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Social Science Research

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/ssresearch](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/ssresearch)

# Educational differentials in cohabitators' marriage intentions at different childbearing stages in seven European countries



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 2 January 2016

Received in revised form 16 February 2017

Accepted 24 March 2017

Available online 27 March 2017

### Keywords:

Unmarried cohabitation

Intentions

Marriage

Family formation

Second Demographic Transition

Pattern of Disadvantage

## ABSTRACT

Several studies have looked into the socio-economic gradients of cohabitation and non-marital fertility. According to the theory of the Second Demographic Transition, highly educated individuals can be considered as forerunners in the Western European spread of non-marital family forms after the 1970s. In Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), however, research has provided evidence for a Pattern of Disadvantage where those with the lowest education have been the most likely to adopt such family forms. Hitherto, few studies have considered the educational gradient of the intentions underlying these behaviors. This contribution uses information on marriage and fertility intentions from the Generations and Gender Surveys for seven European countries to assess educational differentials. In Western Europe we observe no strong educational gradients in marriage intentions at any childbearing stage (before, during or following). In CEE countries, however, less educated cohabitators more frequently choose for cohabitation during childbearing.

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## 1. Introduction

Following the rise of post-marital cohabitation, new types of cohabitation came to the fore in Western Europe in the 1970s. Direct marriage declined dramatically and living together before marriage became widespread. Whereas pre-marital cohabitation initially emerged as a childless co-residence between partners (Kiernan, 2004), Western Europe soon witnessed an increasing share of births occurring within cohabitation (Perelli-Harris et al., 2012). Nowadays, couples not only cohabit as a prelude to marriage, but may also opt for cohabitation as an alternative to marriage (Heuveline and Timberlake, 2004; Hiekel et al., 2014). Several authors have interpreted the growing prevalence of cohabitation and rising non-marital fertility in Western Europe as a key feature of a Second Demographic Transition (SDT), reflecting individual autonomy as a central value in life (Lesthaeghe and Surkyn, 1988, 2002). The SDT framework therefore posits a positive correlation between post-modern value-orientations and changing family forms. Most Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, in contrast, witnessed increasing unmarried cohabitation and non-marital births only in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Kostova, 2007; Zakharov, 2008). Despite the recent changes in family trends, several authors argue that CEE countries have mostly maintained traditional family forms (Kostova, 2007). Recent studies suggest that cohabitation and non-marital childbearing in CEE countries are more frequently prevalent among the lower socio-economic strata, reflecting economic constraints (Perelli-Harris and Gerber, 2011; Potârca et al., 2013; Spéder, 2005). Long-term cohabitation and non-marital childbearing may hence mirror impoverishment as well as cultural emancipation (Perelli-Harris et al., 2010).

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Several studies have looked into the socio-economic gradient of family behaviors in different parts of the world (Hobcraft and Kiernan, 2001; Perelli-Harris and Gerber, 2011; Perelli-Harris et al., 2010; Ventura, 2009). However, marital behavior may not necessarily reflect individuals' views on marriage. For instance, cohabiting partners with a disadvantaged background may still want or intend to form a conjugal family but feel they lack the required resources to realize marriage plans (Gibson-Davis et al., 2005). Rather than considering intentions as a proxy for behavior, our analysis addresses short-term marriage and childbearing intentions in their own right. Data for seven European countries are used from the Generations and Gender Survey (GGS) to analyze marriage intentions at varying childbearing stages among cohabiting individuals in different European regions.

This contribution uses educational attainment as a measure, representing a crucial component of understanding family transitions. Education enables couples to acquire the necessary resources to form a married couple (Thomson and Bernhardt, 2010). Literature on economic disadvantage predicts that individuals having lower levels of education are more often involved in long-term cohabitation (Perelli-Harris and Gerber, 2011). On the other hand, education is associated with values and attitudes influencing the choice between living together as an unmarried or married couple (Thomson and Bernhardt, 2010). Following the SDT framework, higher education leads to values in favor of autonomy and tolerance, which are, in turn, positively associated with alternative family forms (Lesthaeghe and Surkyn, 1988, 2002). In line with other studies addressing the effect of education on marriage we find positive educational gradients in marriage intentions during childbearing in CEE, whereas marriage intentions are less associated with education before and following childbearing. In contrast to other recent research education is not related to marriage intentions in Western Europe.

