

Cross-national differences in continuing childbearing in re-partnering: The role of partnership context

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Background and motivation

Cohabitors differ from their married counterparts in their individual characteristics, such as gender-role and family attitudes. Individuals who have experienced dissolution of cohabiting union may therefore show different continuing childbearing behaviour than divorcees.

Previous research on continuing childbearing after union dissolution:

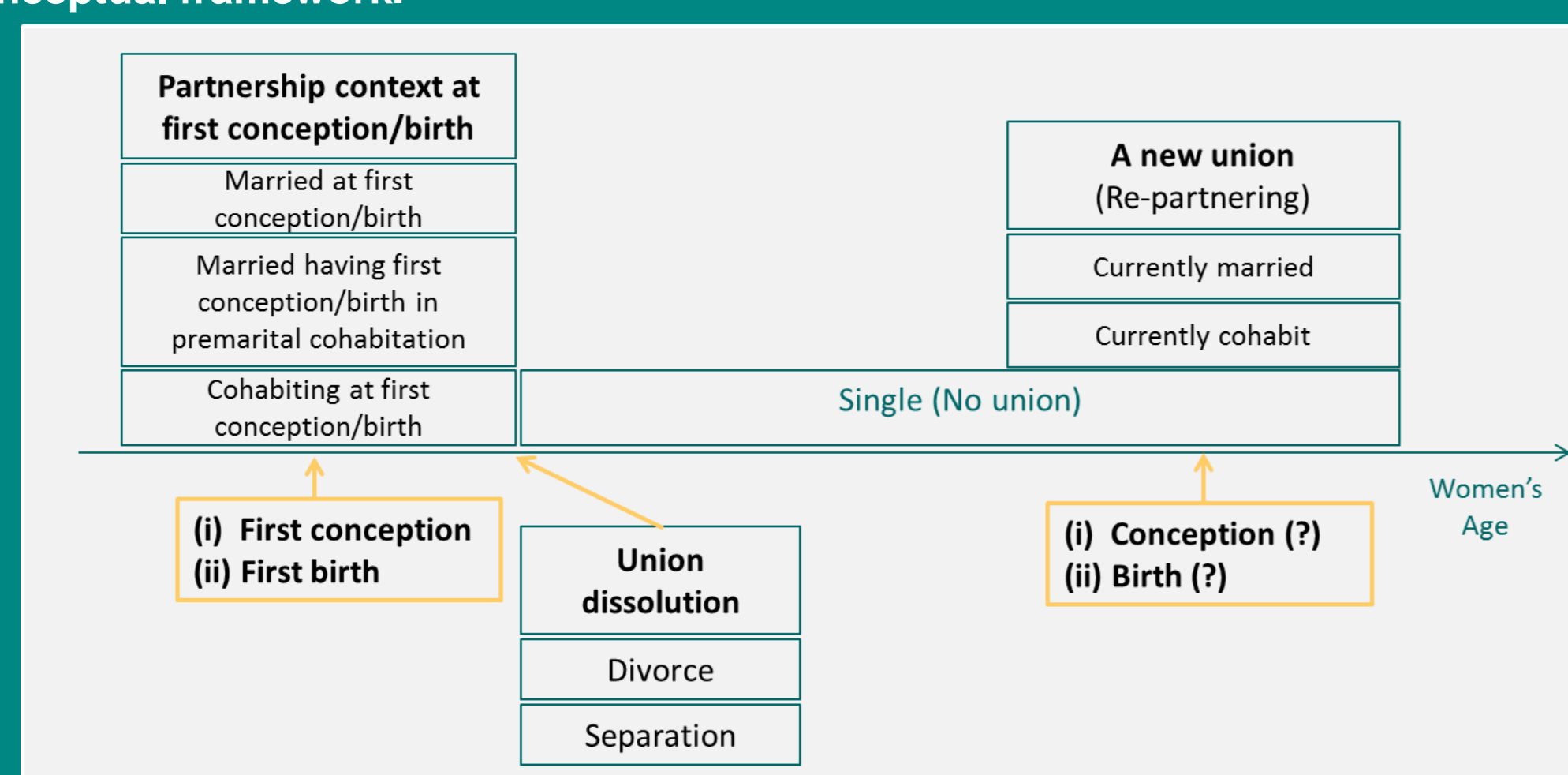
- New established unions often produce an additional child.
- The majority of studies have mainly analysed continuing fertility of re-partnered divorcees. Less is known about childbearing within new partnership after a dissolution of cohabiting union.
- Most of the previous research on childbearing after union dissolution (mainly in stepfamilies) is based on data from the United States.
- While there are some studies on continuing childbearing after union dissolution in European countries, only a few of them aim at cross-national comparison using comparative data and methods.

