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Change and Continuity in Family Formation among Young Adults in Britain

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Abstract

Data from the 1958 and 1970 British birth cohorts permit comparison of family formation patterns among young adults. We present evidence of changes in the speed and extent to which young adults enter first partnership, marry and become parents, and the relationships between these events. There remain remarkable continuities in social class differences. The intergenerational perspective demonstrates how persistent class differences in the family formation trajectories of young adults are in part a reflection of social inequalities in access to further and higher education.

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Outline

New data from the 1970 British birth cohort allow inter-cohort comparisons of both the patterns of family formation among young adults and their underlying determinants. Comparison of their experiences with the 1958 cohort provides the first opportunity in Britain to investigate changes over time in the influence of parental background and childhood factors on the choice between marriage and cohabitation and the outcome of cohabiting unions. By comparing the experience of two cohorts born 12 years apart we demonstrate both divergences and consistencies in their demographic experiences up to age 29. We begin by reviewing the literature relating social changes, particularly the process of individualisation, to increasing diversification in family life. We then present empirical evidence of cohort changes in the speed and extent to which men and women born in 1958 and 1970 enter into their first partnership, marry and become parents. We examine the (dis)connection between establishing co-residential partnerships and entry into parenthood, and highlight social class differences in the extra-marital childbearing. The final section considers cohort changes in the duration and outcome of cohabiting first partnerships and socio-demographic differences in the propensity to begin childbearing whilst cohabiting.

Theoretical perspectives regarding individualisation and family formation

The role of individualisation as a key factor promoting delayed home leaving, delayed marriage, increased cohabitation, and extra-marital fertility has received increased attention within both the sociological and demographic literature. Common themes in the theses of Van de Kaa (1987) and Lesthaeghe (1995), and those of Giddens (1991) and Beck (1992) have not gone unnoticed. (See for

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example the work of Mills 2000 and Irwin 2000.) Both Giddens (1991) and Beck (1992) argue that a key facet of 'modernity' is that individuals face greater uncertainty and risk in their lives. For young adults, these risks have become more individualized as skills and educational qualifications become increasingly important in gaining access to the labour market. Thus, according to Beck, individuals are forced to 'make themselves the centre of their planning and conduct in life' (Beck 1992, p. 88). Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995, p. 5) argue that 'Biographies are removed from the traditional precepts and certainties, from external control and general moral issues, becoming open and dependent upon decision-making, and are assigned as a task for each individual'. Seen from this perspective, the destandardization and reversibility of family and household transitions become expressions of individualisation. Giddens (1991, p. 219) goes so far as to argue that reproduction is now an area where 'plurality of choice prevails'.

For Van de Kaa (1987) and Lesthaeghe (1995) the process of individualisation - expressed as the rejection by individuals of religious institutions, increased individual autonomy and emphasis on self-fulfilment - is also a key factor promoting family change, particularly the separation of sexual behaviour from marriage, and then childbearing from marriage. However, the demographic literature, exemplified by Van de Kaa and Lesthaeghe, tends also to highlight the key roles played by the growing economic independence of women and of technological advances in contraception in producing family change.

Some of the sociological literature has interpreted the increased diversity in the life course to mean that patterns of behaviour have lost their predictability and that correspondingly there has been a decline in the usefulness of class and gender as explanatory variables (Furlong and Cartmel 1997). Beck, whilst acknowledging that risks tend to accumulate at the bottom of the class structure, argues that class ties have weakened and that in the late modernity '[…] people within the same income level, or to put it in the old fashioned way, within the same 'class', can or even must choose between different lifestyles, subcultures, social ties and identities' (Beck 1992, p. 131). Others have questioned this notion of individualised choice. According to Irwin the sociological and demographic literature relating to the

process of individualisation 'over-privilege choice and individual autonomy within explanation, and risk emptying human conduct of its social content' (Irwin 2000, para 1.3).

The youth literature in the UK has emphasised the constraints facing young adults. Unequal access to educational and employment careers has resulted in the 'maintenance of stable, predictable transitions which help ensure that those occupying advantaged social positions retain the ability to transmit privileges to their offspring' (Furlong and Cartmel 1997, p. 28). Furlong and Cartmel (1997, p. 10) argue that 'social class and gender remain central to an understanding of the lives of young people in the age of high modernity'. These class differences result in part from the different educational careers taken by those from more and less privileged groups. Education can affect the timing of family formation via an 'enrolment effect' and a 'human capital effect' (Blossfeld and Huinink 1991). Previous work has emphasised the non-compatibility of marriage with the student role, and the importance of obtaining financial independence for marriage. (For a review see Thornton, Axinn and Teachman 1995). According to Oppenheimer (1988), educational enrolment acts to delay the age at marriage because it delays the transition to a stable work role and hence the time when individuals enter the marriage market. Cohabitation is more compatible with full-time education (Berrington and Diamond 2000) reflecting the lower financial costs of entering cohabitation and the lower levels of commitment demanded compared to marriage. Once individuals have left full-time education the relationship between attainment and entry into marriage is likely to depend on the relative strength of two opposing forces: the increased ability of those in secure and better paid jobs to marry (Oppenheimer et al. 1997; Smock and Manning 1997), and the decreased economic gains to marriage for women (Becker 1981). In the following analyses we use time varying variables of educational enrolment and attainment as measures of both current and long-run labour market position. Parental socio-economic characteristics will act through the respondents experience of education to impact on both the timing and sequencing of family events. In a further pooled analysis we include interactions between birth cohort and all of the independent variables and test whether the relationship between education and partnership formation has changed during a period in which relative incomes for young men with low educational qualifications have declined.

Data

The data come from two national birth cohort studies, which have followed up those born between March 3-9, 1958, and those born between 5-11 April, 1970. Data on the first cohort were collected within the National Child Development Study (NCDS) at birth, 7, 11, 16, 23, 33 and 42 years of age (Ferri 1993), whilst data on the younger cohort have been collected within the 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS70) at birth, 5, 10, 16, 26 and 30 (Bynner et al. 1997). Whilst earlier stages of the two studies were conducted by a variety of organisations, data collection for the two birth cohort studies is now the responsibility of the Centre for Longitudinal Studies, Institute of Education, University of London. The most recent waves of data collection, at the end of 1999/start of 2000, were co-ordinated so that the same questionnaires were given to both cohorts. A wide range of socio-economic, demographic, health and attitudinal data were collected in this last round. To reconstruct the family formation trajectories taken by cohort members, this paper utilises the full partnership and fertility histories collected from the NCDS cohort when they were age 33, and comparable partnership and fertility histories collected from BCS70 respondents at age 30 (respondents interviewed prior to April 2000 were aged 29).

The prospective nature, and broad focus of these birth cohort studies provides a unique opportunity for analysing demographic events within a life course perspective. In particular detailed knowledge of the respondents' parental background and early life experiences have been shown to be important predictors of later life chances (see for example Kiernan and Cherlin 1999; Berrington and Diamond 2000; Cheesbrough 2000; Hobcraft and Kiernan 2001). There are, however, some limitations with these data. Although large amounts of attitudinal and intentions data were collected in recent rounds, notably at ages 33 and 42 for the NCDS cohort, and age 30 for the 1970 cohort, little attitudinal data were collected from cohort members during their teens or early twenties. We cannot, therefore, explore the extent to which attitudes and intentions in relation to family formation are shaped by, and shape,

demographic and other life course experiences. Both surveys have suffered the inevitable loss to follow-up that occurs over the 30-40 years of such studies. In fact a rather complex pattern of wave non-response is seen within both cohorts. Immigrants to Britain and individuals born in the target week who were missed in the original birth survey were added to the sample at later childhood waves, and so, particularly for the 1970 cohort, a significant minority interviewed at age 30 are missing information about their birth circumstances Of those who took part in the birth survey, around 70% of both cohorts were interviewed at age 33 (NCDS)/30(BCS70). Comparison of the characteristics of those who remained in the sample with those lost to follow-up suggests that in both cohorts it is the most socio-economically disadvantaged and those from non-white backgrounds who tended to be lost. Comparison of reported fertility among female cohort members and their equivalent national birth cohort (available from vital registration statistics) suggests that both samples under-represent those who began childbearing in their teens. In this paper we make the assumption that any attrition biases will be similar in both surveys. Since parental social class, parental education and educational attainment are key predictors of loss-to follow up in both cohorts (Berrington and Diamond 2000; Cheesbrough 2000) our analyses - which control for these factors - should be comparable.

