

Relationship quality and cohabitor's family transitions. How country context shapes (un)happy couples' transitions to marriage, childbearing, and partnership dissolution.

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Short abstract (*words: 250*)

Does the quality of the partner relationship influence couple's family transitions and does this differ between countries? Research on relationship quality and family transitions is scarce, even though it is an often presumed mechanism between social factors and couple transitions. We use a cross-national perspective to investigate various of European countries which differ in the level cohabitation is (non-)normative and how cohabitation is associated with disadvantaged positions. This context is expected to shape the way how relationship quality is associated with family transitions.

We use the Generation and Gender Survey and UK Household Longitudinal Study, covering seven European countries (Austria, Bulgaria, France, Hungary, Netherlands, Sweden, and UK). We employ competing risk hazard models to follow respondents as they 1) transition from cohabitation into marriage, childbearing, or separation; 2) transition from marriage or cohabitation into parenthood; and 3) separate after having children.

Preliminary analyses show that among cohabitators higher relationship quality increases the likelihood of marriage in Austria, Bulgaria, France, and the UK, but not in the Netherlands and Sweden. Instead, higher relationship quality is associated with childbearing in cohabitation Sweden, but not in other countries. Lower relationship quality is associated with higher risk of separation in all countries except the UK. In conclusion, high quality couples are more likely to marry in most countries, but in Sweden these couples seem to progress their relationship by having a child. Next steps include investigating the association between relationship quality and transitions from marriage or cohabitation into parenthood and separation after having children.

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Over the past few decades, cohabitation, and childbearing within cohabitation, has increased in nearly every European country (Perelli-Harris et al 2015). Yet research has found that the factors associated with cohabitation, and indeed the meaning of cohabitation, depend on the country context (e.g. Hiekel et al 2014, Perelli-Harris 2018, Brons et al 2017). Here we investigate the association between relationship quality and cohabitation outcomes to better understand how context shapes partnership and childbearing decisions. Research from psychology has found that relationship quality is a key indicator for understanding a couple's commitment to the partnership (Rusbult et al 2011). Couples with high relationship quality are more likely to stay together (Le et al 2010), and have better couple functioning and maintenance (Le and Agnew 2003). However, little is known about how relationship quality influences transitions to marriage and childbearing, even though relationship quality is an often presumed mechanism between social factors and couple transitions.

Prior studies comparing relationship quality between cohabiting and married individuals have been cross-sectional and did not follow individuals over time. These studies have found that, on average, cohabiting couples have lower relationship quality in the US (Brown 2003, Brown et al 2017), and across Europe (Wiik et al 2012). The studies suggest that cohabitation fundamentally differs from marriage; however, simply comparing cohabiting and married individuals masks the heterogeneity of cohabiting couples. And indeed, for many of these couples, cohabitation is a stage in the marriage process or a setting for childbearing. Thus, our main research question is whether higher relationship quality among cohabitators leads to marriage or is instead associated with childbearing within cohabitation, and to what extent this differs across countries.

Our study countries differ in the level of cohabitation, its association with disadvantage, and the cultural and social context which shapes norms about cohabitation (Perelli-Harris and Sanchez Gassen 2014, Perelli-Harris et al 2014). Although there is heterogeneity within countries, broadly speaking, the countries in this study can be placed in one of the following categories: countries where long-term cohabitation is relatively common and accepted, including childbearing within cohabitation (France, the Netherlands and Sweden), countries where cohabitation is mainly a stage in the marriage process and marriage is expected (Bulgaria and Hungary), and countries where cohabitation is more a trial stage of the relationship but where strong norms around marriage persist (Austria and the UK) (Hiekel et al 2014; Perelli-Harris et al 2014). Couples in contexts where cohabitation is more accepted and with more entrenched gender equality, for example in Sweden, may have little need to marry, even before having children (Lappegård and Noack 2015). In these contexts, relationship quality should matter less for marriage, but it might matter for childbearing. In other more conservative contexts such as Eastern Europe, marriage is a strong social norm and often provides greater protection, suggesting that cohabitation is a prelude to marriage (Heuveline and Timberlake 2004). In these countries, we expect higher relationship quality will be strongly associated with marriage, but not childbearing. In other contexts such as the UK, cohabitation is a testing ground, with many couples entering cohabitation to determine whether their relationship is strong enough for marriage (Perelli-Harris et al 2014). Again, we expect high quality relationships to lead to marriage, and poor quality relationships to end in separation.

To better understand the link between relationship quality and family transitions, we use harmonized data from the Generations and Gender Surveys and the UK Household Longitudinal Survey to investigate to what extent relationship quality is associated with a variety of family transitions in Europe. Specifically, we follow respondents as they 1) transition

from cohabitation into marriage, childbearing, or separation, 2) transition from marriage or cohabitation into parenthood, and 3) separate after having children. Taken together, these analyses will shed light on the extent to which marriage signifies higher relationship quality, or whether having children is how contemporary couples express their bond.

