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Repartnering in France: The role of gender, age and past fertility

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ABSTRACT

Men and women's family paths differ in several points. Notably, repartnering after union dissolution, a primary component of union trajectories, varies markedly according to sex. What differences do we observe between men and women in living with a new partner, and especially how is it related to the presence of children? This article, based on the French Generation and Gender Study data (Ined-Insee, 2005), will first analyse the importance of age and parenthood at the time of separation as predictors of repartnering, and then detail the prominence of child's primary residence in that respect. Mothers, regardless of age at the time of separation, are less likely to repartner. However, when the year following the separation is detailed according to the child's custody, fathers and mothers with whom a child primarily resides after the separation behave in an almost similar manner: it is they who form new unions less frequently.

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1. Introduction and background

In France, like in most industrialized countries, recent decades have seen dramatic changes in family behaviours. Family trajectories have become less standardized for men as well as for women (Widmer & Ritschard, 2009). In demography, most fertility and partnership behaviours have been studied from a woman's perspective (Greene & Biddlecom, 2000), but with the change in family dynamics, and notably the increase in second and later unions, an additional insight into male behaviour has become necessary (Ní Bhrolcháin, 1992). Paths of entry into first partnership and parenthood differ by sex (Winkler-Dworak & Toulemon, 2007), but particularly, gender differentiation occurs at time of forming a new relationship after a breakup (Beaujouan, 2009b). This article thus seeks to explore conjugal repartnering for both men and women in France, introducing age and parenthood as possible factors of difference. It also details level and pace of repartnering depending on the living arrangements with

the children, as there is a strong gender difference in which parent has custody.

In the vast majority of studies, mothers are found to remarry less frequently than childless women (see de Graaf & Kalmijn, 2003, Table 1). Furthermore, repartnering in general, including all types of cohabiting unions, is less common among mothers (Bernhardt & Goldscheider, 2002; Cassan, Mazuy, & Clanché, 2001; Goldscheider & Sessler, 2006; Steele, Kallis, & Joshi, 2006; Wu & Schimmele, 2005). This does not mean that separated mothers are continuously excluded from any romantic relationship; more frequently they opt for living apart together relationships (Martin, 1994; Régnier-Loilier, Beaujouan, & Villeneuve-Gokalp, 2009), and some research suggests that they only delay their repartnering rather than relinquish it (Lampard & Peggs, 1999; Villeneuve-Gokalp, 1991). However, some mothers view the presence of children as a restriction that may, for instance, deter potential candidates from entering a union with them. Also, the emotional relationship with children sometimes takes precedence over the desire to find a new partner (Lampard & Peggs, 1999). For childless men and fathers results on repartnering are not as consistent. It has been shown that under some conditions, fathers are more likely to enter a new union than childless men, their status then

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Table 1

Distribution of parental status and children's place of residence in the year following separation, by sex and age of the respondent at the time of separation.

	Age at separation	Childless		At least one child at home		Child elsewhere		Total number
		%	1.96* std err	%	1.96* std err	%	1.96* std err	
Men	Before age 25	84.7	4.9	1.3	1.5	14.0	4.7	209
	Age 25–29	68.4	6.0	6.7	3.2	24.9	5.6	232
	Age 30–39	30.2	5.0	9.3	3.1	60.6	5.3	328
	Age 40–49	20.7	6.2	22.7	6.4	56.6	7.6	163
	From age 50	13.6	8.0	6.8	5.9	79.6	9.4	71
	All	50.0	3.1	8.6	1.7	41.4	3.0	1003
Women	Before age 25	74.3	4.7	23.3	4.5	2.4	1.6	338
	Age 25–29	55.5	5.8	41.9	5.7	2.6	1.8	287
	Age 30–39	22.7	4.1	65.8	4.6	11.5	3.1	409
	Age 40–49	9.6	4.0	69.5	6.3	20.9	5.6	206
	From age 50	17.7	10.6	38.6	13.5	43.7	13.7	50
	All	42.5	2.7	48.0	2.7	9.5	1.6	1290

Source: Ined-Insee, Érfi-GGS1, 2005.

