

Whose economic characteristics matter for the transition to cohabitation? Gender differences among German couples

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While moving in together remains a crucial step in the development of romantic relationships, partnering behaviours have significantly changed in Western countries, including a variety of arrangements outside of marriage (Sassler, 2010). One arrangement is becoming increasingly popular among romantic partners in Europe: living in separate households, nonetheless identifying as part of a couple; in the literature (Levin, 2004), these relationships are referred to as “Living Apart Together” (LAT). Nowadays, young adults spend more time in education (Van Bavel, 2013) and often face spells of economic insecurity before landing to a stable job. We argue that all of these factors may have altered the preconditions to start a residential cohabitation.

Previous studies on the economic factors associated with union formation are based on individuals whose initial partnership status is unknown (Bolano & Vignoli, 2021; Jalovaara, 2012; Palumbo et al., 2022), or concern the transition to marriage or separation (Ishizuka, 2018; Smock & Manning, 1997), while studies on couples’ transition to co-residence have not focused on the role of partners’ economic characteristics (Krapf, 2018; van der Wiel et al., 2020; Wagner et al., 2019). In this paper, we investigate the role played by economic factors – namely, employment status, length of employment contract and income – on the decision to transition from a LAT to a cohabiting relationship in Germany, and whether this varies between women and men. Germany constitutes an interesting case study: cohabitation has become, over time, the normative way of starting a co-residential union among young adults, and women’s labour market participation is high, but gender equality is lower compared to Northern Europe. We develop our theoretical framework and hypotheses adapting theories on economic uncertainty and marriage (e.g., Friedman et al., 1994; Oppenheimer, 1988) to cohabitation, placing particular attention on the combination of LAT partners’ economic attributes.

The German family panel pairfam enables us to consider the characteristics of both partners before they enter cohabitation and collects a wide range of information on partners and their relationships. We apply event-history models to a sample of 7,165 relationships reported by women and men from four birth cohorts (1971-73, 1981-83, 1991-93, and 2001-3) and model the probability to enter a cohabiting union, using as independent variable the combination of women’s and men’s employment status. To shed light on the role of detailed economic characteristics such as length of the employment contract and income, we also analyse the relationships reported by employed women and men separately. LAT couples start to be at risk of cohabiting when they are formed; time to the event of cohabitation is measured in months and each couple can start cohabiting only once. Independent and control variables vary at the wave level; some control variables are available for the main respondent only. Episodes are censored if the relationship continues as LAT in the last wave when it is observed, or if the couple separates. We use Kaplan-Meier survival estimates and Cox proportional hazards regression with standard errors clustered by individual.

Figure 1: Kaplan-Meier survival estimates, by couples’ economic characteristics

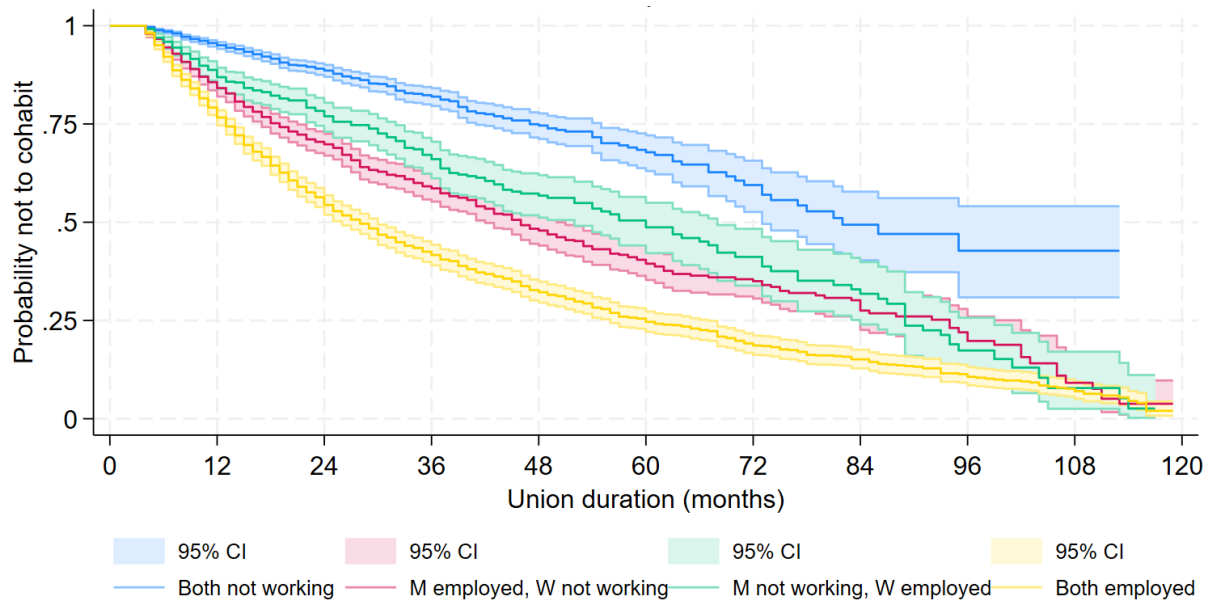


Figure 1 portraying Kaplan-Meier curves descriptively suggests that LAT couples where both partners are employed (“dual-earners”) show the highest hazards of entering cohabitation, whereas gender differences emerge when only one partner is employed: couples where only the man has a job (“male breadwinner”) have a higher hazard of cohabiting than those where only the woman has. These results are confirmed by Cox models (not shown for brevity reasons), showing that these differences are

statistically significant and, furthermore, that couples where both partners are tertiary educated are more likely to cohabit. In addition, models performed on employed women and men separately demonstrate that income is positively associated with cohabitation among working men and women alike, while temporary contracts compared to permanent ones slightly increase the probability to cohabit among women, but not men. Life-course circumstances matter as well: individuals who have previously cohabited are more likely to start cohabiting, and the presence of coresident children negatively affects the likelihood of employed women start cohabiting, but not of men.

These results have important implications: economic uncertainty affects men and women inside LAT couples in a different way. Regardless of the female partner's employment status, men's status as student, unemployed, or inactive is not perceived as compatible with the commitment of cohabitation within a LAT couple. On the contrary, women in an uncertain economic situation are more or less likely to cohabit depending on their partner's employment status; income matters for employed women and men. These findings extend previous research that has highlighted the relevance of men's economic attributes in contexts similar to Germany, but was less conclusive on women's, showing that the couple dimension is key to study the transition from LAT to cohabitation, and family formation processes more in general.

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