

The transition to first union in a divided partner market: the case of two ethnolinguistic groups in Finland

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Abstract

The timing of entry into the first cohabiting union is an issue of scientific and societal importance, as it has bearing on many sociodemographic outcomes, such as fertility. Partner choice is both a cause and a consequence of the partner market, and thus related to opportunities, preferences and norms. Most studies on opportunities and their realisations within the context of interethnic unions have been concerned with natives versus immigrants. Finland, which is the study country here, provides an unusual opportunity to analyse first-union entries. We use multigenerational register data that cover the entire total population, and focus on two ethnolinguistic groups that are equal, live side by side and for whom coresidential unions and marriages across the ethnolinguistic lines are common. Finnish speakers constitute approximately 90% and Swedish speakers just over 5% of the country's population. Considering that ethnicity in general is a fundamental trait for partner choice, partner-market opportunities can be assumed to vary considerably between these two groups. The primary aim is to analyse how own and parental ethnolinguistic affiliation affects time to first union and the partner choice in terms of the ethnolinguistic affiliation of the partner and his or her parents. We are particularly interested in whether scarcity of potential partners imply an accelerated union formation process, or if a smaller group size instead means delayed entry into cohabitation, and how the ethnolinguistic characteristics of the partner relates to the timing of the first union. Preliminary results suggest that Finnish speakers have a faster entry into the first union, while Swedish speakers with an endogamous Swedish background have the slowest rate, and individuals with mixed background are intermediate. The differences appear more marked for persons who eventually obtain tertiary-level education. We discuss these preliminary findings in the light of the partner market literature, and discuss future directions for research.

1. Introduction

The entry into a first coresidential union is a decision related not only to an individual's life course trajectory but also the partner market, childbearing and other societal impacts. The determinants of individuals' first cohabitation is consequently a focal demographic trait. It is generally argued that partner choice is governed by preferences, opportunities and third party norms (Kalmijn 1998). Many individuals prefer to partner with someone who is similar to themselves with respect to background, education, language, religion, values and beliefs. Sharing the same ethnic background may be seen as a particularly poignant trait in a prospective partner, as it not only signifies group belonging but also eases communication and facilitates raising of any common children. Opportunities for partner selection relate to the features of the population structure in terms of, e.g., the adult sex ratio and the number of individuals who possesses a desired trait. The group size is known to affect the probability of intermarriage across different ethnic and country-of-birth backgrounds (Çelikaksoy and others 2010). Much of the intermarriage literature has focussed on unions where one partner is an immigrant and the other is native born. Other examples refer to intermarriage across religious barriers, e.g. among Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland (O'Leary and Finnäs 2002). However, in general much less is known about the demographic behaviours on the partner market in situations where the minority is not a vulnerable group, with potential subject to discrimination and other barriers to integration and family formation.

The case of Finland is interesting and provides a unique opportunity to test aspects of the partner market that many other countries cannot provide. As a nation it has two native, and constitutionally equal, ethnolinguistic groups, the Finnish- and Swedish-speaking Finns. A person can be registered with only one mother tongue. While the two groups have the same constitutional rights and are similar on many observable characteristics (Saarela and Finnäs 2014), this division has profound impact on Finnish society, which has parallel school systems based on this ethnolinguistic division, two separate branches of the military, and a clear geographic residential segregation from the country-level perspective. However, today an increasing number of children are raised by parents from both ethnolinguistic groups.

In spite of that the Swedish-speaking population is thoroughly mapped, there is little awareness of how group-specific traits are maintained over generations within and across ethnolinguistically mixed families. The Swedish speaking population has since the 1950s been facing large demographic changes. They have decreased in number, Finnish speakers have moved into regions that were previously primarily Swedish speaking, and the proportion of individuals who find their partner across the linguistic border has doubled. In the 1950s, approximately 20% of the Swedish-speaking population married a Finnish-speaking spouse (Finnäs 1986). This figure rose gradually until the 1980s when it levelled off, and today about 40% of the unions of Swedish-speakers are to a Finnish-speaker (Finnäs 2015). Moreover, these exogamous families have become more duo-lingual over time (Finnäs and O'Leary 2003); about two-thirds of the children in duo-lingual families are registered as Swedish speakers.