Methods

Analytical strategy

Cleaned data from the partnership and fertility histories of the two cohorts are used to calculate probabilities of entry into first co-residential partnership, marriage, and parenthood by exact age. In all analyses the experience of the 1958 cohort has been censored at age 29. Multiple decrement life tables are used to calculate the outcome of cohabiting first partnerships where marriage, separation and censoring by the survey are competing risks. For the multivariate analyses, discrete time logistic hazard models are used to estimate the annual probability of marriage and cohabitation, conditional on it not having occurred up to that point in time. Multinomial discrete time hazards models are used to examine

the probability of exiting cohabiting first partnerships through marriage or separation, taking account of any censoring by the survey. In order to reduce the number of cohabitations which are censored we focus on the first four years of cohabitation. By including a set of dummy variables for each of the time intervals (we group the months into years) we estimate a non-parametric hazard rate which can change with duration (Allison 1982). The competing risks model assumes that the processes underlying marriage, separation, marriage following a conception, and having a baby whilst cohabiting are independent. This assumption is made in much previous research (Manning and Landale 1996; Ermisch and Francesconi 2000). The same background variables were tested in each model and included in the final model if they were found to be significant at the five per cent level for either the 1958 cohort, or the 1970 cohort. All two-way interactions have been tested for and are included in the results for both cohorts if they are found to be significant in either cohort. For the ease of interpretation the models were run separately for the two birth cohorts. In further analyses (not shown) we pooled the data from the two cohorts and tested, using interactions, whether the effects of covariates differed according to cohort. Effects which are found to be significantly different (at the five per cent leve) in the two birth cohorts are highlighted as bold.

Independent variables

In order to make comparisons between the two cohorts, we focus on parental background, childhood, and early life course measures that were collected using the same question, at a similar time point, in both surveys. Maternal education and the occupational social class (Registrar General's definition) of the cohort member's father (or father figure) at the time of birth are used to identify the social background of respondents. Parental characteristics for BCS70 cohort members who joined after the birth sweep are obtained from the first sweep in which they participated, either at age five, or age ten. As would be expected given changes in the occupational class distribution, a slightly higher proportion of the 1970 cohort come from non-manual backgrounds. We minimize any selection effect by grouping respondents in the top two and bottom two social classes. In both cohorts individuals' reported age at leaving full-time education is used to identify whether, in the previous year, a person was currently enrolled in, or had left full-time education. We also quantify, using a time varying covariate, the

cumulative years of education experienced by an individual up until that point. This measure should be more comparable over time than 'highest educational qualification' which is prone to grade inflation and an expansion in the number of qualifications, both academic and vocational, on offer.

Other background variables included in the multivariate analysis are chosen on the basis of previous findings from the 1958 cohort (Kiernan and Cherlin 1999; Berrington and Diamond 2000; Berrington 2001; Hobcraft and Kiernan, 2001), and the availability of comparative measures in the two surveys. These include; the respondent's mother's age at first birth, and an indicator as to whether the respondents parents ever separated (reported at age 30 (BCS70)/33 (NCDS)). Cohort members who were born to lone mothers are identified by the 'no father figure' category of the father's social class covariate. We include maternal reports of the respondent's behaviour in childhood. At age 11 in the NCDS, and at age 10 in BCS70, the mother (or mother figure) was asked to report the extent to which their child displayed behaviours described in a series of statements derived from the Rutter Parent's Scale (see Elander and Rutter 1996 for a review of this measure). The statements used to identify antisocial behaviour are: 'Destroys own or other's belongings'; 'Is irritable, quick to fly off the handle'; 'Fights with other children'; 'Is disobedient'. The statements used to identify neurotic behaviour are: 'Is miserable or tearful'; 'Worries about many things'; 'Is upset by new situation, by things happening for first time'; 'Bites nails'. Total scores for antisocial behaviour and neurotic behaviour are calculated by adding up the separate score for the two types of behaviour. Those in the top decile are categorized as displaying anti-social behaviour or neurotic behaviour accordingly.

Results

Cohort changes in the timing of entry into first co-residential partnership, marriage and biological parenthood

As can clearly be seen in Figures 1a and 2a the percentages married by each age fell dramatically between the two cohorts. Whilst three quarters of women and two thirds of men born in 1958 had married by age 29, only just over one half of women and a little over a third of men had done so in the younger cohort. Of course, young adults continue to form co-residential partnerships outside of

marriage, as Figures 1b and 2b show. In comparison with the earlier birth cohort men and women are delaying entry into first partnership, but the majority - over three quarters - have lived with at least one partner by the end of their twenties. Examination of the two cohorts suggests that the overall percentage who have ever experienced a co-residential partnership by age 29 is similar. What is also clear, however, is that there has been an increase in the variability in the timing of entry, with the inter-quartile range increasing, especially among women (from 4.9 to 5.9 years).

The postponement of parenthood, depicted in Figures 1c and 2c, has not been as dramatic as one might have expected given the delay in entry into first partnership and more particularly into marriage. Whilst the median age at first birth for women did increase from 26.6 to 29.0, around one in ten of the women had become a teenage parent in both cohorts. Two thirds of men and one half of the women have not had a live birth by age 29. In order to make some judgement as to whether it is likely that those born in 1970 will begin to have children in their thirties and forties we can examine their intentions. At age 30 cohort members were asked first if they were able to have (further) children, and those that said yes were asked if they intended to have any or further children. Two-thirds of all childless women intend to have a child. If they actually go on to do so (an arguably rather optimistic prediction) then the percentage of this cohort of women who become mothers (84%) would be very similar to those born in the early 1950s who have now reached the end of their reproductive ages (ONS 2000).

Socio-economic differentials in the timing of family formation

Table 1 shows the percentage who have entered into first marriage, first partnership and parenthood by age 29 for the two cohorts according to social class background. Some postponement of entry into first co-residential partnership, marriage and parenthood is observed for all classes. Social class differentials in the likelihood of forming a co-residential union are small, whereas differences in the propensity to have a child by age 29 are substantial. Comparison of the social class differentials among those born in 1970 with those born 12 years earlier suggests two important trends. First, differentials in the propensity to be married by age 29 have remained similar for men and have diminished for women, largely as a result of a steep decline in marriage rates among women from more disadvantaged

backgrounds. (Whilst 8 out of 10 women born in 1958 to fathers with manual occupations had married by age 29, this had declined to one half among similar women born 12 years later.) Secondly, social class differentials in the likelihood of becoming a parent by age 29 have increased for men and remained large for women. Among men, 44% of those born in 1970 to fathers in semi-skilled and unskilled occupations had become a parent by age 29 as compared to just 22% of those born into professional and intermediate families. Consequently among men and women from semi- and unskilled class backgrounds there is a higher percentage who have become a parent than have been married, whilst among those from professional and intermediate backgrounds there is a higher percentage who are ever married than have become a parent at age 29. These aggregate patterns suggest important socio-economic differences in the inter-relationships between partnership formation, marriage and parenthood in early adulthood, which will be explored in more detail below.

