

# Partnership Instability over the School-to-Work Transition among Women in France

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## Introduction

School expansion and higher education enrollment have deeply affected young adults' partnership pathways in France and in Western countries since the 1960s. Coupled with increasing labor market constraints and economic uncertainties, these changes in the socioeconomic context have transformed the timing and order of partnership transitions during young adulthood (Billari & Liefbroer, 2010; Winkler-Dworak & Toulemon, 2007). They have resulted in a multiplication of the number of intimate relationships in youth, a postponement of the entry into a coresidential partnership, the development of non-marital cohabitation, the parenthood postponement (Sobotka & Toulemon, 2008).

In the recent decades, female educational attainment has dramatically increased, leading to a reversal of the female hypergamy (Van Bavel, 2012). Mass schooling and improved access to tertiary education have resulted in an increasing number of cohabitating couples that are formed before graduation, especially among women. Although adverse economic conditions and the restriction of affordable housing are in place, students may engage in a relationship and may access independent housing. For most of them, education continues while being in a relationship and it is often followed by a labor market entry. With an increasing convergence of professional prospects between men and women and less gender specialized division of labor, the intersection of both partners' professional trajectories challenge partnership stability in a time of self-fulfillment and individualization (Abraham, Auspurg, & Hinz, 2010; Cooke, Mulder, & Thomas, 2016). Then, the transition from education to employment bring transformations in couple's daily life and in the share of paid work and unpaid work in the joint household, might create stress and entail young women's union dissolution when tensions emerge (Sayer, 2006).

Previous literature has shown that unemployment or a job loss are determinants of partnership instability, along with growing economic uncertainties during young adulthood (Doiron & Mendolia, 2012; Hansen, 2005; Mills & Blossfeld, 2003). Turning points like the school-to-work transition are less documented as factors of separation. These two events entail a change in the employment status, which may influence the probability of family transitions. The aim of this paper is to assess the effect of graduation and of the (stable) labor market entry on first coresidential partnership's separation among women in France. We propose to analyze these two events as a process, by focusing on the timing of enrollment and employment changes, to determine their impact on union dissolution. We used the French EPIC<sup>3</sup> survey and applied discrete-time event history analysis to model the probability of a first separation depending on the economic activity status. The analytical sample is constituted of first cohabitating unions of women born between 1960 and 1983 in France.

## Background

### *Transition to adulthood and the rise in partnership instability*

During the four last decades in France as in other Western countries, the partnership history of young adults has moved from an "early marriage" model in the 1980s to a "multiple intimate relationships" model in the 2010s. School expansion and higher access to tertiary education since the 1980s have made young adults postponing family formation and have resulted in a transformation of the timing and order of transition to adulthood markers (Billari & Liefbroer, 2010; Rault & Régnier-Loilier, 2015). For young adults, the labor market entry and residential independence have become key events in early adulthood (Spéder, Murinkó, & Settersten Jr, 2013). In France, students pursuing higher education are frequently living in an independent housing, without full financial independence once they have acquired stable entry into the labor market (Van de Velde, 2008). The extended time between the first romantic or sexual relationship and the first cohabiting union represents an opportunity for young adults to experience multiple intimate relationships (Arnett, 2000; Toulemon, 2008).

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Even if young adults move from a non-cohabiting relationship to a cohabiting relationship, previous literature has argued that this transition is broadly associated to a low level of commitment (Sawhill, 2014). Embedded in tight housing and job markets in France, sharing a dwelling with a partner may facilitate the access to an independent household, especially for young people having low income, thus the first union may stem from practical reasons (i.e. pooling resources). However, this type of event-driven commitment (i.e. achieving economy of scale) into a coresidential union may also lead to higher partnership instability, as partners who choose early cohabitation report frequent relationship dissatisfaction (Surra & Hughes, 1997). When the partnership has been formed for a short time and constraints or dedication are low, then the probability of separation rises (Sawhill, 2014; Schnor, 2015; Stanley, Rhoades, & Whitton, 2010).