Previous research has demonstrated differences between the two ethnolinguistic groups in various demographic behaviours, in for example mortality risks (Saarela and Finnäs 2004), emigration and return patterns (Saarela and Scott 2017), progression to parenthood within cohabiting unions and union dissolution (Saarela and Finnäs 2014). Here we add to this literature by considering differential rates of first-union formation between the two groups, not only by an individual's own ethnolinguistic affiliation but also by ethnolinguistic background, that is, each parent's ethnolinguistic affiliation. Specifically, we are interested in how these features affect time to first-union entry and the partner choice in terms of the partner's ethnolinguistic affiliation and ethnolinguistic background. Given the unique context of two equal groups with distinct languages, yet high rates of union formation across the language barrier, we examine whether there are differences in the rates into first cohabitation between individuals with endogamous Finnish and Swedish backgrounds, and whether individuals with mixed backgrounds if so fall in between? Previous evidence points towards a stronger impact of mother's than father's ethnolinguistic affiliation on the ethnolinguistic registration of children in mixed unions (Finnäs 2015). Furthermore, there are consistently more cohabiting unions, marriages and children in unions that consist of a Swedish-speaking man and Finnish-speaking woman than in unions that consist of a Finnish-speaking man and a Swedish-speaking woman (Saarela and Finnäs 2014). Our study will therefore also try to shed light on the role of gender in the process of first union formation.

Contribution and research questions

When individuals have difficulties in finding a partner, they have three options: to delay union formation, to migrate elsewhere where the partner market is more favourable, or to modify one's preferences if partners who fulfill the original criteria are scarce. The primary focus in this paper is on the first alternative, whether to enter a union or to delay. Predictions regarding the role of belonging to the majority/minority can be made in both directions for entry into cohabitation. Swedish speakers can be expected to enter cohabitation earlier if they anticipate generally higher family stability, but Finnish speakers may start cohabitation earlier if they more easily move in and out of partnerships (Saarela and Finnäs 2018, 2014). Individuals with mixed ethnolinguistics background might start cohabitation earlier if they perceive themselves as having a larger pool of potential partners, or lie in between the two groups with endogamous background if these individuals have less of a community/belonging. Thus, we pose the following main research questions:

- I) How does ethnolinguistic background impact the transition to first cohabitation, net of an individual's own ethnolinguistic affiliation?
- II) Does this association differ by sex and level of education?
- III) Who partners with whom in terms of ethnolinguistic affiliation and background?

2. Data and Methods

We use Finnish register data that has unique linkage of ethnolinguistic identity for multiple generations. Each person in the data can be linked to his or her mother and father, as long as the parent had not died before the end of 1970. We construct ethnolinguistic background by the focal individual's both parent's registered languages, as well as his/her own. This gives us 6 meaningful categories (see table 1) from endogamous Finnish to endogamous Swedish with the sex of the parent taken into account. Because there only a negligible number of individuals who have two parents with one language background yet is themselves registered as the other, these are excluded in our analysis. Through anonymized person numbers we can link individuals to various socioeconomic variables and demographic controls, and importantly to

cohabitation by residential address changes. The Finnish register data is world class in being able to capture unions that are based on cohabitation even if the couple is not married and does not have a common child. The data is accessed through Statistics Finland's FIONA system (contract number TK-52-694-18, project number U1054_a, and the permission number is TK-53-1370-17).

In the present analyses we include all individuals who are born 1970-1995, who have information on their own, mother's and father's registered mother tongue. The vast majority have this information (e.g. 98.5% of those born in 1990). Further, we impose the restriction that the individual must be resident in Finland at age 17 when we start the time at risk. Given our cohorts, the oldest individuals (YOB 1970) will be age 48 at the end of observation period in 2018.

We perform a survival analysis for progression into first cohabiting unions. In this first step, all Finnish born individuals are followed from age 17 until the first childbearing union, and are censored if they emigrate or die before 2018. We analyse models separately for men and women, and construct a binary variable "ever in tertiary education" to consider cohabitation risks by highest achieved education level. This is because higher education is associated with delayed entry into unions and generally different life course patterns (Jalovaara and Fasang 2017; Jalovaara and others 2019). Language identity is measured at age 17 but very few individuals change their registered language after this point (Obućina and Saarela 2019).

3. Results

The vast majority of the population are Finnish speakers with endogamous Finnish background, at approximately 92% of men and women (Table 1). The equivalent number for Swedish speakers is 3.6-3.7% and smaller numbers of Swedish with mixed background. Nearly 2% of the population are Finnish speakers with at least one parent with Swedish affiliation.

