

**Title:** The impact of parental socio-economic status on the timing of first marriage: What is the role of unmarried cohabitation? Results from a cross-national comparison

*M.D. (Anne) Brons (corresponding author)<sup>1,3</sup>, A.C. (Aart) Liefbroer<sup>1,2,3</sup> & H.B.G. (Harry) Ganzeboom<sup>3</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute, The Hague (NIDI/KNAW), University of Groningen

<sup>2</sup> University Medical Centre Groningen

<sup>3</sup> VU University Amsterdam, The Netherlands

**Short abstract (max 250 words)**

Previous research has shown that parental socio-economic status (SES) is an important determinant of the timing of marriage; individuals from advantaged backgrounds delay their first marriage compared to those from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, since the 1970s, in many Western societies, it has become increasingly common to first cohabit before one marries. The main question of this study is whether parental SES still affects the timing of first marriage after young adults have started to cohabit? Furthermore, 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 this link is consistent across countries. We used 19 countries from wave 1 of the Generations and Gender Programme to analyse country differences in the link between parental SES and marriage timing of young adults (15-40 years old). First results of discrete-time logistic models show that in the majority of the countries higher parental SES (measured with parental education) results in a delayed entry into first marriage. Moreover, we found in general that the impact of parental SES on the timing of first marriage significantly reduces after young adults started to cohabit. However, there is also significant cross-national variation found in the strength of the link between parental SES and marriage timing after young adults started to cohabit. Thus, the effect of unmarried cohabitation on the link between parental education and first marriage timing differs significantly across countries.

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

## **Extended Abstract (2-4 pages)**

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 (e.g. Axinn & Thornton 1992; South 2001). However, since the 1970s, in many Western societies, 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 also more and more seen as an acceptable alternative to marriage (Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004). Although most existing studies on marriage timing did include respondent's cohabitation status as independent variable into their models, most studies did not analyze whether parental education still affects the timing of marriage after young adults have started to cohabit. Therefore, the main question of this study is *whether parental socio-economic status still affects the timing of first marriage after unmarried cohabitation?*

Since nowadays cohabitation often precedes marriage in many Western countries, we expect that the influence of parents on marriage timing becomes weaker once young adults decide to cohabit because by the time of first marriage, children will be less dependent on their parents and their status since they are older and already living together with their partner. However, given the high costs of marriage, parental financial support may still be important for the decision to marry, even if young adults first cohabit prior to their marriage. Moreover, since marriage is less easily reversible and more consequential than cohabitation, it could be that parents still want to be involved in their children's marriage timing (Wiik, 2009).

Before we test the role of unmarried cohabitation in the link between parental SES and marriage timing, we first analyze whether there is 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 becomes weaker once young adults started to cohabit by including an interaction between parental SES and cohabitation. Within these discrete-time logistic models, we not only take into account if respondents cohabited before they entered their first marriage, but also from which age respondents started to cohabit.

Another contribution of this study is that we analyze whether the impact of parental SES on the timing of first marriage differs across countries, using data from the first wave of the Generations and Gender Programme. Most existing studies on the link between parental SES and marriage has been conducted in single countries. There are, however, reasons to expect that there are country variations in (1) the degree to which parental education influences the timing of marriage and (2) the degree to

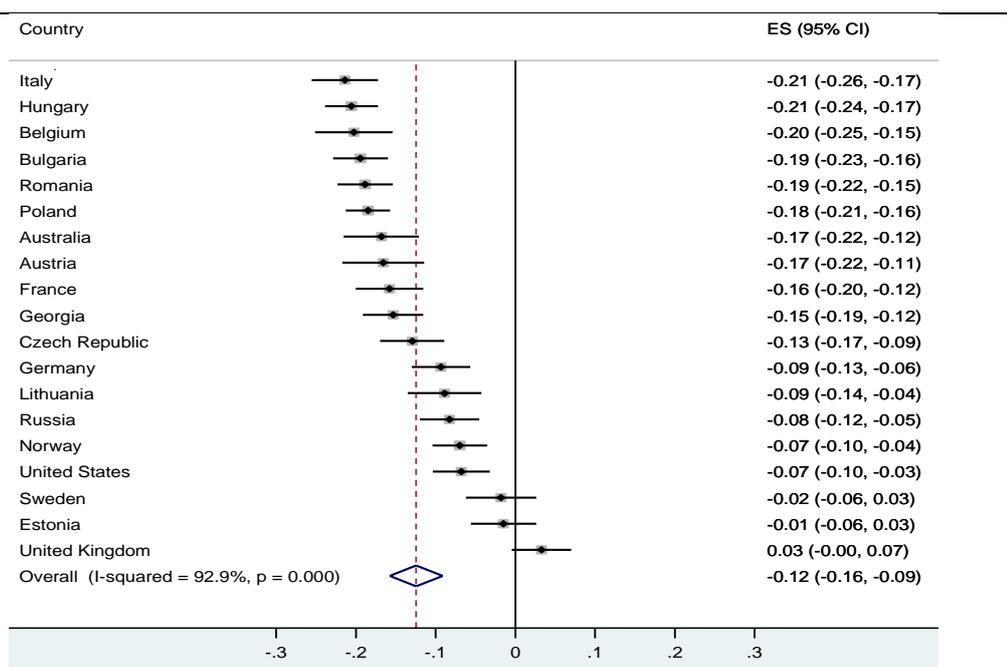
which this impact of parental education diminishes once young adults decided to cohabit, mainly because of country differences in the institutionalization and the prevalence of unmarried cohabitation. First of all, the rise in unmarried cohabitation has a different starting point and speed of diffusion across countries; Nordic countries are, for example, often cited as forerunners regarding unmarried cohabitation, while in Southern and Eastern European countries, this living arrangement is far less common (Kiernan, 2001). Second, the meaning of cohabitation differs across countries; in some countries cohabitation is largely identical to marriage and more often seen as an alternative, while in other countries cohabitation is a stage in the marriage process (Hiekel, Liefbroer & Poortman, 2014).