Multivariate analyses of entry into first partnership and first marriage

Tables 2 and 3 contain, for men and women respectively, coefficients from a series of discrete-time logistic regression hazards models of entry into first partnership and first marriage. As anticipated, we find the effect of educational enrolment to be larger for entry into marriage than for entry into any partnership suggesting that cohabitation is more compatible with being a student. Among men, the effect of educational enrolment is similar for the two cohorts, whereas for women, the effect of current enrolment appears to have diminished for the younger cohort. This may reflect the increased opportunities for women in higher education and hence the attenuation of the selection of the most career orientated women into education as was the case in the 1958 cohort. Once educational enrolment is controlled, completed years of education have a significant but relatively small impact on the chance of entering a partnership or marriage. For men and women in both cohorts, those who left school at 16 are the most likely to form a partnership. There is some evidence that men and women with intermediate levels of education are the least likely to enter a co-residential partnership of either type.

Other background controls have expected effect. The interactions at the bottom of Tables 2 and 3 suggest that for teenagers, paternal social class exerts a large independent effect, delaying entry into

marriage or cohabitation among those from professional and other non-manual backgrounds. Once individuals reach age 22, however, father's social class is no longer associated with the speed of partnership formation. These patterns are similar for both cohorts. Experience of parental separation was also found to be positively associated with marriage and cohabitation among teenagers, but negatively associated with partnership formation amongst those who remained single in their twenties. In comparison with the findings for the 1958 cohort, parental separation seems to be associated with a stronger delay or rejection of marriage among the 1970 cohort. Similarly, being born to a lone mother is strongly associated with a preference to cohabit, especially in the 1970 cohort.

Once other factors are controlled, increased maternal education has only a weak effect delaying partnership formation among men, but has a significant effect in delaying entry into marriage for both men and women. Even when parental socio-economic status is controlled there remain inter-generational associations in the timing of family formation, with lower rates of partnership formation (via both cohabitation and marriage) among respondents whose mothers had their first birth in their late twenties and thirties.

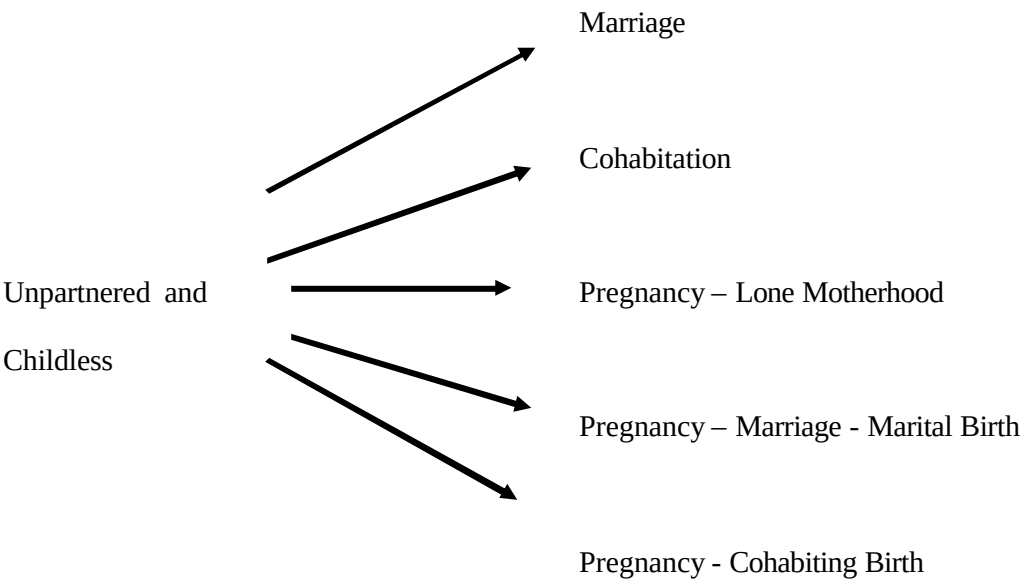
Individual behavioural characteristics measured in childhood have only a small predictive effect. Among men in both cohorts, and women in the earlier birth cohort, those identified as being nervous, afraid or worried in childhood are less likely to form a partnership. For men and women there is some evidence that anti-social behaviour in childhood is associated with higher propensities to form partnerships and marry as teenagers.

Cohort changes in the sequencing of family events

In Table 4, we examine for the two cohorts, the **first** family event that women experienced prior to age 29 (Diagram 1). Women either marry or cohabit directly (without experiencing any pre-partnership conception), become a lone parent, become pregnant and legitimate the birth through marriage, or become pregnant, start cohabiting and have a cohabiting birth. For comparability we censor the experience of the 1958 cohort at age 29. Only pregnancies that result in a live birth are included. We do

not present analyses for men since it is likely that their reporting of offspring with whom they are not co-resident will be incomplete (Rendall et al. 1999). Our analyses do not identify terminated pregnancies. Rates of termination have been consistently found to be highest among more socio-economically advantaged women in Britain (see for example Wilson et al., 1992). Ideally we would wish to be able to model termination as an alternative outcome of experiencing a conception. It would also be useful to be to identify how many premarital pregnancies which result in lone parenthood, shot-gun cohabitation, or shot-gun marriage are mistimed or unwanted; clearly, the relationship between experiencing a pre-partnership conception and partnership formation will differ according to whether the birth was planned or not (Musick, 2002).

Diagram 1. Alternative Family Formation Trajectories: First family event.



Looking first at women from all social class backgrounds (the bottom row of Table 4), we see that the percentage who had not experienced a family transition was roughly the same, at around one in ten. A similar proportion of both cohorts experienced pregnancy as their first event. However, the chances of becoming a lone mother, with a birth prior to any co-residential partnership, increased between the two cohorts (from 5% to 9%), whilst the likelihood of marriage following a pre-partnership pregnancy declined sharply (from 7% to 1%). The percentage that began cohabiting following a pre-partnership pregnancy increased from 1% to 4%. The majority practice of both cohorts was to form a co-residential partnership prior to childbearing. We can immediately see, however, that cohabitation has replaced marriage as the preferred form of union, initially at least. Although marriage was the first family event for almost one half of females born in 1958, this was the case for only one in seven women born 12 years later.

Despite significant inter-cohort change in the family formation trajectories taken by women, we see larger differences in the patterns according to social class background. In both cohorts, three times as many women whose fathers were employed in semi-skilled or unskilled occupations (social classes IV&V) had a child prior to living with a partner as those whose fathers were in social classes I and II (professional, managerial, and intermediate non-manual occupations). Among both cohorts, women from social class IV&V backgrounds were also over three times more likely to cohabit or marry following a pre-partnership pregnancy. There is a clear inter-generational transmission in lone motherhood. Among women born in 1970 to a lone mother, 14% experienced lone motherhood as their first family event, and only nine percent married as their first event.

In the earlier cohort, entry into cohabitation was more common for women from more privileged social class backgrounds. As discussed by Berrington and Diamond (2000) the greater prevalence of premarital cohabitation among more advantaged results in part from period increases in the acceptability of cohabitation between the mid 1970s and mid 1980s. Women from wealthier class backgrounds were more likely to have delayed entry into first partnership into their later twenties and in the 1980s were facing the decision of whether to marry or cohabit at a time when cohabitation was

more common. By the time the 1970 birth cohort began forming partnerships, cohabitation had become firmly established as a majority practice, and the proportion of who chose to cohabit rather than marry as their first event is more similar across social class backgrounds.

We conclude that lone parenthood and entry into cohabitation have increasingly replaced shot-gun marriages as the result of pre-partnership pregnancy. Within-cohort differences in the sequencing of family events in young adulthood according to social class background can be just as large, if not larger, than inter-cohort differences.