Table 1. Proportion of own and parental ethnolinguistic affiliation.

Ego	Mother	Father	Men (n=818 248, 8,390 701 yrs at risk) in per mille	Women (n=783 398, 6,432 229 yrs at risk) in per mille
Finnish-speaker	Finnish-speaker	Finnish-speaker	924	925
	Finnish-speaker	Swedish-speaker	12	12
	Swedish-speaker	Finnish-speaker	7	6
Swedish-speaker	Swedish-speaker	Swedish-speaker	37	36
	Finnish-speaker	Swedish-speaker	10	9
	Swedish-speaker	Finnish-speaker	11	11

We display the rates of entry into first cohabitation by Kaplan Meier plots by ethnolinguistic background (based on ego's mother's and father's languages), for men and women separately. Figure 1ab shows that Finnish speaking men with Finnish endogamous background have slightly faster entry into cohabitation than Swedish speaking endogamous men, but by age 35 levels seem to roughly equal and by the end of the follow up period (age 48 at most) Swedish speaking men have slightly lower levels of never partnered (1a). What is interesting is that Swedish speaking men with a Swedish speaking mother, followed by those with a Swedish speaking father are intermediate between the two endogamous groups. Among women, we observe a similar pattern, albeit the Finnish speaking women with a Swedish speaking father appear to also fall in between the endogamous groups. It is noteworthy that women with identical parental affiliations (mother Finnish-father Swedish speaking) show differences in cohabitation rates based on their own registered language (with Finnish speakers having accelerated entry into unions) (1b).

Figure 1a. Kaplan Meier plots for entry into first cohabitation for men.