Thus, since the popularity and meaning of unmarried cohabitation as first union differs between countries, we expect cross-national variation in the impact of parental SES on marriage timing, also when we take into account whether young adults decided to cohabit. In this study, we analyze 19 countries and we will focus on young men and women between 15 and 40 years old.

### Preliminary results

First results from the discrete-time logistic models show that in the majority of the countries higher parental SES (measured by parental education) is linked to a delayed entry into first marriage for women (see Figure 1). The dotted line represents the overall effect of parental SES on first marriage timing for all countries and overall, the higher the education of parents, the later young women enter

*Figure 1. Total effect of parental education on the timing of first marriage for women in 19 countries. Meta-analysis of estimates from discrete-time hazard models.*



their first marriage ( $b = -.012, p < .01$ ). Another important finding from Figure 1 is that although the direction of the effect of parental SES is the same in almost all countries, namely a delaying effect, the strength of the link between parental SES and the timing of first marriage differs significantly across countries. The heterogeneity between countries is found to be substantial, with an I-square of 92.9%. In addition, we now show only the results for women but 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.

### *The role of cohabitation*

The overall delaying effect of parental education on the timing of first marriage, found in Figure 1, is in line with results from existing studies, but what happens with the effect of parental education once young adults decide to cohabit? Figure 2 shows the effect of parental education on marriage timing when young adults are not (yet) living with a partner and the effect once they started to cohabit. We control for a possible age effect, since it is possible that it is not the decision to cohabit, but just the fact that young adults marry at a later age once they first cohabit, which result in a weaker impact of parental education on marriage timing.

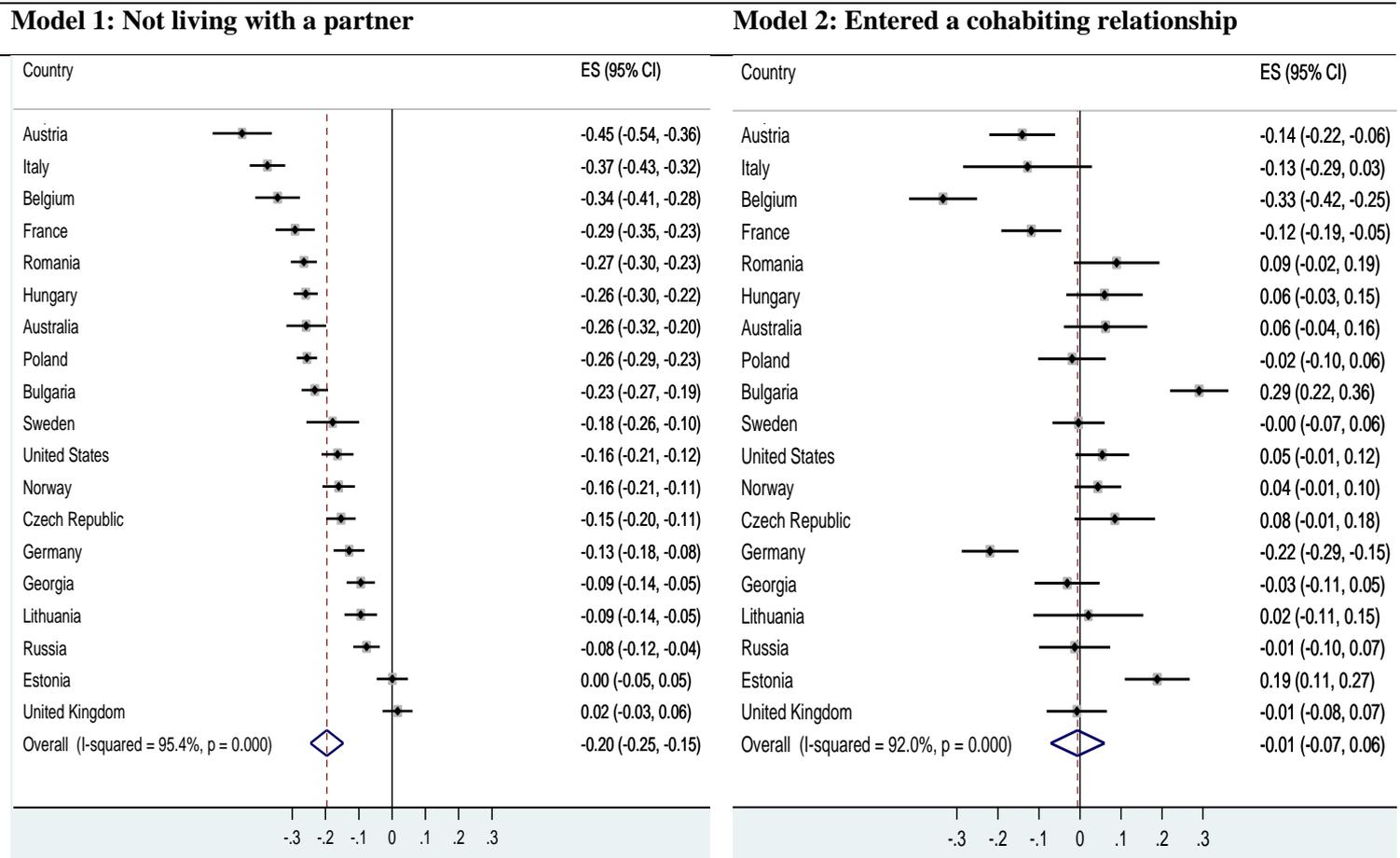
The first model of Figure 2 shows that in general, young adults from high status families delayed their first marriage when they were not living with their partner ( $b = -.20, p < .01$ ). However, once young adults have entered a cohabiting relationship (Model 2 of Figure 2), the overall effect of parental education on marriage timing becomes almost zero and insignificant ( $b = -.01, p = ns$ ). Thus, as expected, the delaying effect of parental education on the timing of first marriage becomes weaker after young adults decided to cohabit.