Sample: Men and women separated between 1975 and 2005, excluding union dissolution due to the death of a partner.

seeming to advertise them as potential good fathers (Barre, 2003; Wu & Schimmele, 2005). Other studies find a negative effect of being a father versus being childless on union formation (de Graaf & Kalmijn, 2003; Sweeney, 1997).

With the rise in separations and divorces, more people are living alone at mid-ages – separated parents and formerly married people (Beaujouan, 2009b; Demey, Berrington, Evandrou, & Falkingham, 2011). This change in the composition of the population brings a new balance in repartnering possibilities as “mate availability” changes (Lichter, Anderson, & Hayward, 1995; Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007). On the other hand, some characteristics appear defavourable to “being suitable” as a partner. For instance, the proportion of mothers eventually chosen as a partner is much smaller than the proportion of mothers remaining without a partner (Beaujouan, 2011), which can be interpreted as a lesser preference for women who already have children (Goldscheider, Kaufman, & Sassler, 2009). As age grows, mechanisms of the marriage market are also more and more in disfavour of women (Goldman, Westoff, & Hammerslough, 1984; Ní Bhrolcháin, 1992). However, they become more beneficial to men, indicated by older men choosing a partner with educational and family characteristics near to theirs, and in a larger age range (Gelissen, 2004; Goldscheider & Sassler, 2006).

Factors governing choices and behaviour in the area of conjugal and reproductive life also differ by age and sex (Charton, 2006; Régnier-Loilier, 2007), and it appears in general that the desire to remarry decreases at later ages. Possible explanations include, amongst others; to keep the benefits of the previous marriage, to enjoy one's freedom, or to maintain the relationship status quo with adult children (Caradec, 1996; Sassler, 2010). It seems possible that free standing cohabitations, with less legal constraints, could replace marriage at older age (Villeneuve-Gokalp, 1991). Despite this observation, it has been found that for both sexes, the speed and frequency of living together with any new partner diminishes with increasing age at breakup (Skew, Evans, & Gray, 2009; Villeneuve-Gokalp, 1994). We will investigate this result more

recently in France, by studying level and pace of re-entry into a cohabiting partnership—whether married or not—by age. In the French context where cohabitation prevails and more than a half of children are born of unmarried cohabiting parents (Pla & Beaumel, 2011), we focus on all types of cohabiting partnerships rather than on marriage only.

Additionally, past fertility might see its importance in the repartnering process vary with age. If a woman is young at the time of separation and has no children, she may wish to repartner and have children in the new union, due mainly to the procreative norms strongly prevalent in France (Bajos & Ferrand, 2006). Women at a less fertile age may also wish to have children rapidly before reaching the physiological limit, or the “deadline ages” rooted in the fertility norm. The desire for children may thus motivate childless men and women of reproductive age to repartner faster than they would at ages where childbearing is no longer possible. Overall, repartnering may well be linked to intentions regarding childbearing as well as to the emotional and material constraints of already existing children, the various effects being difficult to disentangle.

By comparing repartnering chances at various ages for men versus women, we expect some insights into understanding gender differences. In studies of men's repartnering, behaviours appear more similar between fathers and childless men than between mothers and childless women (de Graaf & Kalmijn, 2003). Also men remarry until much later ages than women (Haskey, 1999). The role of men in family life seems to still differ from that of women (Kalmijn, Loeve, & Manting, 2007; Lewis, 1992), and their age or parental status might then be of less importance for entering a partnership than their economic situation and prospects (Beaujouan, 2009a; Oppenheimer, 2003). Also, men sometimes perceive family obligations as a constraint until they grow older and tend to have a later schedule of family formation (Bessin, Levilain, & Régnier-Loilier, 2005; Donati, 2000; Lampard & Peggs, 1999; Martin, 1994). While some women might discard further involvement after they have achieved constructing a family (Villeneuve-Gokalp, 1991), some men might by

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