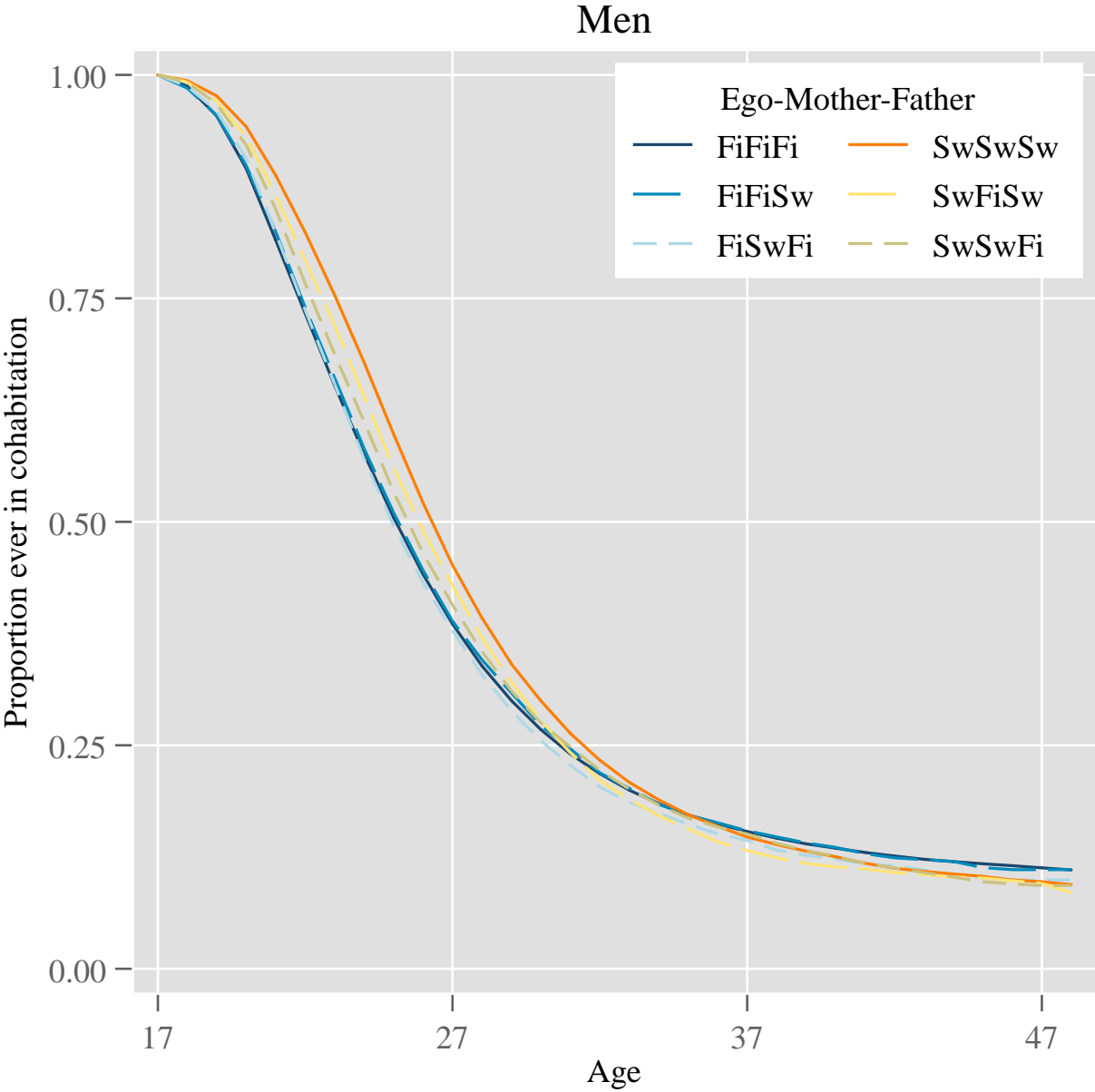


Figure 1b. Kaplan Meier plots for entry into first cohabitation for women.