Cohort changes in the outcome of cohabiting first partnerships

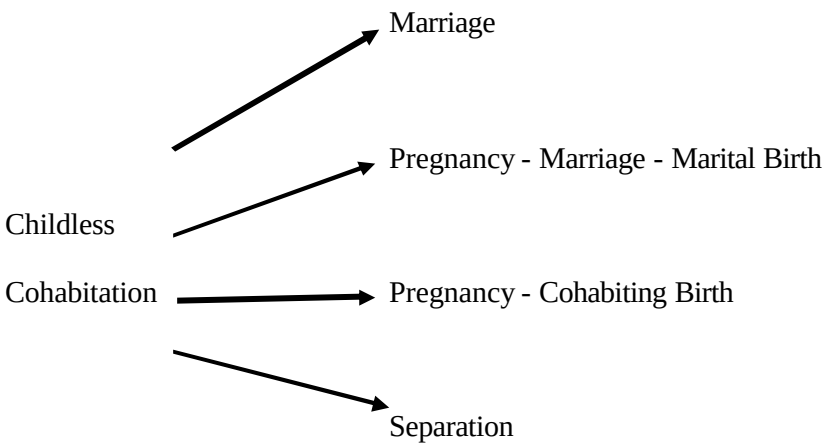
The final sections of the paper consider the outcome of cohabiting first partnerships. First we identify cohort changes in the duration of cohabitation and in the percentage who marry their partner. We then use a multinomial logistic discrete-time hazards model to measure socio-economic differences in the propensity to begin childbearing within cohabitation and to assess whether these socio-economic differences have changed over time.

Table 5 shows life table estimates of the outcome of cohabiting first partnerships for the first five years. Among the 1958 birth cohort, the majority of couples were no longer cohabiting after five years – over one half had married, whilst a further quarter had split up. Most of those who married within five years had done so within the first couple of years of cohabitation. Whilst marriage continued to be the most likely outcome of cohabitation for the 1970 cohort, the speed of entry into marriage was slower. After five years, 35% of male cohabitors and 40% of female cohabitors had married their partner. The likelihood of separation among cohabitors was roughly similar in the two cohorts. Between one quarter and a third of cohabiting first partnerships broke down within five years among the 1970 group. Around a quarter of the couples remained cohabiting.

In Table 6, we compare the first family event experienced by cohabitors who were childless at the start of the cohabitation. We calculate a multiple decrement life table of exiting the state of childless

cohabitation. In accordance with Diagram 2 below, cohabitors may first experience marriage, a pregnancy legitimated by marriage prior to birth, a pregnancy resulting in a cohabiting birth, or they may separate. Some cohabitors will not experience any of the above events and will remain childless cohabitors. In order to facilitate social class comparisons we examine the first four years of cohabitation, and restrict our attention to those cohabiting first partnerships that began prior to age 27. Once again we focus on female sample members.

Diagram 2: Family Formation Trajectories: First event following entry into cohabitation



As seen in the bottom row of Table 6, the likelihood of having a birth during the first four years of cohabitation doubled, from 6% to 13%. At the same time the likelihood of marrying following a cohabiting conception halved (from 8% from 3%). Whilst the propensity to separate from their cohabiting partner remained fairly constant, the percentage that married their partner decreased, thus resulting in more cohabitors remaining childless after five years. What is also clear, however, is that social class differences in the outcome of cohabiting first partnerships are as large as these inter-cohort changes – for example, 17% of women whose fathers were in semi-skilled or unskilled occupations had a birth as the first event following entry into cohabitation, compared to just 7% of women whose fathers were in professional, managerial or intermediate occupations. Young cohabitors from more advantaged

social class backgrounds are more likely to marry their partner (either directly or following a pregnancy whilst cohabiting), or to separate. Respondents who were themselves born to a lone mother are particularly likely to have a cohabiting birth (almost one in four of the 1970 cohort).

Multivariate analyses of outcome of cohabiting first partnerships

A multinomial logistic discrete-time hazards model was used to estimate the probability of being in each of the states shown in Diagram 2 in each month during the first four years of cohabitation. Table 7 presents the parameter estimates associated with making each of the transitions, relative to the reference category of remaining as a childless cohabitor. Once again effects which are found (in a pooled analysis not shown) to be significantly different for the 1958 and 1970 cohorts are in bold. Maternal education and reported behavioural characteristics in childhood were not found to be significant at the five per cent level in either cohort, and hence are not presented.

In contrast to the earlier models of entry into first partnership and marriage, here we find educational attainment to be the single most important factor affecting the outcome of cohabitation. In other words, having left full-time education all educational groups are likely to start cohabiting, but the outcome of this first cohabitation depends very much on educational attainment. When educational attainment is included in the analysis the large differences according to father's social class seen in Table 6 are attenuated (but in some cases remain significant). Women with fewer years of completed education are more likely to have a child whilst cohabiting, or to marry their partner following a premarital conception, than those with higher levels of education. The clear linear relationship between completed years of education and experiencing a cohabiting birth among the 1970 cohort suggests that this effect is not simply the increasing selection of those most disadvantaged into the lowest educational groups. However, it must be noted that our analyses have focused on cohabiting first partnerships begun before age 27. Some individuals, especially those with higher levels of education, will not yet have formed a co-residential union. It is possible that those with higher levels of education who form a union in their

mid twenties are more traditional in their family behaviour than those who postpone family formation. Previous research on the 1958 birth cohort (Berrington and Diamond 2000) suggested that experience of independent living prior to partnership formation is associated with a preference for cohabitation rather than direct marriage, and higher separation rates among cohabitors. If it were the case that the experience of non-family living encourages more liberal family attitudes, as found in the US by Axinn and Barber (1997), we could see higher rates of extra-marital fertility among more educated cohabiting couples in their thirties.

In both cohorts, cohabitors currently enrolled in education are significantly less likely to marry directly. Teenage cohabitation more often results in an extra-marital conception, leading either to legitimation through marriage or a cohabiting birth. Older cohabitors are more likely to marry without having experienced an extra-marital conception and are less likely to split up. The effect of other factors appears to change between the two cohorts. Among the 1958 cohort, the odds of marrying, either directly, or after experiencing a premarital conception, were highest in the first year of cohabitation, whilst for those born 12 years later, the likelihood of marriage is greater in the second, third and fourth years of cohabitation. Parental separation also appears to differ in its effect between the two cohorts. Among women born in 1958 parental separation was positively associated with the experience of a cohabiting birth. In the 1970 cohort those who had experienced parental separation were no more likely to have a cohabiting birth but were significantly less likely to marry and more likely to remain cohabiting, or to split up.

Discussion

Comparisons of the timing, frequency and sequencing of family transitions between the 1958 and 1970 birth cohorts have supported the notion that family formation is being delayed and that family trajectories made by young men and women are becoming more complex and diverse. However, young adults in Britain are not rejecting co-residential partnerships – by age 29 similar proportions of those born in 1970 had lived in a couple, compared to the earlier cohort. These findings support the view of authors such as Beck and Beck-Gernsheim who argue that young adults continue to seek emotional

commitment. 'Individualisation may drive men and women apart, but paradoxically it also pushes them back into one another's arms. *As traditions become diluted, the attractions of a close relationship grow*' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995, p. 32, emphasis as in the original).

At the aggregate level, entry into marriage is being delayed or foregone to a much larger extent than entry into parenthood, resulting in a significant number of children born outside of marriage. Whilst this trend has been seen in many other European countries, it seems that Britain stands out in the extent of childbearing outside of **any** co-residential partnership. Debate on the role played by Government housing and social security policies in encouraging this trend continues (Coleman 1999). The increase in extra-marital fertility in Britain is consistent with the notion that there has been a decline in traditional family values, and increased emphasis on individual autonomy (that is to say 'individual freedom of choice and the non-acceptance of external authority or morality', (Lesthaeghe 1995)). However, our analyses have also highlighted persistent structural factors influencing the timing and sequencing of family formation trajectories. Social class differentials in the timing of entry into partnerships, marriage and parenthood within each cohort can be just as large as the timing differences between the two cohorts.

In Britain the strong relationship between parental social class and prospects of continuing in further and higher education (Bynner and Parsons 1997) is a key factor maintaining large socio-economic differentials in the timing of forming a co-residential union. The expansion of further and higher education in Britain between the 1970s and 1990s led not only to an increase in the average age of entry into first partnership, but also in the variability in the timing of this transition. Our inter-cohort comparisons suggest that more educated men and women are moving further away from their less educated contemporaries in postponing parenthood. Simultaneously, levels of teenage motherhood have remained fairly constant. This increasing polarisation according to social class background in the timing of entry into parenthood is generally not discussed in the sociological literature which emphasises ideational change, but it has important implications, for example the social exclusion of young parents (Hobcraft and Kiernan, 2001).