Objective of the study

Research questions:

- What is the role of partnership context on fertility decisions after divorce or separation?
- Does the union status at first birth and the one of a subsequent union matter for continuing childbearing?
- Do people cohabiting at first birth differ in their continuing childbearing after union dissolution from their counterparts married at first birth?
- Do currently married people differ in their fertility decisions after divorce or separation from their currently cohabiting counterparts?
- Does the role of partnership context on continuing fertility differ if conception instead of birth is analysed?

Figure 1. Conceptual framework.



Author's illustration.

Data, variables and method

Harmonized Histories - A unique and powerful cross-national data set containing cleaned and standardised partnership and fertility histories collected from individuals within various European surveys:

- The British Household Panel Survey, the Dutch Fertility and Family Survey, the Swiss Household Panel Survey, the Polish Employment, Family and Education Survey, the Spanish Fertility Survey, and the Generations and Gender Surveys in Belgium, France, Germany, Austria, Norway, Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Russia.

It enables a broad cross-national comparison of numerous family demographic processes, such as marriage, cohabitation, childbearing and union dissolution.

Table 1. Description of the data set. Partnership context at first birth and at birth after union dissolution.

| Country in Harmonized Histories | Number of women with first birth within a union | Partnership context at first birth (in %) | | Union dissolution (separation or divorce) before age 50 (*) | Re-partnering | Child after union dissolution | Partnership context at birth after union dissolution (in%) | | | Excluded from the analyses because of |
|---------------------------------|---|---|-------------|---|---------------|-------------------------------|--|-----------------|-------------|---------------------------------------|
| | | in cohabitation | in marriage | | | | Being single | in cohabitation | in marriage | |
| Austria | 1,035 | 31.7 | 68.4 | 22.7 | 51.4 | 23.7 | 21.3 | 45.1 | 33.6 | Small and young sample |
| Belgium | 1,561 | 8.9 | 91.1 | 20.1 | 59.4 | 19.7 | 23.2 | 47.5 | 29.3 | Small sample |
| Bulgaria | 4,087 | 6.1 | 93.9 | 8.6 | 34.3 | 22.2 | 19.4 | 27.8 | 52.8 | Less union dissolutions |
| Estonia | 3,241 | 14.1 | 85.9 | 30.9 | 65.4 | 37.5 | 15.3 | 37.3 | 47.5 | INCLUDED |
| France | 3,139 | 17.6 | 82.4 | 16.2 | 56.0 | 24.7 | 28.6 | 45.4 | 26.0 | INCLUDED |
| Hungary | 4,352 | 3.2 | 96.8 | 20.2 | 55.5 | 26.9 | 23.0 | 17.1 | 60.0 | INCLUDED |
| NLD | 2,626 | 9.1 | 90.9 | 15.2 | 47.2 | 16.8 | 43.4 | 13.3 | 43.3 | Less union dissolutions |
| Norway | 3,794 | 27.8 | 72.2 | 27.3 | 55.2 | 25.2 | 26.6 | 45.1 | 28.3 | INCLUDED |
| Poland | 1,195 | 5.2 | 94.8 | 8.7 | 26.9 | 34.6 | 52.8 | 33.3 | 13.9 | Small and young sample |
| Romania | 4,048 | 5.4 | 94.6 | 10.0 | 40.6 | 20.9 | 19.2 | 27.4 | 53.4 | Less union dissolutions |
| Russia | 4,383 | 9.2 | 90.8 | 30.6 | 48.9 | 25.3 | 13.3 | 25.9 | 60.8 | INCLUDED |
| Spain | 4,538 | 4.9 | 95.2 | 6.9 | 36.6 | 15.8 | 36.2 | 36.6 | 27.1 | Less union dissolutions |
| UK | 2,436 | 9.2 | 90.8 | 20.0 | 62.6 | 25.6 | 29.1 | 26.8 | 44.1 | INCLUDED |

Note: (*) Union dissolution of women who had a first birth within partnership; percentage whose unions dissolved.