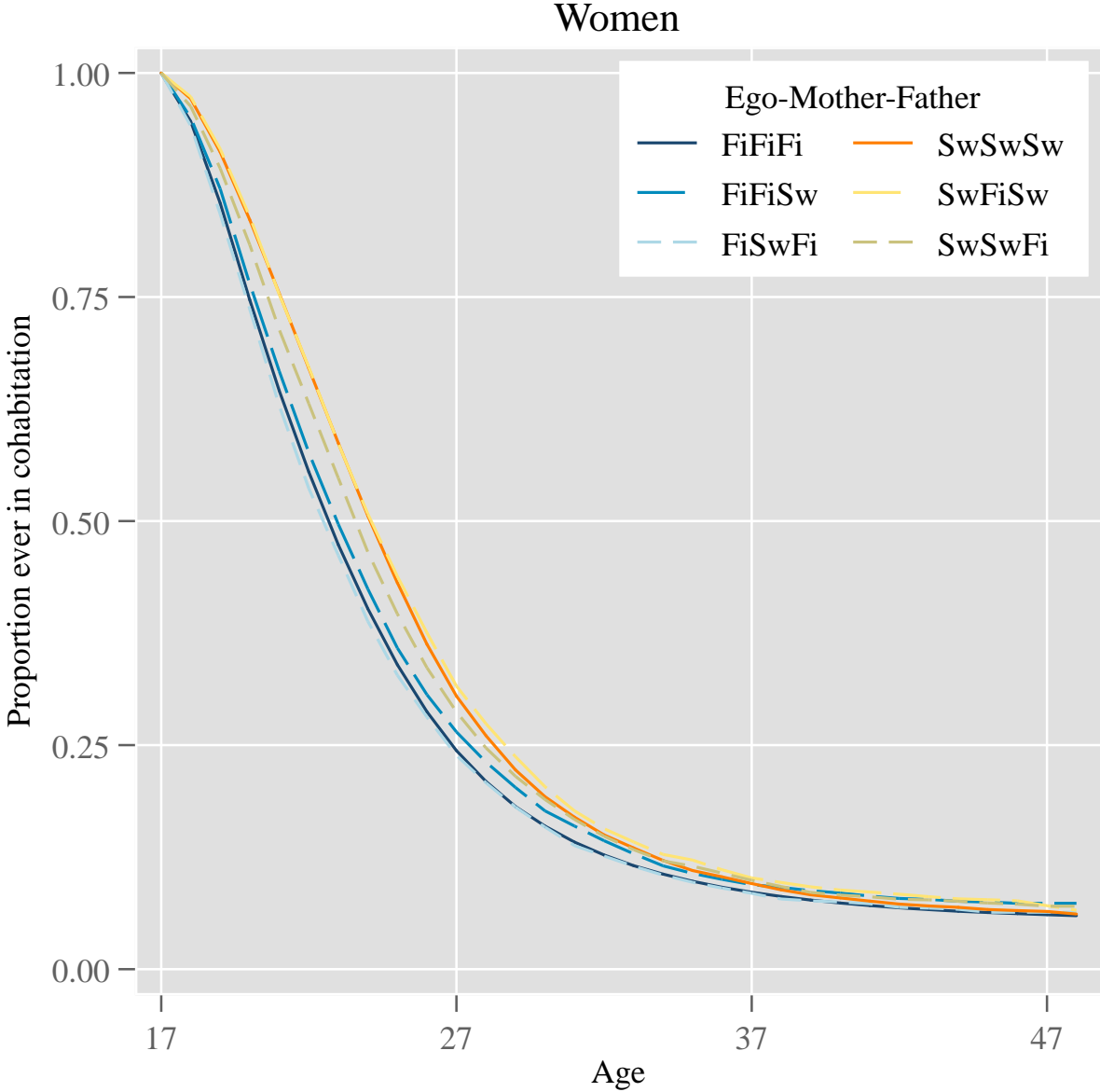


Figure 2. Kaplan Meier plots for entry into first cohabitation by ethnolinguistic background and education, among men.