As noted by Irwin (1995 p.118), a 'positive feature' of demographic life course research is the emphasis placed on increased female education and attachment to the labour market as explanations for the delay in childbearing. 'Rising earnings over (male) middle-class careers suggest that later ages at parenthood can better accommodate the probable, if temporary, loss of mother's earnings and the costs of children, relative to lifestyle aspirations. Job insecurity and a shallow earnings gradient over working-class employment trajectories […] are seen to encourage younger ages at family formation since there is little to be gained by delay' (Irwin 1995, p. 118). Yet there remains the question of how people become orientated towards their future earnings profile. A number of authors including Kiernan and Diamond (1983) and more recently Irwin (1995) suggest that cultural variables and class orientations are of importance here. This type of attitudinal data is seldom available from the quantitative surveys that demographers routinely analyse. Evidence from face to face interviews undertaken by Irwin with young adults in Scotland reveal strong social differences in young people's views of the 'normal circumstances, under which to be married'. The timing of life course transitions made by the respondents was associated with their perceptions of their future career prospects in relation to these views. Those whose current wages fell short of the acceptable standard of living required for marriage were often those most likely to defer marriage.

Cohabitation has now become the preferred type of first partnership. We have shown that the duration of cohabiting first partnerships has increased and that the percentage who go on to marry their partner within five years has fallen below 50%. Since one quarter of these cohabitors remain together after five years it is perhaps no longer helpful to describe cohabitation as a short-term transitionary phase. More research is required to understand the choices and constraints faced by these longer term cohabitors. Furthermore, given the relatively high dissolution rates of cohabiting partnerships, better understanding of the subsequent life course of those who experience the dissolution of their first cohabiting partnership is required. How does the individual's experience in their first cohabiting partnership affect the formation and dissolution of later unions?

Our work confirms and extends earlier research (see for example Ermisch and Francesconi 2000) which found higher levels of childbearing within cohabitation among those from poorer socio-economic backgrounds. Explanations which view the increase over time in extra-marital childbearing as the result of increased secularisation, or 'the disappearance of restrictions on sexuality' (Lesthaeghe 1995, p. 40) need to identify differences in these trends according to socio-economic background. It is certainly the case that, historically, premarital conceptions leading to shot-gun marriages were more prevalent among women from poorer social classes: in 1970 around one quarter of legitimate first births were conceived premaritally, ranging from 13% of births to fathers in professional and intermediate occupations, to 38% of births to fathers in semi-skilled and unskilled occupations (OPCS 1987, Table 11.2). It seems likely that shot-gun marriages are being replaced by childbearing within cohabitation. Smart and Stevens (2000) found in their interviews with cohabitors (who later separated) that unplanned pregnancy was a key factor promoting the start of cohabitation.

Other authors have explained the higher rates of childbearing among cohabitors from poorer socio-economic backgrounds as a result of the inability of disadvantaged men to fulfil the traditional breadwinner role. In the U.S., the higher rates of non-marital childbearing among black and hispanic women tend to be explained in terms of economic disadvantage forming a barrier to marriage (Manning and Landale 1996; Smock and Manning 1997). According to Musick (2002, p. 917), while US women with low educational levels are more likely to have both planned and unplanned births outside of marriage still these women aspire to marriage, and they, 'like women from all socio economic levels, look for partners who offer economic stability and some degree of upward economic mobility'. In the UK, interview evidence with cohabiting families suggests a wide range of reasons why cohabiting families do not marry. For some cohabitors, wedding costs are prohibitive (McRae 1993; Pickford 1999). For many others, marriage has not necessarily been rejected as an ideal but is seen as a low priority in comparison with the quality of the relationship and the importance of other factors such as establishing adequate accommodation (Pickford 1999; Smart and Stevens 2000). Pickford sought the views of unmarried cohabiting fathers on whether marriage was important to them and whether such a transition might take place for them. She concludes (p. 40) 'Some unmarried couples were strongly

opposed to marriage but the majority of unmarried men said they thought they would marry at some point. However, most of these saw this as a very long-term objective and very low in their list of priorities. The degree of apathy expressed by a substantial proportion made it questionable whether they would ever get round to marrying, even if the relationship continued'. Sociological and demographic theories which emphasise the role of value change and the process of individualisation for the diversification of family life suggest that childbearing within cohabitation will eventually spread more widely across all classes of British society. However, if the observed tendency for more advantaged groups to marry and have children within marriage continues for the 1970 cohort when they are in their thirties we would need to question whether this is likely. What is clear is that there remain large inter-generational continuities in the speed and sequencing of family transitions which are likely to be the result of both underlying attitudinal factors and the intergenerational transmission of inequalities in access to both education and employment.

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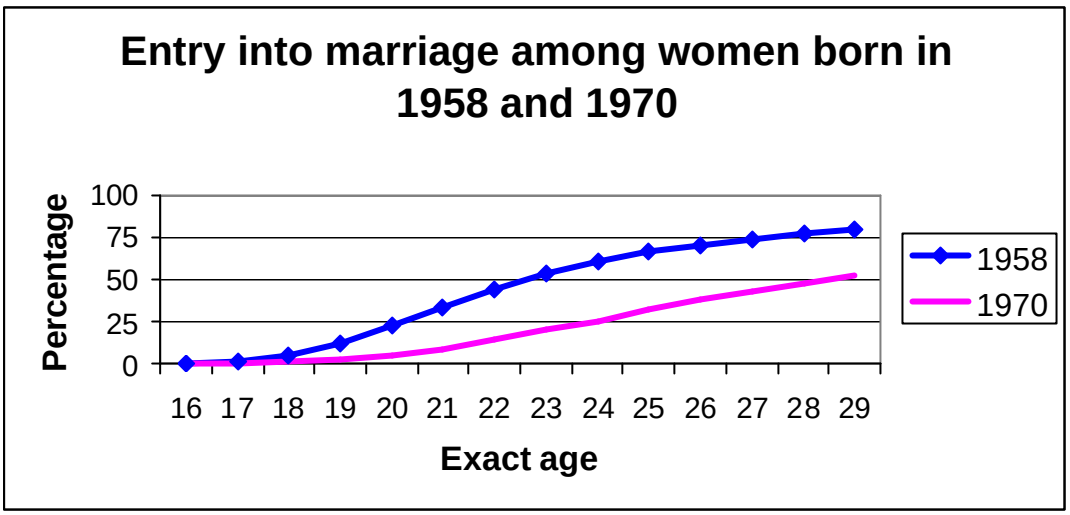
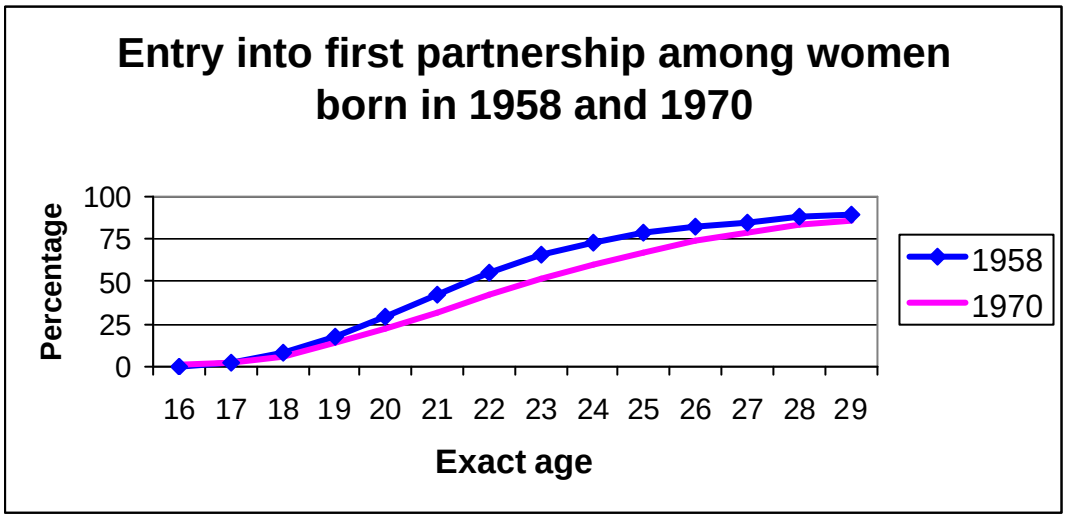
Figure 1a-c