Weights were applied if available.

Sources: Harmonized Histories, author's calculations.

Sample selection:

- Women aged 15 to 50 years born before 1975, who had a first conception/birth within partnership (marriage, cohabitation) and experienced union dissolution (divorce or separation) before age 50.

Main covariates:

- Time after union dissolution, Union status at first conception/birth, Current union status, Women's age at union dissolution, Age of the youngest child at union dissolution, Number of children at union dissolution and Women's education.

Method: Discrete time hazard model: $\log\left(\frac{P_{it}}{1-P_{it}}\right) = \alpha_t + \beta_1 x_{it1} + \dots + \beta_k x_{itk}$

Dependent variables:

- Start of the process: (i) union dissolution or (ii) 9 month after union dissolution.
- End of the process: (i) conception or (ii) birth after union dissolution or censoring (if no conception/birth within 15 years after union dissolution, age 50 or interview).

Results (1) – main effects

Table 2. Relative risks (odds ratios) of having a child (conception/birth) after union dissolution. Main effect.

| | France | | UK | | Norway | | Russia | | Estonia | | Hungary | |
|--|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| | Conception | Birth | Conception | Birth | Conception | Birth | Conception | Birth | Conception | Birth | Conception | Birth |
| Union status at first conception/ birth | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Married at first conception/ birth | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Cohabiting at first conception/ birth and afterwards | 2.644*** (0.70) | 2.403*** (0.54) | 1.462 (0.45) | 1.065 (0.25) | 1.031 (0.19) | 1.176 (0.18) | 0.606 (0.16) | 0.707 (0.17) | 0.805 (0.17) | 0.885 (0.43) | 1.094 (0.51) | 1.394 (0.51) |
| Cohabiting at first conception/ birth and subsequently married | 1.397 (0.45) | 1.317 (0.54) | 1.379 (0.57) | 1.943 (0.81) | 1.173 (0.26) | 1.555 (0.37) | 0.553** (0.12) | 0.833 (0.31) | 1.240 (0.23) | 1.752* (0.49) | 2.445* (0.95) | 2.010 (2.10) |
| Current union status | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Currently single | 0.175*** (0.07) | 0.075*** (0.02) | 0.177*** (0.06) | 0.117*** (0.03) | 0.076*** (0.02) | 0.064*** (0.01) | 0.029*** (0.01) | 0.019*** (0.00) | 0.089*** (0.02) | 0.047*** (0.01) | 0.146*** (0.03) | 0.080*** (0.02) |
| Currently married | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Currently cohabiting | 1.006 (0.35) | 0.529* (0.13) | 0.858 (0.26) | 0.517** (0.12) | 0.620* (0.15) | 0.459*** (0.08) | 0.641* (0.11) | 0.354*** (0.05) | 0.873 (0.16) | 0.493*** (0.07) | 0.694 (0.26) | 0.396*** (0.10) |
| Person-months | 37756 | 44458 | 38499 | 48991 | 60815 | 74858 | 83570 | 93125 | 52756 | 65024 | 42473 | 52875 |
| Number of women | 443 | 542 | 419 | 564 | 729 | 916 | 872 | 1026 | 576 | 755 | 462 | 602 |
| Number of events | 82 | 105 | 82 | 133 | 157 | 213 | 170 | 221 | 187 | 245 | 114 | 147 |

Controlled for: Time after union dissolution, Age at union dissolution, Age of the youngest child at union dissolution, Number of children at union dissolution and Women's education; Standard errors in parentheses; Significance level: *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05
Sources: Harmonized Histories, own calculations.

In most of the cases union status at first conception/birth does not matter for continuing childbearing after union dissolution.

Current union status matters for childbearing after union dissolution; the effect of subsequent partnership is stronger for birth than for conception.