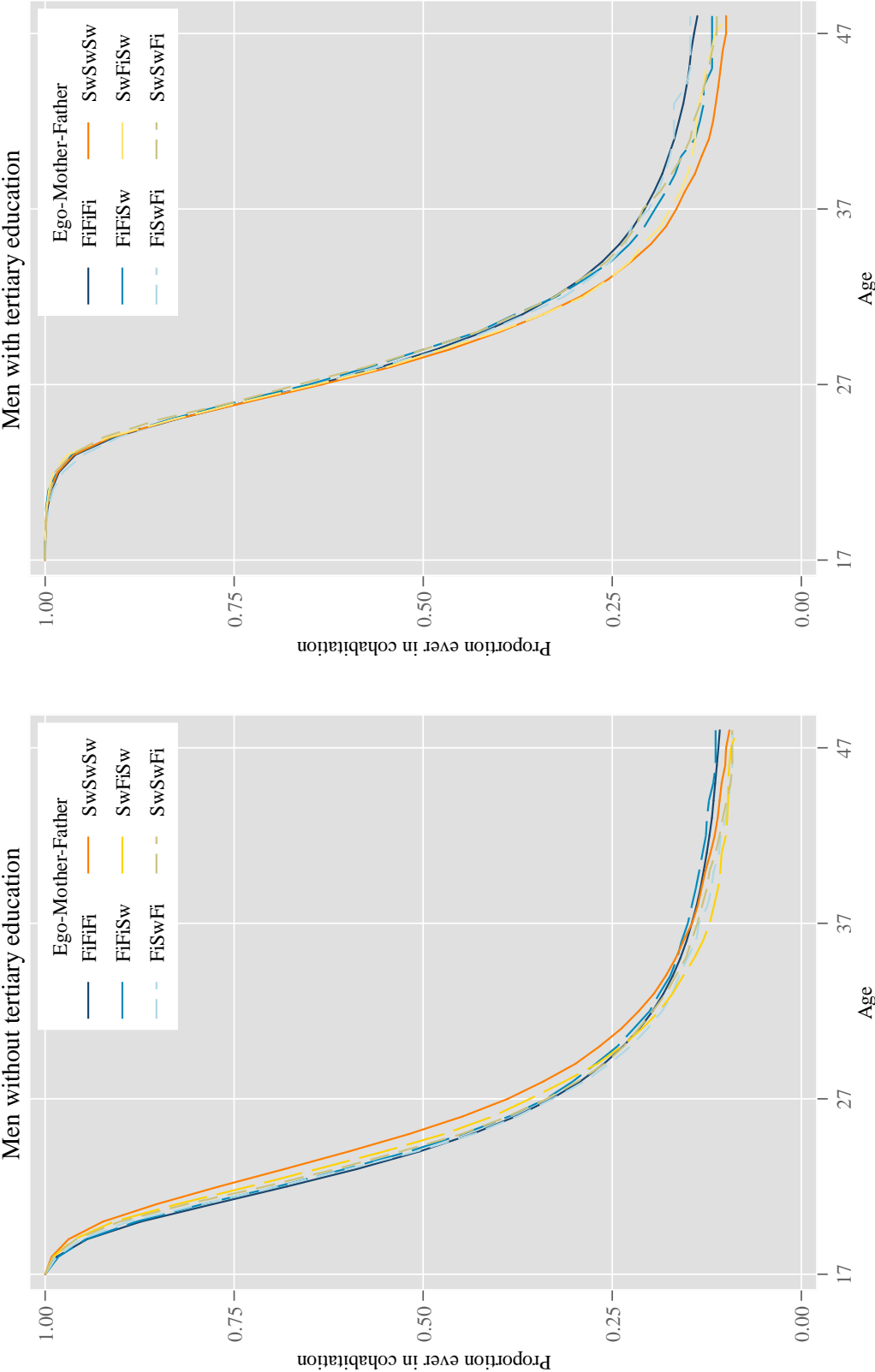
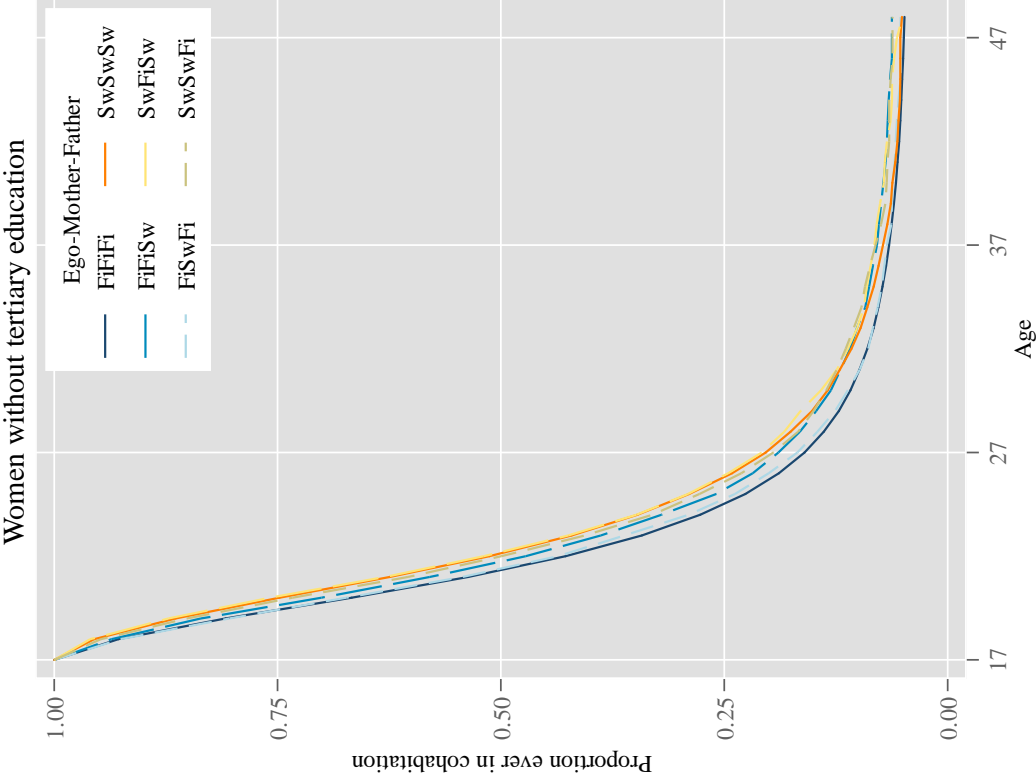
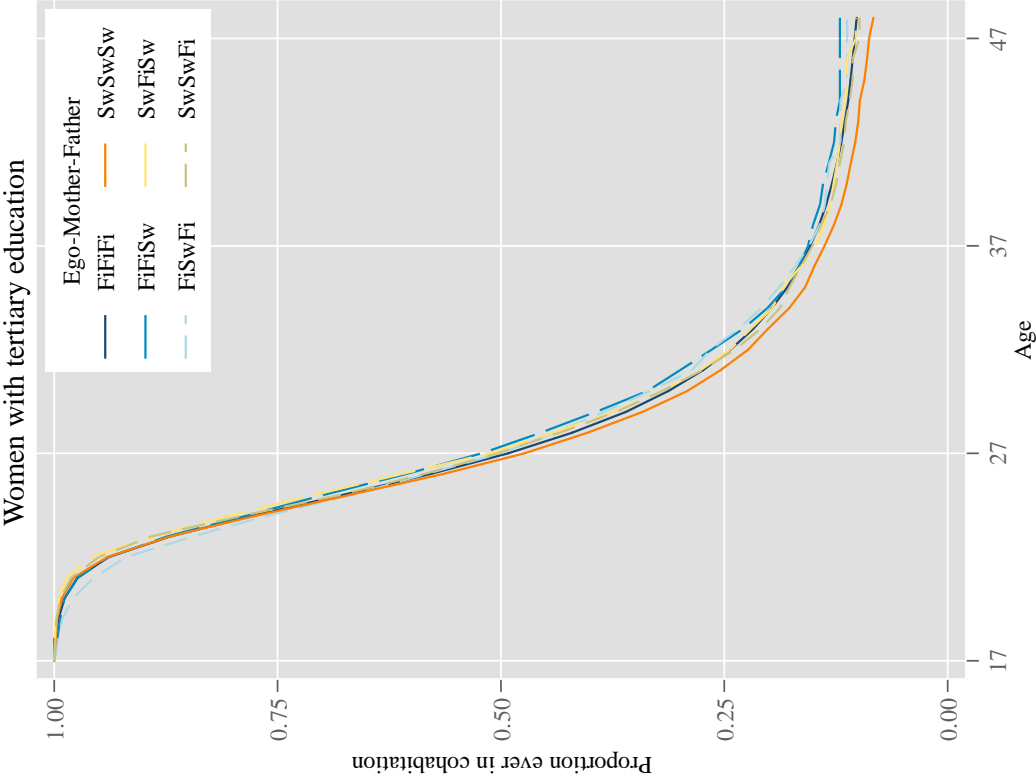


