	Istat, Famiglia, soggetti sociali e condizione dell'infanzia (GGS)	2003	0 - 104	21454	23182	15093	2003
Netherlands	Fertility and Family Survey	2003	18-62	4736	6756	2987	2003
Norway	Generations and Gender Survey	2007-08	18-79	6962	11310	4935	2004
Romania	Generations and Gender Survey	2005	18 - 79	5980	8586	3990	2004
Russia	Generations and Gender Survey	2004	18 - 81	7019	10458	5902	2004
U.K.^b	Subset of British Household Panel Survey (constructed to look like a cross-section with retrospective information)	Wave 15: 2005-2006	16-79	7846	12639	5337	2004

^a We exclude East Germany from the analyses, because the pattern of nonmarital childbearing differs radically from that in the West (Konietzka and Kreyenfeld 2002), and sample size is too small to consider each region separately. Also, comparisons with vital statistics suggest that the German GGS understates fertility in the older cohorts and underreports partnerships. Thus, we restrict the German analyses to the period 1980-2004 and urge caution in interpreting the German data for single women.

^b The British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) is an annual panel survey. Information from the panel and from retrospective fertility and union histories (cleaned by Chiara Daniela Pronzato (2007) were combined with the 2005 sample to construct the dataset we analyze here.