Data and Method

We use the Generations and Gender Survey (Wave 1 and 2) (www.ggp-i.org) and the UK Household Longitudinal Study (Wave 1 to 8) (www.understandingsociety.ac.uk) to examine these questions. We study whether people who were in a co-residential relationship in Wave 1 married, separated, or had a child between wave 1 and subsequent waves¹. In Sweden, partnership transitions were recorded in register data (provided by the Generations and Gender Programme). People were asked on the quality of their relationship in wave 1¹. The countries which have sufficient transitions between the waves to the various outcomes are Austria, Bulgaria, France, Hungary, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. See table 1 for the percentage and frequency for the transitions per country.

We restrict our sample to people in a different-sex co-residential partner relationship in wave 1 who are aged 45 or less. We are interested in examining the intersection between relationship quality, and transitions to marriage, childbearing, and union dissolution. Therefore, we focus on three sets of analyses. First, in part 1 we restrict our sample to unmarried individuals who have been in a co-residential partnership for five years or less, but do not yet have a child. Second, we examine the transition to first conception (or union dissolution) for both married and cohabiting couples who have not yet had a child and who have been in a residential relationship for five years or less. Finally, in part 3 we examine union dissolution among those who have children aged 17 or younger. Only part 1 is presented in this abstract.

The main purposes of this paper is to investigate how relationship happiness affects couples' transitions. Relationship quality was asked as how satisfied people were with their partner relationship. The scale from 0 ("not at all satisfied") to 10 ("completely satisfied") in most countries, but in the Netherlands it ranged from 1 to 5. In the UK people were asked about how happy they were with their relationship which ranged from 1 ("extremely unhappy") to 7 ("perfect"). We standardized relationship quality per country to take the different formats of the question into account.

We control for the relationship duration (in years), age, employment status of the individual and the partner (employed or not employed), and educational level (higher or not higher) in wave 1, and for the number of months since wave 1.

Preliminary results

Table 2 presents relative risk ratios from competing risk hazard models per country that compare marriage, separation and conception, relative to remaining in cohabitation. These ratios can be roughly interpreted as relative risks because the outcome variables are rare outcomes – in the vast majority of person-months, no event occurs. The table shows that higher relationship quality is positively associated with marriage risks in most countries, namely Austria, Bulgaria, France, Hungary and the UK. The magnitude differs between countries, where higher quality couples have a higher risk of marriage in Bulgaria, although the magnitudes should be interpreted with caution. Relationship quality is not significantly related to marriage in the Netherlands and Sweden. As expected, relationship quality is negatively associated with separation in all countries, except the UK. Lastly, childbearing within cohabitation is not significantly associated with relationship quality in all countries, except for in Sweden; high quality Swedish couples have higher conception risks, but not marriage risks.

¹ For the UK couples could enter the data also in wave 3 and 5, the waves relationship quality was asked.

Robustness analyses in which we restrict the observation to 36 months after the first wave show similar results.

Preliminary conclusions and future directions

In many Western countries cohabitation has increased at a rapid rate over the past few decades, raising questions about whether this alternative living arrangement is a substitute for marriage. Here we find that this is not the case in all countries: cohabitators have higher marriage rates if they are happy with their relationship in Austria, Bulgaria, France, Hungary, and the UK, suggesting that for the majority of the population in these countries, marriage continues to be an expression of higher quality relationships. However, in Sweden we see that couples with higher quality relationships are more likely to have children within cohabitation. Childbearing is not associated with relationship quality in the other countries.

Relationship quality is associated with the transitions couples make in all countries, but the type of transition differs across countries. This suggests that the manner in which couples affirm their relationship, by marriage or childbearing, differs between countries. In countries where cohabitation is more normative, relationship quality appears to be less related to marriage (with the notable exception of France). Instead, these couples may opt to have children within cohabitation.

In the next stages of the research, we investigate the transition to first birth among married and cohabitation and how relationship quality differentially affects the likelihood of this transition. Finally, we will examine union dissolution among parents and whether relationship quality affects separation differently for cohabitators than married couples.

Table 1. Type of transition from cohabitation to marriage, separation or conception by country. Percentages shown and frequency between brackets.