Figure 3. Kaplan Meier plots for entry into first cohabitation by ethnolinguistic background and education, among women.



For both men and women who were ever in tertiary education, differences between ethnolinguistic groups only start to emerge around age 30, at which point Swedish endogamous individuals are more likely to have entered a cohabitating union than Finnish endogamous counterparts (2 and 3ab). Interestingly, among individuals who were never in tertiary education, Finnish speakers are more likely to enter into a cohabitation union. Thus it seems that education is an important factor to consider when trying to ascertain the differences between language groups in cohabitation risks. It should be noted that both men and women with Swedish endogamous have higher levels of tertiary education (30%, or Swedish registered with mixed background, 24%), than their Finnish endogamous (21%) or Finnish mixed counterparts (approx. 18%).

Finally, we consider partner choice – the ethnolinguistic background of one's partner by ego's ethnolinguistic background. We here consider the first cohabiting partner, among individuals who are age 40 or over (year of birth 1978 or before) in order to not confound partner choice by differential entry into cohabitation. These results are in line with previous evidence that has shown that it is more likely that Swedish speaking men partner with Finnish speaking women, than *vice versa* (Saarela and Finnäs 2014). However, here we have registered language by an additional generation and so have more potential categories of partners (from mixed unions) that would otherwise go undetected in the analyses. Figure 4 shows that Swedish speaking women who have either a Finnish speaking father or mother are more likely than their male counterparts to partner with someone who has an endogamous Swedish background.

Figure 4. Partner’s ethnolinguistic background by ego’s ethnolinguistic background.