Entry into marriage among women born in 1958 and 1970
Percentage
100
75
50
25
0
16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29
Exact age
1958
1970


Entry into first partnership among women born in 1958 and 1970
Percentage
100
75
50
25
0
16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29
Exact age
1958
1970

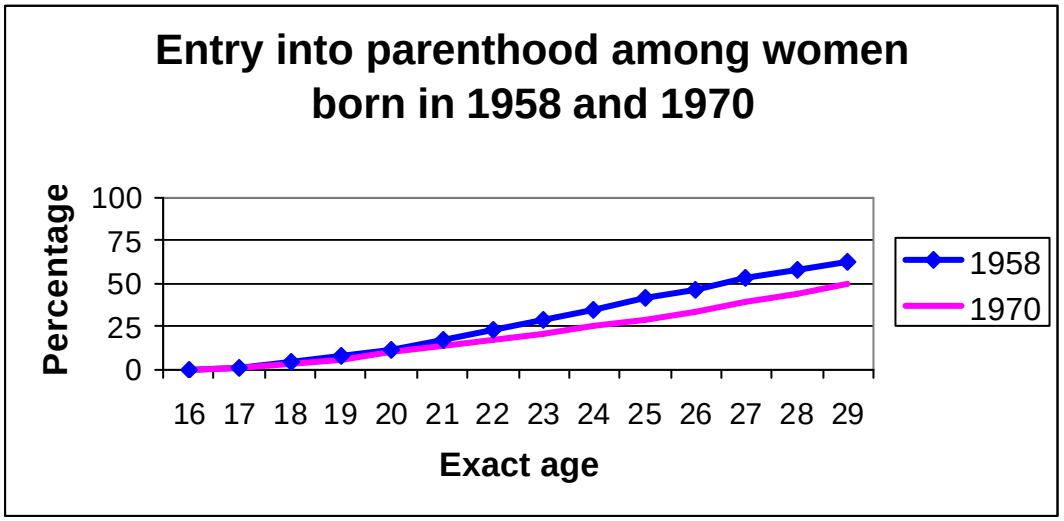
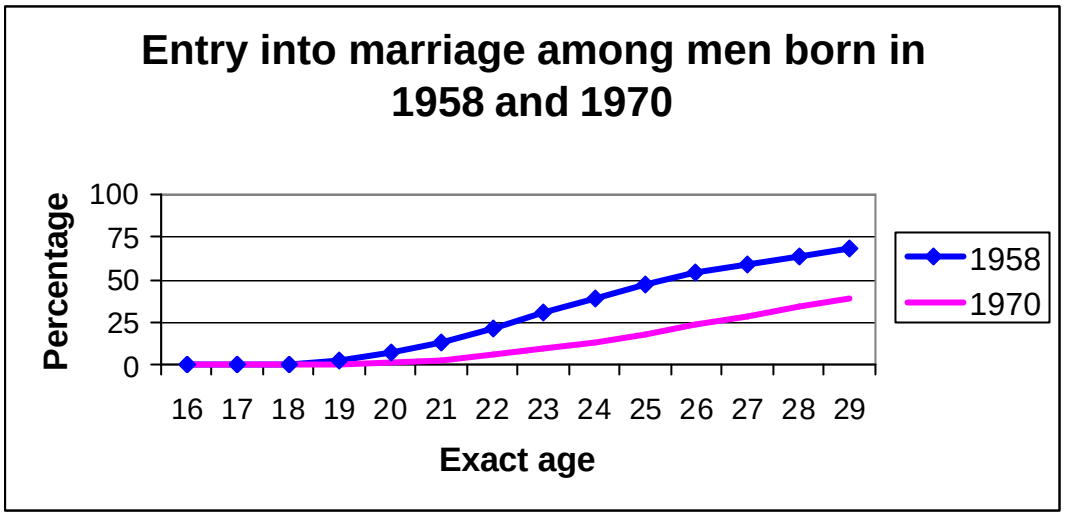
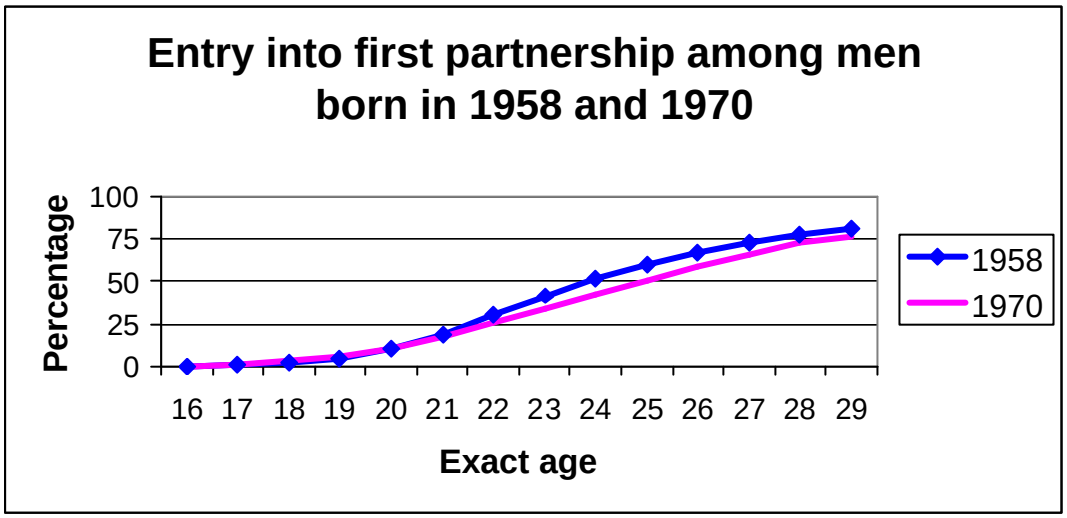

Entry into parenthood among women born in 1958 and 1970
Percentage
100
75
50
25
0
16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29
Exact age
1958
1970

Figure 2a-c


Entry into marriage among men born in 1958 and 1970
Percentage
100
75
50
25
0
16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29
Exact age
1958
1970


Entry into first partnership among men born in 1958 and 1970
Percentage
100
75
50
25
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16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29
Exact age
1958
1970

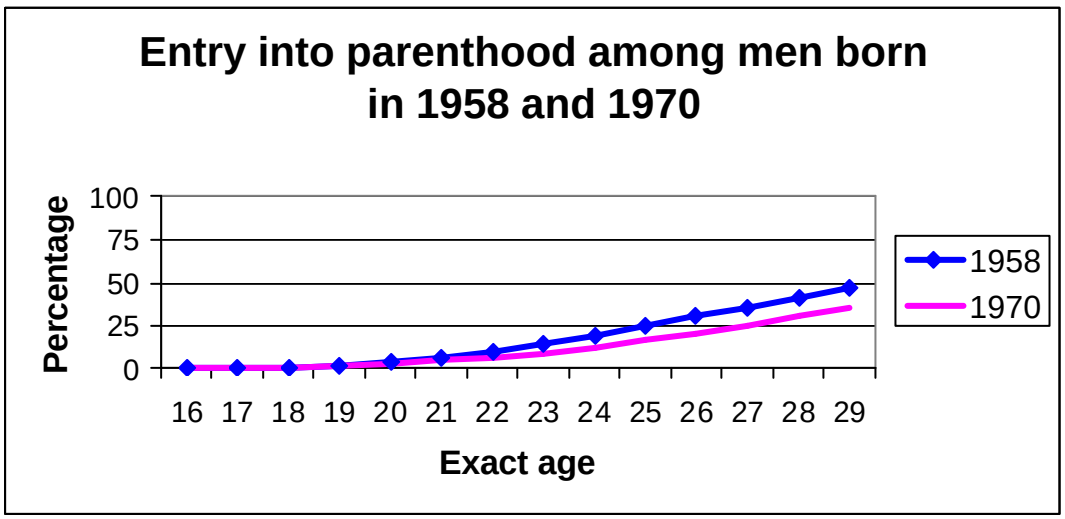
Entry into parenthood among men born in 1958 and 1970
Percentage
100
75
50
25
0
16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29
Exact age
1958
1970

Table 1. Percentage making transition to first partnership, first marriage and parenthood by exact age 29 according to father's[1] social class. Men and women born in 1958 and 1970.