## 2. Theoretical framework

In this section we contrast the two most prominent diffusion patterns of unmarried cohabitation and non-marital childbearing discussed in the literature. Subsequently, we identify the characteristic features and correlates of these family forms for the countries in the analysis.<sup>1</sup>

### 2.1. Two distinct social patterns in the diffusion of cohabitation and non-marital fertility

In an overview paper, Sobotka (2008) discerns two patterns of diffusion of changing family forms in Europe. The first pattern relates major cultural changes, coinciding with post-war economic prosperity, to the increasing popularity of alternative family forms in the second half of the twentieth century (Lesthaeghe, 2010; Lesthaeghe and Meekers, 1987; Lesthaeghe and Van de Kaa, 1986). In this view, rising standards of living entailed a shift in post-war birth cohorts towards post-materialist attitudes. Proponents of the SDT argue that an increasing emphasis on self-determination and autonomy constitutes the core process underlying the rise of contemporary cohabitation and non-marital fertility in Western Europe (Lesthaeghe, 2010). Higher education, particularly a prolonged educational enrolment, is considered as a pathway leading to the transformation of values and, accordingly, progressive views on family life (Lesthaeghe and Surkyn, 1988, 2002). Hence, individuals with a high education are considered to be the first to reject traditional family institutions in the 1970s (Sobotka, 2008).

A substantial body of literature describes a different expansion of non-marital fertility and partnerships. From this point of view, changing family forms particularly reflect economic constraints (Oppenheimer, 2003). The choice for long-term cohabitation is frequently a mere adaptation to uncertain circumstances that have little to do with personal preferences or value patterns (Sobotka, 2008), as marriages are more selective and require a stronger economic underpinning (Kravdal, 1999). Scholars often link this idea to increasing unmarried cohabitation among young couples since this group is often confronted with difficulties entering the labor market (Buchholz et al., 2009; Perelli-Harris et al., 2010), resulting in uncertain prospects (Mills and Blossfeld, 2005; Skirbekk et al., 2010). Rising expectations regarding living standards and consumption patterns may also have affected marriage aspirations of low educated and unskilled people in particular. Financial stability and house ownership are considered as important prerequisites for couples to feel ready to marry (Smock et al., 2005). Financial stress, in contrast, is associated with relationship conflict, which may indirectly preclude marriage. Also, the cost of a wedding is often indicated as an additional barrier (Edin and Kefalas, 2005; Gibson-Davis et al., 2005). Cherlin (2004, 2010) therefore interprets modern marriage in the United States as an important symbol of prestige and personal achievement. Low-income groups often fail to meet the perceived requirements to marry. In this respect, Spéder (2004, 2005) hypothesizes a clear differentiation in family formation strategies<sup>2</sup> between social groups. Whereas the lower social strata often combine childbearing with cohabitation, privileged groups paradoxically distance themselves by reinforcing traditional pathways with a central role for the conjugal family. Several authors have therefore referred to a 'Pattern of Disadvantage' (POD) when studying family forms among low educated groups (Edin and Kefalas, 2005).

Neither the SDT nor the POD pattern is expected to prevail in a pure and unequivocal way (Sobotka, 2008). Theoretical approaches emphasizing either cultural emancipation or economic disadvantage are not necessarily mutually exclusive but may reflect varying motivations underlying family forms in different social groups (Lesthaeghe and Surkyn, 2002; Sobotka,

<sup>1</sup> Bulgaria, France, Georgia, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, and Russia.

<sup>2</sup> The term 'family formation' is general, referring to the connection between partnership choices and the transition to parenthood.

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