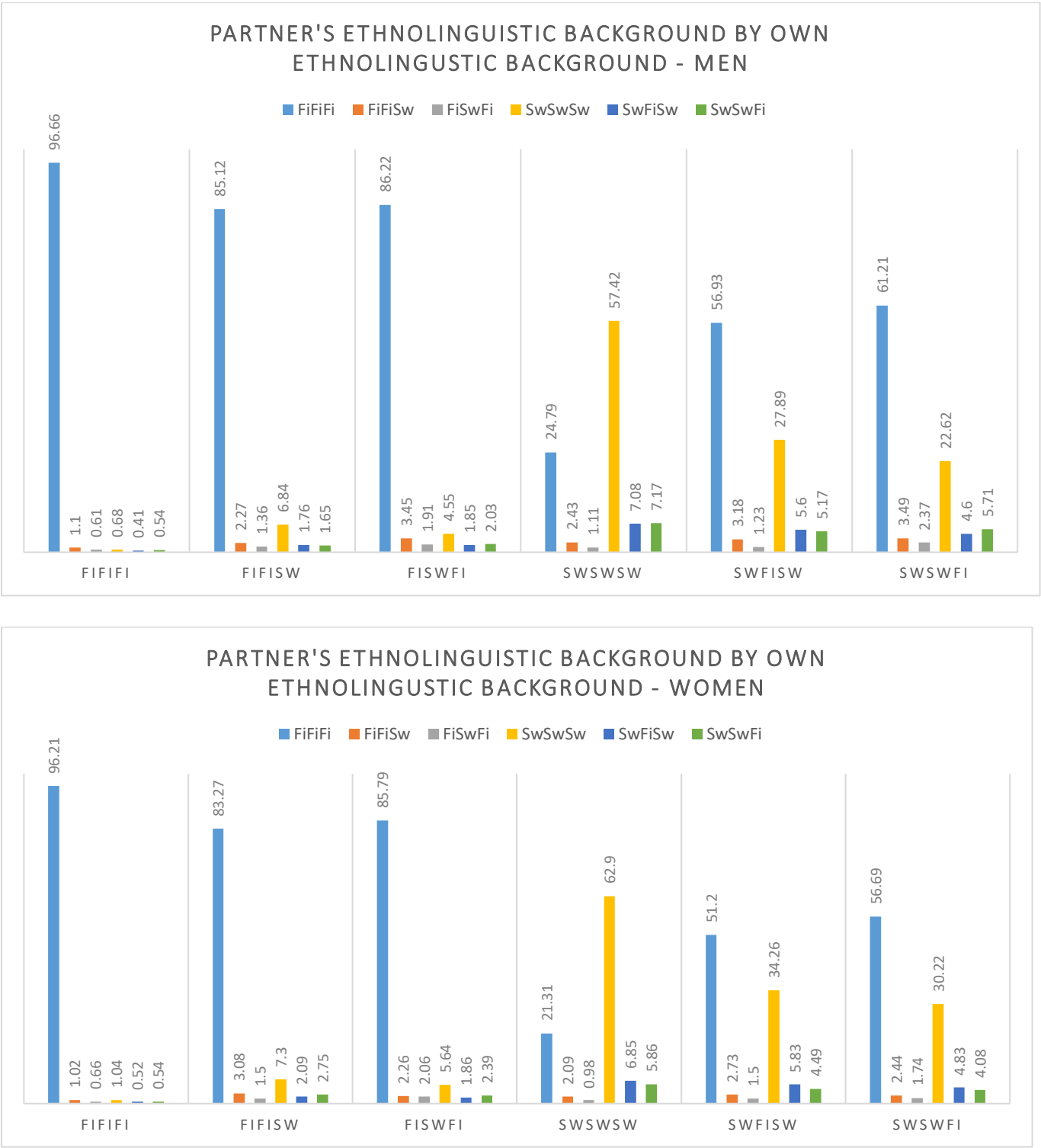


Figure 4ab for men (a) and women (b). Ethnolinguistic background of partner at first cohabiting unions, for individuals at age 40 over or over (Year of birth 1978 or before). Note: the language abbreviations refer to ego- mother –father’s ethnolinguistic affiliation in that order.

4. Discussion and future directions

We have analysed who enters into a cohabitation relationship, when and with whom in Finland where two main ethnolinguistic groups divide the partner market. Simultaneously, union formation between the two groups is common and a substantial number of individuals grow up in families with representation from both communities. These preliminary results indicate that it is important to take into account language affiliation in two generations, as individuals from a mixed background (i.e. the same composition of mother/father's background) behave differently in terms of union formation based on their own language affiliation.

As we are interested in understanding how the type of available partners is linked to risk of entry into cohabitation, we will in the full paper apply competing risk models for discrete-time hazard for risk of entering a union with a partner with a) Swedish ethnolinguistic identity, b) Finnish ethnolinguistic identity, c) or mixed background. A similar approach has previously been applied to study competing risks in repartnering (de Graaf and Kalmijn 2003; Obućina 2016). Time is an important extension of the cross-sectional results of partner choice presented here. This is because how important an individual's ethnolinguistic background is for partner choice and cohabitation may vary over time. Several types of explanations based on partner markets can be applied to understand these patterns. For example, it is possible that with age, increased education or other experiences mean that any preference for a partner with similar language background is weakened, and other characteristics become more desirable. Selection may also play a part if individuals who partner later in their life course were not as motivated to partner within their language group to start with. An argument based on partner opportunity structures may be that for Swedish speakers, many of whom grow up in areas that are predominantly Swedish speaking, increased opportunities to meet Finnish-speakers might come with age (and possibly migration outside of Swedish-speaking areas). The entry into and the durability of cohabiting unions will be discussed in the light of declining fertility levels, high rates of childlessness in Finland and the relationship between union stability and fertility (Jalovaara 2013; Jalovaara and others 2019).

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