Father's social class	By exact age 29							
	% had partnership		% married		% become a parent		sample (100%)	
	1958	1970	1958	1970	1958	1970	1958	1970
Men								
I&II	74	72	58	34	34	22	1038	975
IIIn	81	76	68	39	44	29	548	687
IIIm	82	77	70	40	49	38	2563	2370
IV&V	81	76	70	41	55	44	1109	1008
No father figure	78	75	65	26	49	44	124	177
Total	80	76	68	39	47	35	5541	5397
Women								
I&II	84	82	71	48	44	36	1001	998
IIIn	90	87	79	56	54	42	539	704
IIIm	90	87	81	52	66	51	2696	2525
IV&V	92	87	83	53	73	60	1204	1043
No father figure	89	86	72	47	66	62	161	252
Total	89	86	79	52	63	50	5759	5698

[1]Father's social class is based on occupation of the cohort member's father or father figure at the time of the cohort member's birth. Totals for men and women include those for whom father's social class is not available.

Table 2. Coefficients from discrete time logistic event history model of entry into first co-residential partnership and first marriage among men born in 1958 and 1970.

Variable	First Partnership 1958 cohort	1970 cohort	First Marriage 1958 cohort	1970 cohort
Age 16-17	-2.50***	-2.63***	**-2.71*** **	**-3.43*** **
18-19	**-1.33*** **	**-1.80*** **	**-1.31*** **	**-2.53*** **
20-21	**-0.31*** **	**-0.82*** **	**-0.24*** **	**-1.06*** **
22-23	**0.03**	**-0.50*** **	**0.08**	**-0.61*** **
24-25	**0.13** **	**-0.19*** **	**0.15*** **	**-0.20*** **
26-28	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**
Father's social class				
I&II	0.00	0.01	0.02	-0.02
IIIn	0.04	0.00	0.05	0.02
IIIm	0.03	0.02	0.03	-0.03
IV&V	0	0	0	0
No father figure	-0.06	0.02	**-0.14**	**-0.51*** **
Not known	0.24*	-0.03	0.23*	0.32**
Mother's age at first birth				
Before 20	0	0	0	0
20-24	-0.10**	-0.08	-0.11**	-0.12**
25 and above	-0.35***	-0.25***	-0.37***	-0.36***
Not known	-0.16*	-0.15	**-0.09**	**-0.57*** **
Mother's age at leaving education				
<15 yrs	0	0	0	0
15	-0.04	-0.07	-0.02	-0.23**
16+	-0.10*	-0.16*	-0.20***	-0.33***
Not known	-0.04	-0.05	**-0.08**	**0.21**
Parents ever separated				
No	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**
Yes	**0.15*** **	**-0.08***	**-0.11***	**-0.33*** **
Not applicable/known	**0.25*** **	**-1.14*** **	**0.09***	**-1.27*** **
Anti-social behaviour at age 10/11				
No	0	0	**0**	**0**
Yes	0.05	0.06	**-0.01**	**-0.26*** **
Not known	0.00	0.04	-0.05	0.14
Neurotic behaviour at age 10/11				
No	0	0	0	0
Yes	-0.15**	-0.15**	-0.09	0.06
Not known	-0.08	-0.03	-0.04	-0.29*
Enrolled full-time education at t-1				
Yes	-0.57***	-0.48***	-1.11***	-0.84***
No	0	0	0	0
Years of education at t-1				
16+ years	-0.10	-0.13*	-0.23***	-0.10
14-15 years	**-0.07**	**-0.33*** **	-0.17*	-0.34***
13 years	-0.27***	-0.21***	-0.35***	-0.24***
12 years	-0.14***	-0.10*	-0.17***	-0.21***
<12 years	0	0	0	0
Age 16-17 * Father's class I&II	-0.70**	-0.25	-0.47	-1.19
Age 16-17 * Father's class IIIn	-0.78*	-1.16***	-1.06	-1.01
Age 16-17 * Father's class IIIm	-0.73*	-0.19	-0.58*	-0.68
Age 18-19 * Father's class I&II	-0.45***	-0.19	-1.25***	-0.84
Age 20-21 * Father's class I&II	-0.22**	-0.22*	-0.49***	-0.92***
Age 16-17 * Parents separated	0.80***	0.65***	0.13	0.43
Age 18-19 * Parents separated	0.31**	0.34***	0.56***	0.12
Age 16-17 * Anti-social behaviour at 10/11	0.24	0.63***	0.46	1.17*
Age 18-19 * Anti-social behaviour at 10/11	0.07	0.22	**0.06**	**0.93*** **
Intercept	**-1.42*** **	**-1.01*** **	**-1.70*** **	**-1.72*** **
-2 Log likelihood	25408	25340	23342	16303
Sample (person years)	45993	49537	51161	62647

*** p<0.01 ** p<0.05 * p<0.10

Note: estimates in **bold**refer to effects which are significantly different for the 1958 and 1970 cohort at the five per cent level.

Table 3. Coefficients from discrete time logistic event history model of entry into first co-residential partnership and first marriage among women born in 1958 and 1970.

Variable	First Partnership 1958 cohort	1970 cohort	First Marriage 1958 cohort	1970 cohort
Age 16-17	**-0.91*** **	**-1.74*** **	**0.78*** **	**-1.86*** **
18-19	**-0.17** **	**-0.96*** **	**-0.02**	**-1.37*** **
20-21	**0.40*** **	**-0.40*** **	**0.53*** **	**-0.47*** **
22-23	**0.48*** **	**-0.22*** **	**0.48*** **	**-0.23*** **
24-25	**0.27*** **	**-0.09**	**0.22*** **	**0.00**
26-28	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**
Father's social class				
I&II	-0.08	0.03	-0.01	0.02
IIIn	-0.01	0.09	-0.01	0.10
IIIm	-0.01	0.00	-0.01	-0.04
IV&V	0	0	0	0
No father figure	-0.09	0.09	-0.30***	-0.05
Not known	-0.09	-0.07	-0.10	-0.07
Mother's age at first birth				
Before 20	0	0	0	0
20-24	-0.16***	-0.08*	-0.11**	-0.01
25 and above	-0.33***	-0.27***	-0.25***	-0.15**
Not known	-0.06	-0.06	-0.15	-0.17
Mother's age at leaving education				
<15 yrs	0	0	0	0
15	-0.06	-0.04	-0.09**	0.06
16+	-0.06	-0.09	-0.18***	0.04
Not known	-0.06	-0.14	-0.11***	0.32*
Parents ever separated				
No	0	0	0	0
Yes	0.06	-0.08*	**-0.13** **	**-0.36*** **
Not applicable/known	**0.07**	**-1.07*** **	**-0.08***	**-1.17*** **
Anti-social behaviour at age 10/11				
No	0	0	0	0
Yes	-0.05	-0.14*	-0.08	-0.25***
Not known	-0.07	0.15	0.02	0.16
Neurotic behaviour at age 10/11				
No	**0**	**0**	0	0
Yes	**-0.14** **	**0.02**	-0.13**	-0.03
Not known	**0.01**	**-0.20***	-0.08	-0.16
Enrolled full-time education at t-1				
Yes	**-1.03*** **	**-0.75*** **	**-1.52*** **	**-0.87*** **
No	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**
Years of education at t-1				
16+ years	0.09	-0.07	0.02	-0.13*
14-15 years	-0.24***	-0.13*	-0.30***	-0.19**
13 years	-0.22***	-0.20***	-0.18***	-0.12**
12 years	-0.13***	-0.13***	**-0.19*** **	**0.07**
<12 years	0	0	0	0
Age 16-17 * Father's class I&II	-0.73***	-0.63***	-0.72***	-1.30***
Age 16-17 * Father's class IIIn	-0.78***	-0.96***	-0.69**	-1.61***
Age 16-17 * Father's class IIIm	-0.11	-0.32**	-0.15	-1.06***
Age 18-19 * Father's class I&II	-0.18	-0.45***	-0.58***	-0.64**
Age 20-21 * Father's class I&II	-0.03	-0.23**	-0.25**	-0.20
Age 16-17 * Parents separated	**0.44*** **	**0.90*** **	0.42**	0.51*
Age 18-19 * Parents separated	0.35***	0.38***	0.41***	0.28*
Age 16-17 * Anti-social behaviour at 10/11	0.71***	0.32	0.64***	-0.01
Age 18-19 * Anti-social behaviour at 10/11	0.37***	0.29*	0.30**	0.45*
Intercept	**-1.35*** **	**-0.93*** **	-1.70***	-2.12***
-2 Log likelihood	27029	28077	26286	21715
Sample (person years)	37744	43855	43558	60546

