**Title:** The impact of parental socio-economic status on the timing of first marriage: Is there still an impact of parental status after unmarried cohabitation? Results from a cross-national and cohorts comparison.

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**Keywords:** *parental socio-economic status, first marriage, comparative perspective*

**Abstract**

Previous research has shown that parental socio-economic status (SES) plays an important role in the timing of marriage formation of young adults. Young adults from higher socio-economic backgrounds delay their first marriage compared to those growing up in lower status families, even after controlling for individuals own educational level. However, since the 1970s it has become increasingly common to first cohabit with a partner before one marries, and an increasing number of people do not even marry anymore with their partner (Kiernan, 2001). The meaning of marriage has changed and marriage has lost its popularity, especially as first union. Cohabitation is widely seen as an acceptable alternative to marriage in many Western societies (Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004). The main question of this study is *whether parental socio-economic status still affects the timing of first marriage after unmarried cohabitation?*

Using data from the third round of the European Social Survey (ESS 3, 2006), we first analyze whether there is, in general, an impact of parental SES on the timing of first marriage. Second, we examine whether the impact of parental SES on the timing of first marriage is weaker for young adults who first lived together with a partner. Within these discrete-time hazard models, we not only take into account if respondents cohabit before they entered their first marriage, but also how many years there are between their first co-residential union and their first marriage.

In this study we will also analyze whether the impact of parental status on the timing of first marriage differs across birth cohorts. According to the Second Demographic Transition theory, the rise in unmarried cohabitation as first union type is a result of value changes during the 20th century, with increasing ideological emphasis on individual freedom and autonomy (Lesthaeghe, 2010; South, 2001). Due to these ongoing processes of secularization and individualization started in the 1970s in Western societies, it can be expected that the impact of parental SES on the timing of first marriage decreased over time. Young adults, born in more recent birth cohorts, are becoming more individualized and less dependent on their parents, and at the same time scholars show that the meaning and importance of marriage has changed during the last few decades (Thornton et al., 2007).

Another important aspect of this study is the cross-national comparative perspective. Most existing studies on the link between parental SES and first marriage are conducted in a single country, while given the social, cultural and economic heterogeneity in Europe, it is unlikely that the impact of parental SES is consistent across Europe. For example, the rise in unmarried cohabitation has a different starting point and speed of diffusion across Europe, with Northern European countries as forerunners followed by Western, Eastern and Southern European countries (Sobotka, 2008). Due to this heterogeneity between countries, we also expect differences between countries in the link between parental SES and the timing of first marriage. A further step of this study is that we will examine potential country level indicators (e.g. level of secularization or meaning of marriage in a country) that might explain this cross-national variation. The third round of the ESS includes information on 25 European countries and in this study we will focus on young men and women between 15 and 40 years old.

First results from the discrete-time hazard models show that in the majority of the European countries higher parental SES (including both education and occupation of parents) is linked to a delayed entry into first marriage. Moreover, we found in almost all European countries, that the greater the difference between the year of unmarried cohabitation and the year of marriage, the weaker the effect of parental SES on the timing of first marriage. In addition, gender differences are found in the link between parental SES and marriage timing with a weaker impact of parental SES for men than for women. These first results also show that the impact of parental SES did not change over historical time. Even for the youngest birth cohorts, born after 1960, results still show, in general, a significant link between parental SES and first marriage. This means that even for these youngest birth cohorts, for whom unmarried cohabitation is more common, there is in most European countries still an impact of parental SES on the timing of first marriage. Another important finding is that although the direction of the effect of parental SES is the same in many European countries, namely a delaying effect, the strength of the link between parental SES and the timing of first marriage differs significantly across countries.

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