

**Reconsidering the Historical Roots of Cohabitation:
A Comparative Perspective on the Role of the Previously Married**

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October 2023

Extended Abstract

Few social transformations have captured the attention of contemporary family demographers more than the late 20th century rise of nonmarital cohabitation. Consistent with classic demographic notions of cohort replacement (e.g., Ryder 1965) and young adults as “the engines of social change” (Rindfuss 1991), existing studies of the historical rise of cohabitation have tended to focus on young and/or unmarried people (e.g., Lesthaeghe & Moors 1995). Yet the early rise of cohabitation among the previously married has received remarkably little rigorous attention to date, despite considerable interest in understanding both the historical roots of cohabitation and possible interrelationships between cohabitation and divorce (e.g., for some useful reviews, see Bumpass 1990; Cherlin 1992; Kiernan 2004; Perelli-Harris et al. 2017; Seltzer 2000; Smock 2000).

Our paper analyzes data from the Fertility and Family Surveys to directly investigate the historical rise in non-marital cohabitation among separated and divorced individuals in seven countries. We have two specific aims in this project. First, we rebalance the narrative on cohabitation’s early rise, rigorously documenting the nature and timing of growth in cohabitation among the separated and divorced in our study countries. We consider the experience of successive marital separation cohorts -- and do not limit samples to only those who eventually remarry or to those who were currently cohabiting at the time of interview, as was common in prior work -- to better understand the nature and timing of the early rise of cohabitation among the previously married. In the second stage of the analysis, we explore the characteristics of the previously-married pioneers of cohabitation. In particular, we investigate whether early cohabitation among the previously married was selective of the least-educated individuals, as was the case for early cohorts of never-married cohabitants (e.g., Bernhardt & Hoem 1985). Prior efforts to consider how the characteristics of early cohabitants differ for previously-married versus never-married populations have tended to focus on couples cohabiting at the time of interview (e.g., Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin 1991). Yet because cohabitation tends to be relatively short-lived, this will not aptly capture the characteristics of all early cohabitants.

Data and Method

Our study relies on data from the Fertility and Family Surveys (FFS), a nationally-representative survey program of member countries from the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe. Although data were also collected from men in some (but not all) of our study countries, we will only use the female data for the purpose of this comparative project. To maximize the potential lifespan considered for our analysis of relationship transitions among the previously married, we only retain those FFS countries with an upper age limit of at least age 49. For the purposes of this study, we also limit the analyses to countries with non-trivial levels of cohabitation at the time of survey, dropping those classified as having a “Marginal” cohabitation in Heuveline and Timberlake’s (2004) analysis of the FFS (i.e., Italy, Poland and Spain). Together, these restrictions leave us with the following seven countries in our analytic subsample: Austria, Canada, Finland, France, Latvia, New Zealand, and Switzerland. Age ranges and survey years for each of the individual study countries are shown in Table 1.

The FFS was the first large and population-representative survey program to collect complete cohabitation histories for a representative sample of women across the study countries, with data and measures harmonized in a common study framework. Complete marital histories were also collected, along with extensive data on background characteristics. Because of the lack of direct data on historical rates of cohabitation, and biases associated with various inferred measures, retrospective cohabitation histories are an important means of studying the emergence of cohabitation. Although retrospective reports tend to underestimate cohabitation rates, especially for periods in the distant past relative to date of survey (Hayford & Morgan 2008), this may arguably bias our results in the direction of *underestimating* how historically early cohabitation emerged among the previously married. Moreover, in the case of our comparisons between the cohabitation experience of never-married versus previously-married people, we cannot think of a reason why our estimates for the previously married should be *more* biased than those for the never married. We also construct measures of timing of transitions into and out of marriages and cohabitation, as well as information on background characteristics such as respondent’s education level.¹

Prior efforts to document the historical rise of cohabitation among the previously married investigated the cohabitation experience of successive remarriage cohorts (thus limited to those who do remarry), only considered the characteristics of those currently cohabiting at time of interview, or combined cohabitation with remarriage into a single measure of any co-residential union experience (e.g., Bumpass & Sweet, 1989; Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin 1991). We instead document the rise of cohabitation among the previously married by comparing the cohabitation experience of successive separation cohorts, for all individuals who experienced the end of their

¹This study complements a parallel analysis the authors are conducting of post-marital cohabitation in the United States, using data from the National Survey of Families and Households.

first marriage through separation or divorce.² Specifically, we consider the likelihood of entering a cohabiting union within five years of the date of separation from a first spouse, for those reaching the five-year duration point in various calendar years.

To better understand the relative timing of cohabitation's rise among the previously married versus never married, we also construct historically comparable cohorts for cohabitation experience before first marriage. For example, we compare cohabitation experience for those reaching 5-years duration post-separation around 1970 with the cohabitation experience observed among those marrying for the first time around 1970. Our approach complements the analysis of pioneering demographers in this area, who compared the likelihood of pre-(re)marriage cohabitation for first and second marriage cohorts (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989; Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin 1991), but without limiting the sample of previously married to only those who legally remarried.

Once documenting these basic historical trends, we next consider patterns of educational variability among early post-married cohabitators. Here, we first consider the timing of the rise of post-marital cohabitation for those with less education vs. relatively more education for cohorts separating from their first marriages in the 1960s through early 1980s. To compare the educational selectivity of pioneering never-married vs. previously-married cohabitators, we also compare these patterns to those observed for comparable cohorts of never-married individuals, as described above.

Anticipated Results

Taken together, we expect that our results will suggest that the dramatic late-twentieth century rise in cohabitation occurred earlier for the previously married than the never married in some or all of our study countries. We further expect that the well-documented educational selectivity of cohabitation among the never married, with pre-marital cohabitation being most common among the least-educated women, may not similarly characterize late-twentieth century cohorts of post-marital cohabitators. Our findings will offer an important extension to the narrative of the late twentieth century *cohabitation revolution* and may suggest that further attention should be paid to the potential role played by the previously married as pioneers of family change.

² Consistent with much prior work, we use the date a couple stopped living together to define our marital separation cohorts, regardless of whether a couple eventually legally divorced. Cohabitation among the widowed, which would represent a significantly older population, on average, is beyond the scope of the current analysis.

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Table 1. Family and Fertility Surveys (FFS), Selected Countries (Adapted from Heuveline and Timberlake, 2004)

Country	Contributing FFS Survey	Survey Dates	Survey Age Range	# Women
Austria	Austrian Family and Fertility Survey	12/95 - 4/96	20-55	4,535
Canada	Family History Survey	1/95 - 12/95	15-55	4,050
Finland	Population Survey	8/89 - 1/90	22-53	4,140
France	Annual Employment Survey	1/94 - 5/94	20-51	2,936
Latvia	Latvian Fertility and Family Survey	9/95 - 10/95	18-50	2,688
New Zealand	Women, Work, Family, and Education Survey	9/95 - 11/95	20-60	2,901
Switzerland	Swiss Family Microcensus	10/94 - 6/95	20-50	3,876