As a matter of fact, we observe an increase in the number of separations of coresidential unions during young adulthood (Costemalle, 2015; Lichter, Turner, & Sassler, 2010). Therefore, the first separation may constitute a delay in life stage for the establishment of a long-term committed union.

### ***Education, work and partnership trajectories of young women***

Economic insecurity and unstable professional prospects limit the settlement in an independent household along with union formation (Oppenheimer, 1988; Solaz, 2000). With school expansion, access to higher education has increased, and particularly for women. As it is difficult for young people to settle down without a stable job and income, young adults are delaying the formation of their first coresidential union (Rault & Régnier-Loilier, 2015). Nevertheless, since more young women are pursuing higher studies and as the delay of the first cohabitation does not cover all the extended time spent in education, more are entering their first coresidential union during education (Costemalle, 2015). This trend is accentuated by the fact that women form a coresidential partnership with men who are, on average, two years older and who frequently have a stable employment (Vanderschelden, 2006). Then, even if economic uncertainty is negatively associated with setting up an independent household, entry into a coresidential union is increasingly prevalent among young women who are enrolled in education (Prioux, 2003; Vergauwen, Neels, & Wood, 2016).

There is a complex intertwining between graduation, entry on the labor market, the formation of a couple and the future gendered division of labor. Several studies have argued that changes in economic status and resources affect partnership stability (Jalovaara, 2013; Sayer, 2006). For young women who are still enrolled at the beginning of their union, completing education and entering the labor market may constitute key-events for the transition to adulthood and for union duration. Becker's economic theories suggest that one of the two partner (in practice, women) should withdraw from the labor market to specialize in unpaid work in the household (Becker, 1981). When women access higher economic resources, Becker's theory predict an increase in union dissolution risks.

Nevertheless, many scholars have challenged women's economic independence as a factor of union dissolution during the past decades. Indeed, this outcome may apply to traditional arrangement in the division of labor (male breadwinner model). Students are poorly concerned by gender role specialization, especially when both partners are enrolled in education. When gender equality norms are high and when economic constraints prevail, dual-earner couples may enhance partnership stability (Oppenheimer, 1988). Pooling two sources of income may hamper negative shocks caused by unemployment or economic crisis (Cohen, 2014). In this sense, we should see a positive effect of the entry into the labor market of women on partnership stability. On the opposite, forming a union before graduation and at a young age is associated with higher probability of partnership dissolution (Heintz-Martin & Zabel, 2018). This strand of literature suggests that low educational level, low income and less maturity in the decisions may partly explain this association between separation and low age (Ishizuka, 2018; Lyngstad & Jalovaara, 2010). Moreover, the completion of formal education implies job search. "Locational conflicts" may arise from employment opportunities that are not located in the same residential area than the joint dwelling (Cooke et al., 2016). Since career opportunities increasingly converge between men and women, the issue of housing and the professional prospects of both partners becomes a concern within the couple, which can generate familial tensions and uncertainties about the future (Boyle, Kulu, Cooke, Gayle, & Mulder, 2008; Halliday Hardie & Lucas, 2010). A difficult entry into the labor market may also hamper partnership stability by generating economic uncertainties that reflect on family well-being. Once school-to-work transition is realized, partnerships long-term prospects and commitment are more easily achieved.

The association between labor market entry, graduation and union dissolution may also vary by the educational level. Young adults pursuing higher education have more probability of entering a union before the completion of formal education than school-leavers without tertiary education. Moreover, high-qualified young adults may develop long-term career prospects and higher professional and residential mobility than low-qualified young adults (Corijn & Klijzing, 2001). In terms of locational conflict, union dissolution is expected to be particularly associated with education completion and labor market entry for young adults with tertiary education. Low-educated young women standing in more traditional male breadwinner model may accept more easily alternative social roles and invest in the family domain rather than the paid work sphere (Gershuny, Bittman, & Brice, 2005). Moreover, when low-income partners have professional opportunities, couples in traditional model tend to favor men's career over women ones (Moen & Sweet, 2004).