However, once we look at the country specific effects, we see much cross-national variation in the effect of parental education both when young adults were not (yet) living together (I-square = 95,4%) and once young adults started to cohabit (I-square = 92%). Although the effect of parental education is negative and significant in almost all countries when young adults were not living with a partner, the strength of the effect varies significantly across countries (see Model 1).

Model 2 of Figure 2 shows that in some countries (e.g. Belgium, Austria and France), there remains a significant delaying effect of parental education on marriage even if young adults started to cohabit, while in Bulgaria and United Kingdom, the effect of parental education becomes positive once young adults start to cohabit. Thus, in these countries this means that the higher the education of parents, the earlier young adults enter their marriage once they decided to live together with a partner. However, in more than half of the countries, the effect of parental education on marriage timing becomes insignificant once young women have entered a cohabiting relationship.

Moreover, results of Figure 2 shows that in most of these countries, the difference between not living with a partner and living with a partner in the effect of parental education on marriage timing is significant. Only in some countries (Belgium, Lithuania, Russia, United Kingdom & Georgia), the interaction between parental education and unmarried cohabitation is insignificant.

Figure 2. Total effect of parental education on the timing of first marriage for women when they are not living with a partner and the effect once they entered a cohabiting relationship in 19 countries (controlled for age). Meta-analysis of estimates from discrete-time hazard models.



### Next steps

A further step of this study is that we want to include two more countries to our dataset, namely the Netherlands (Onderzoek Gezinsvorming, 2008) and Canada (General Social Survey, 2006). Next to that, we also want to include individuals' own educational attainment into the model, to analyze whether an effect of parental education on marriage timing remains after controlling for individuals' own status. Moreover, we will examine potential country level indicators (e.g. level of secularization or meaning of marriage and/or cohabitation in a country) that might explain this cross-national variation.

## References

- Axinn, W. G. and Thornton, A. (1992). The influence of parental resources on the timing of the transition to marriage, *Social Science Research*, 21, 261-285.
- Heuveline, P. & Timberlake, J.M. (2004). The Role of Cohabitation in Family Formation: The United States in Comparative Perspective. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 66(5), 1214-1230.
- Hiekel, N., Liefbroer, A. C. and Poortman, A. (2014). Understanding diversity in the meaning of cohabitation across Europe, *European Journal of Population*, 30, 391-410.
- Kiernan, K. (2001). The rise of cohabitation and childbearing outside marriage in Western Europe. *International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family*, 15, 1-21.
- South, S. J. (2001). The variable effects of family background on the timing of first marriage: United States, 1969–1993. *Social Science Research*, 30, 606–626.
- Wiik, K. A. (2009). You'd better wait. Socio-economic background and timing of first marriage versus first cohabitation, *European Sociological Review*, 25, 139-153.