	Austria	Bulgaria	France	Hungary	Netherlands	Sweden	UK	Total
No transition	30.5 (90)	29.6 (29)	36.0 (64)	28.0 (84)	38.6 (114)	30.3 (108)	31.6 (416)	31.9 (905)
Marriage	28.8 (85)	24.5 (24)	30.3 (54)	33.3 (100)	30.9 (91)	14.3 (51)	24.3 (320)	25.5 (725)
Separation	17.6 (52)	9.2 (9)	9.6 (17)	20.7 (62)	11.2 (33)	22.2 (79)	26.6 (350)	21.2 (602)
Childbearing	23.1 (68)	36.7 (36)	24.2 (43)	18.0 (54)	19.3 (57)	33.2 (118)	17.5 (231)	21.4 (607)
Total	100 (295)	100 (98)	100 (178)	100 (300)	100 (295)	100 (356)	100 (1317)	100 (2839)
Time to transition or censoring								
	Austria	Bulgaria	France	Hungary	Netherlands	Sweden	UK	Total
Mean	26.7	16.3	24.4	27.7	27.7	28.2	24.8	25.8
SD	17.6	11.2	11.8	17.0	14.9	18.9	22.2	19.3
Range	1-56	1-32	1-37	1-50	1-56	1-56	1-89	1-89

Source. Generations and Gender Study, UKHLS

Table 2. Transitions from cohabitation to marriage, separation or conception by country, competing risk hazard models, Relative Risk Ratio's presented. Remaining in cohabitation without children is reference category.

	Austria		Bulgaria		France		Marriage Hungary		Netherlands		Sweden		UK	
	RRR		RRR		RRR		RRR		RRR		RRR		RRR	
Relationship quality	1.91	*	3.85	*	1.87	*	1.94	**	1.26		1.17		1.37	***
Age	0.99		0.96		0.97		1.02		0.99		1.02		1.00	
Gender (ref.=Male Female)	1.12		1.17		0.59		1.12		0.92		0.91		0.96	
Education (ref.=Higher Middle and Lower)	0.85		0.58		0.50	*	0.55	**	1.09		0.60		0.77	#
Employment (ref.=employed) Not employed	0.50		1.14		0.78		1.19		0.65		0.77		0.95	
Partner employ. (ref.=employed) Not employed	0.69		0.64		0.57		0.67		0.43		1.30		0.68	
Missing													0.97	
Relationship duration	0.95		1.08		1.08		0.99		1.07		1.26	*	1.12	*
T	0.98		0.98		1.04	**	1.01		0.99		1.02		0.99	*
Constant	0.02	***	0.05	#	0.02	**	0.01	***	0.02	***	0.00	***	0.01	***

	Austria		Bulgaria		France		Separation Hungary		Netherlands		Sweden		UK	
	RRR		RRR		RRR		RRR		RRR		RRR		RRR	
Relationship quality	0.61	***	0.26	#	0.49	**	0.77	#	0.66	*	0.72	**	0.93	
Age	0.94		1.36	*	0.86		0.96		1.04		0.95		0.97	**
Gender (ref.=Male Female)	0.55	#	0.08	#	1.23		0.74		0.78		0.99		0.82	#
Education (ref.=Higher Middle and Lower)	0.99		0.12	#	1.20		0.80		1.25		1.52		0.98	
Employment (ref.=employed) Not employed	0.83		0.86		0.60		1.42		0.73		0.81		1.07	
Partner employ. (ref.=employed) Not employed	2.06	#	121.45	*	0.93		0.59		1.60		0.90		1.20	
Missing													1.36	
Relationship duration	1.01		0.68		1.16		0.96		0.93		1.08		1.01	
T	1.00		1.01		0.97		1.01		1.03	#	0.95	***	1.00	
Constant	0.06	*	0.00	**	0.17		0.04	*	0.00	***	0.05	**	0.04	***

	Austria		Bulgaria		France		Childbearing Hungary		Netherlands		Sweden		UK	
	RRR		RRR		RRR		RRR		RRR		RRR		RRR	
Relationship quality	1.47		1.18		0.94		1.13		1.22		1.65	**	1.10	
Age	1.02		0.98		1.09	**	1.03		0.98		1.03		0.97	*
Gender (ref.=Male Female)	0.72		0.91		1.98		1.30		0.59		1.10		0.87	
Education (ref.=Higher Middle and Lower)	1.26		0.76		1.38		1.00		1.03		0.81		2.03	***
Employment (ref.=employed) Not employed	0.78		2.48	*	1.25		1.29		1.24		0.38	***	1.30	
Partner employ. (ref.=employed) Not employed	0.89		1.52		0.57		0.96		0.00		0.74		1.34	
Missing													1.15	
Relationship duration	0.95		0.90		0.86		1.18		0.96		1.11		0.99	
T	1.01		0.98		1.04	*	1.00		1.01		1.00		0.99	**
Constant	0.01	***	0.05	*	0.00	***	0.00	***	0.01	**	0.01	***	0.02	***

Source. Generations and Gender Study, UKHLS. # p<.1, * p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001