### **Data and methods**

For this study we use the EPIC ("Etude des Parcours Individuels et Conjugaux") survey, which was gathered in 2013-14 by the French National Demographic Institute (Ined) and the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (Insee). The survey contains the entire individuals' partnership history and information on social markers of transition to adulthood for 7,825 individuals aged between 26 and 65 at the time of the interview. In order to describe the recent changes in partnership pathways occurred along with the school expansion, we choose to restrict the sample to women born between 1960 and 1983.

Individuals are followed between age 16 and 30 or the event of interest, i.e. union dissolution. About 2,650 women born between 1960 and 1983 are included in the sample, of which 438 have formed a first cohabiting union before ending their studies. Among these unions, 216 have dissolved (49.3%).

We use a discrete-time duration model to analyze partnership dissolution risks depending on the event of schooling completion and employment status. Our baseline hazard function is a quadratic term of the duration since entry into their first (married or unmarried) cohabitation. In line with Winkler-Dworak and Toulemon (2007), our main covariate is a 7-category variable combining enrollment and employment status, which identifies three situations of non-working individuals and four situations of working individuals. A duration component is included in the school enrollment status, distinguishing between 1) more than one year before graduation, 2) the graduation year and 3) one year or more after graduation. Concerning the employment status, we distinguish between those who worked while being enrolled (distinguishing between 1) more than one year before graduation and 2) the graduation year) and those who worked after leaving school (with a work experience 3) below or 4) above three years). We also add controls for sociodemographic variables that can contribute to the association between enrollment or employment status and union dissolution: birth cohort, educational level, whether they are married or in a registered partnership, parenthood status, partner's previous children, parental separation, age difference between partners, country of birth, and age at entry into cohabitation. In order to investigate which factors mostly affect our dependent variable, we perform several nested models. Model 1 (M1) includes the enrollment and working status, the partnership's duration and the level of education. Model 2 (M2) adds to model 1 the variable accounting for the age at entry into union and a cohort covariate. Model 3 (M3) is the full model.

### **Provisional Findings**

Figure 1 shows the odds ratios for each category of our main explanatory variable, according to the different model specifications. With respect to the reference category (i.e. women having graduated and being working for 3 years or more), all other situations show a higher dissolution risk if we only account for partnership duration and education (M1). However, the inclusion in the model of the cohort effect, age at the formation of the union and other covariates (M2 and M3) levels off the magnitude of the coefficients and reduces their statistical power. Nevertheless, the significant effect of schooling completion still holds for working young women: in the graduation year the dissolution risk of cohabiting unions is significantly higher than in the period of time that immediately precedes or follows graduation. Thus, graduation represents a turning point for young women's partnerships.

Other control variables have significant effects on the dissolution risks of young women in France. In line with previous literature, being married or in a civil union rather than in an unregistered partnership