*** p<0.01 ** p<0.05 * p<0.10

Note: estimates in **bold**refer to effects which are significantly different for the 1958 and 1970 cohort at the five per cent level.

Table 4. First family transition by age 29 according to father's[1] social class among women born in 1958 and 1970.

Father's social class[1]	First family transition by age 29						
	Preg --> Lone Mother	Preg --> Marital Birth	Preg --> Cohab Birth	Marry	Cohab	No event	Sample (100%)
I & II							
1958	2	3	0	43	36	15	1001
1970	4	1	2	15	62	17	998
IIIn							
1958	2	5	1	50	31	11	539
1970	5	1	2	18	63	13	704
IIIm							
1958	5	8	1	50	27	10	2696
1970	10	1	4	13	61	11	2525
IV & V							
1958	7	11	2	48	25	7	1204
1970	13	2	6	13	55	10	1043
No father figure							
1958	7	6	3	35	39	9	161
1970	14	1	5	9	62	8	252
Total							
1958	5	7	1	48	29	10	5759
1970	9	1	4	14	60	12	5698

[1] See Table 1 for definition of father's social class. Total includes women whose father's social class is not available.

Table 5. Life table estimates of the outcome of cohabiting first partnerships among the 1958 and 1970 birth cohorts.

Duration (months)	Males				Females			
	1958		1970		1958		1970	
	married	split	married	split	married	split	married	split
6	12	4	4	5	11	3	5	4
12	25	11	9	10	26	9	11	8
24	41	19	20	19	42	15	24	16
36	51	23	29	26	51	19	33	22
48	56	25	35	30	56	23	40	26
60	58	27	40	33	59	25	44	29

Table 6: Percentage distribution of events experienced by cohabitors within the first four years of cohabitation, according to father's social class. Female respondents who were childless at the start of cohabitation and who began cohabiting at ages 16-26.

Father's social class[1]	Percentage experiencing first family event in first four years					
	Preg → Cohab Birth	Preg → Marital Birth	Marry	Separate	No event	Sample (100%)
I&II						
1958	2	2	46	30	22	328
1970	7	3	38	28	24	536
IIIn						
1958	5	7	45	24	19	147
1970	8	3	37	30	23	405
IIIm						
1958	7	8	49	22	14	664
1970	14	3	34	23	25	1400
IV&V						
1958	9	14	46	14	17	279
1970	17	5	31	22	25	526
No father figure						
1958	15	11	35	29	11	55
1970	21	3	28	25	23	145
Total						
1958	6	8	47	23	16	1521
1970	13	3	35	24	25	3091

[1] See Table 1 for definition of father's social class. Total includes women whose father's social class is not available.

Table 7. Coefficients from discrete time multinomial logistic event history model of first family transition following entry into cohabitation among never pregnant women born in 1958 and 1970 who were aged 16-26 at entry into cohabitation.

Variable	Preg → cohabiting birth		Preg → marital birth		Marriage		Separate	
	1958	1970	1958	1970	1958	1970	1958	1970
Duration of cohabitation								
0-11 months	-0.12	0.55***	**0.57**	**0.14**	**0.49*** **	**-0.49*** **	**0.00**	**-0.18**
12-23 months	-0.27	0.48**	**-0.03**	**0.27**	**0.48*** **	**-0.02**	**-0.14**	**0.01**
24-35 months	-0.20	0.32	**0.03**	**0.17**	**0.43****	**0.05**	**0.07**	**0.15**
36-48months	0	0	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**
Age at start of cohabitation								
16-19	0	0	0	0	**0**	**0**	0	0
20-22	0.01	-0.29**	-0.48*	-0.51**	**-0.11**	**0.15***	-0.09	-0.24**
23+	-0.60*	-0.30**	-0.30	-0.65**	**-0.12**	**0.28*** **	-0.43**	-0.17
Father's social class								
I&II	-0.99*	-0.44**	-1.25***	-0.12	-0.07	0.22*	**0.68*** **	**0.20**
IIIn	-0.11	-0.54***	-0.20	-0.32	-0.08	0.11	0.44*	0.29**
IIIm	0.02	-0.08	-0.26	-0.51**	0.11	0.13	**0.54*** **	**0.08**
IV&V	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
No male head	0.85**	-0.17	-0.16	-0.31	-0.27	0.07	0.90***	0.16
Not known	0.95	-0.35	-1.62	-1.55	-0.22	-0.30	0.62*	0.03
Mother's age at first birth								
Before 20	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
20-24	-0.53**	-0.25*	-0.36	0.07	-0.03	-0.13	0.10	0.06
25 and above	-0.66**	-0.35*	-0.36	-0.30	-0.19	-0.16	0.29	0.21*
Not known	-0.87*	-0.05	0.11	-0.20	-0.25	-0.09	-0.04	-0.06
Parents ever separated								
No	**0**	**0**	0	0	0	0	**0**	**0**
Yes	**0.62****	**-0.08**	0.18	-0.15	-0.08	-0.28***	**0.02**	**0.35*** **
Not applicable/known	-0.04	-0.41	-0.15	-0.66	**0.01**	**-0.68*** **	**-0.04**	**0.63*** **
Enrolled full-time education 1 year prior to start								
Yes	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
No	-0.59**	-0.12	0.03	0.24	0.45***	0.50***	-0.24	-0.22**
Years of education at start								
16+ years	-2.05**	-2.09***	-1.28*	-1.70***	**0.55*** **	**0.03**	-0.12	0.05
14-15 years	-2.16***	-0.83***	-1.35**	-2.09**	**0.17**	**-0.27***	-0.21	0.23
13 years	-1.09	-0.70***	-0.91	-0.18	0.21	-0.10	0.20	0.20**
12 years	-1.36***	-0.58***	-0.80**	-0.45	0.13	0.15	0.07	0.05
<12 years	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Intercept	-4.28***	-4.70***	**-4.80*** **	**-5.91*** **	-4.49***	-4.63***	-4.72***	-4.72***

1958 women: -2 log likelihood = 12644, person months = 29423
1970 women: -2 log likelihood = 26137, person months = 81475
*** p<0.01 ** p<0.05 * p<0.10
Note: estimates in **bold**refer to effects which are significantly different for the 1958 and 1970 cohort at the five per cent level.