Results (2) – interaction effects

Table 3. Relative risks (odds ratios) of having a child (conception/birth) after union dissolution. Interaction effect.

| | France | | UK | | Norway | | Russia | | Estonia | | Hungary | |
|---|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| | Conception | Birth | Conception | Birth | Conception | Birth | Conception | Birth | Conception | Birth | Conception | Birth |
| Interaction between union status at first conception/birth and current union status | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Currently single | 0.219*** (0.07) | 0.185*** (0.05) | 0.230*** (0.07) | 0.263*** (0.07) | 0.128*** (0.03) | 0.166*** (0.04) | 0.043*** (0.01) | 0.052*** (0.01) | 0.091*** (0.02) | 0.095*** (0.02) | 0.201*** (0.06) | 0.210*** (0.06) |
| Cohabiting at first conception/ birth and afterwards – Currently cohabiting | 1.49 (0.59) | 1.735 (0.58) | 1.665 (0.80) | 1.95 (0.70) | 0.975 (0.26) | 1.317 (0.29) | 0.705 (0.29) | 0.673 (0.29) | 0.582* (0.16) | 0.768 (0.20) | 0.935 (0.52) | 1.605 (0.82) |
| Cohabiting at first conception/ birth and afterwards – Currently married | 7.473*** (4.13) | 6.618*** (2.69) | 2.278 (1.11) | 1.956 (0.81) | 3.065** (1.28) | 3.650*** (1.05) | 0.959 (0.39) | 2.224* (0.77) | 1.387 (0.68) | 2.400** (0.76) | 3.103 (2.02) | 4.095* (2.63) |
| Married at first conception/ birth – Currently married | 0.638 (0.29) | 1.472 (0.45) | 1.072 (0.39) | 2.363** (0.62) | 1.205 (0.42) | 2.310*** (0.50) | 1.936** (0.40) | 2.738*** (0.45) | 0.830 (0.19) | 1.925*** (0.31) | 1.368 (0.37) | 2.589*** (0.66) |
| Married at first conception/ birth – Currently cohabiting | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Cohabiting at first conception/ birth and subsequently married – Currently cohabiting | 1.346 (0.55) | 1.773 (0.82) | a. | a. | 1.253 (0.36) | 1.938* (0.58) | 0.805 (0.24) | 0.635 (0.38) | 1.03 (0.26) | 2.019 (0.77) | a. | a. |
| Cohabiting at first conception/ birth and subsequently married – Currently married | 0.377 (0.40) | 2.312 (2.42) | a. | a. | 1.999 (0.94) | 1.206 (0.89) | 0.45 (0.22) | 2.722 (1.45) | 2.062* (0.67) | 3.149* (1.51) | a. | a. |
| Person-months | 37756 | 44458 | 38499 | 48991 | 60815 | 74858 | 83570 | 93125 | 52756 | 65024 | 42473 | 52875 |
| Number of women | 443 | 542 | 419 | 564 | 729 | 916 | 872 | 1026 | 576 | 755 | 462 | 602 |
| Number of events | 82 | 105 | 82 | 133 | 157 | 213 | 170 | 221 | 187 | 245 | 114 | 147 |

Controlled for: Time after union dissolution, Age at union dissolution, Age of the youngest child at union dissolution, Number of children at union dissolution and Women's education; Standard errors in parentheses; Significance level: *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

Note: a. For the UK and Hungary, the categories 'Cohabit at first birth and subsequently married – Currently married' and 'Cohabit at first birth and subsequently married – Currently cohabit' are assigned to the categories 'Married at first birth – Currently married' and 'Married at first birth – Currently cohabit', respectively, due to a small number of observations.

Sources: Harmonized Histories, author's calculations.

Partnership context matters for the risk of continuing childbearing after union dissolution.

Being currently married matters the most for the risk of having a birth after union dissolution.

In most cases, transition from cohabitation to marriage after first conception/birth does not matter for the risk of continuing childbearing after union dissolution.

The role of partnership context for continuing childbearing varies for conception and birth.

Conclusions

In all studied European countries we found similar patterns of partnership context for birth after union dissolution. The effect on conception depends on the country.

- Subsequent union status has a much stronger impact on fertility after union dissolution than the partnership context at first conception/birth.

- Generally, women married and cohabiting at first conception/birth do not differ in their childbearing after union dissolution.

- Currently cohabiting women have a significantly lower risk of continuing their childbearing after union dissolution than their currently married counterparts; the negative effect is stronger for birth than for conception after union dissolution.

- Marriage to the next partner is crucial for continuing childbearing after union dissolution, even or especially for women who entered motherhood in cohabitation that did not transition into marriage. However, being currently married is more important for birth after union dissolution than for conception.
- Partnership context at first conception/ birth does not matter for continuing childbearing after union dissolution for those who are currently cohabiting.

Our results are sensitive to the specification of the response variable (conception/birth). In most cases, partnership context matters more for the birth of a child after union dissolution than for conception.

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