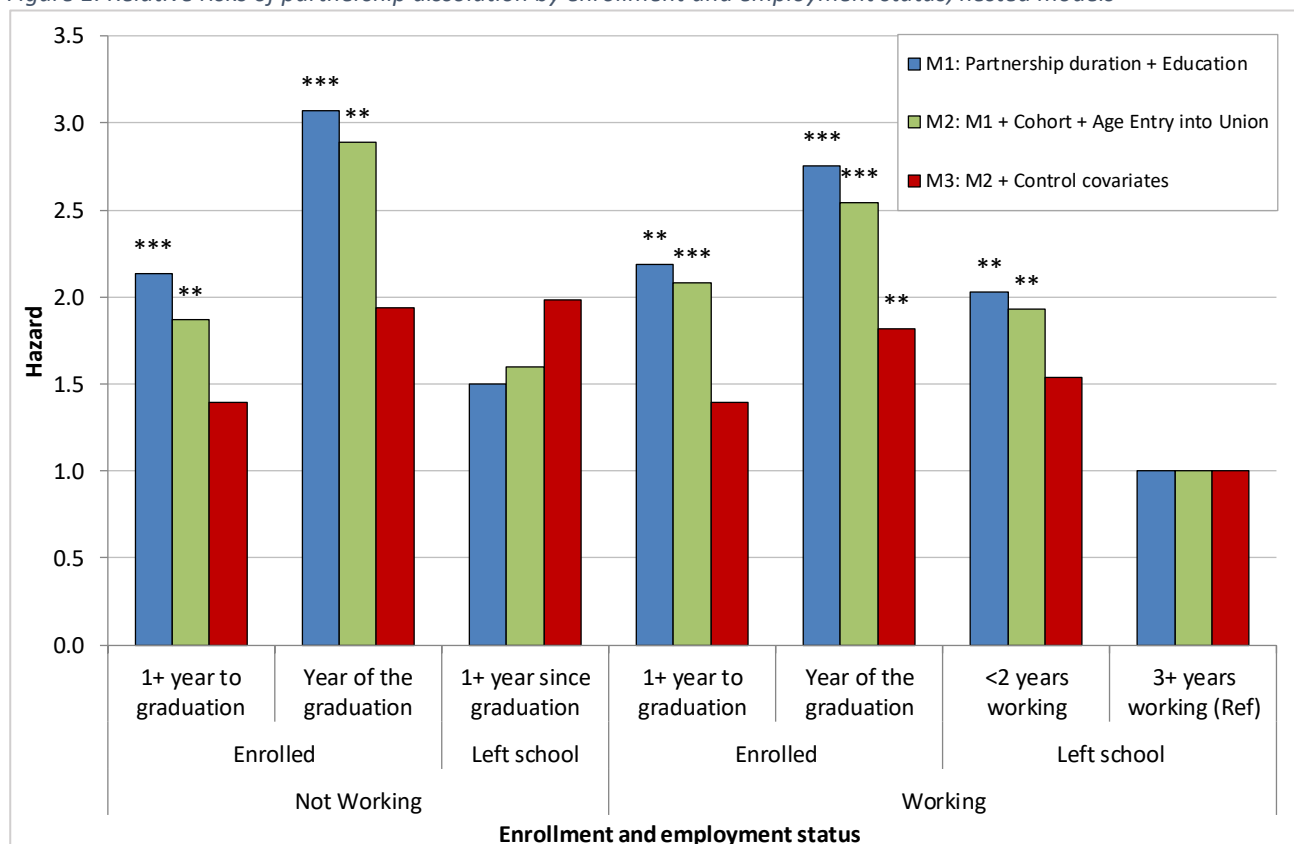
decreases the likelihood of dissolution. Similarly, having children reduces the dissolution risk. Parental divorce increases the probability of separation. Finally, the risk of separation increases with younger cohorts. Differences by educational level are investigated with interaction terms that will be presented at the conference.

### Conclusion

Few research on transition to adulthood and partnership instability focuses on the interplay between graduation, the entry into the labor market and union duration. Most of this research treats the association between school-to-work transition and union formation, but does not address the changing employment situation of young people and their entry into the labor market once they are in a relationship. However, more young adults are entering a first coresidential partnership while being enrolled in education, which is not without consequences on the way they handle their professional careers. With an increasing convergence of professional prospects between men and women and less specialized division of labor, the intersection of partners' professional trajectories in dual-income couples appears to generate tensions within couples, which might lead to separation. As spells of unemployment or economic uncertainties may lead to situations of stress and conflict, the school-to-work transition reveals, in some cases, uncertainties about the future of young couples.

Our results indicate a significant effect of women's graduation on the probability of separation of young women's unions when they enter the labor market in the same year. Henceforth, a rapid transition from education to employment is a factor of separation during young adulthood. The cumulative nature of key events in a short period of time, such as graduation and first (stable) employment (and the related income and independence) may be at the source of separation risks. Our study show the importance of considering the school-to-work transition and the association with partnership trajectories in order to gain better understanding of the complexity of the transition to adulthood.

Figure 1: Relative risks of partnership dissolution by enrollment and employment status, nested models



Source: Epic 2013-2014, Ined-Insee. Coverage: Women born 1970-1983, entering into cohabitation a year or more before graduation. Note: p-value: \* p<0.10, \*\* p<0.05, \*\*\*p<0.01.

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