

# Relationship quality and family formation in Europe. How country context shapes (un)happy couples' transitions to marriage and first birth

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## **ABSTRACT**

The meaning of marriage and cohabitation has changed, potentially altering how people with higher relationship quality progress family formation, by getting married and/or having a first birth. We employ a cross-national perspective to study how relationship quality is associated with the likelihood of marriage and first birth within cohabitation and how this differs by country context. We raise questions about whether cohabitators with higher relationship quality are as likely to have a first birth as married couples in contexts where cohabitation is widespread. Using the Generation and Gender Survey and UK Household Longitudinal Study, we study seven European countries (Austria, France, Hungary, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and UK). We employ competing risk hazard models to follow respondents as they 1) transition from cohabitation into marriage or childbearing outside marriage 2) transition from marriage or cohabitation into parenthood. Results indicate that cohabitators with higher relationship quality have higher marriage risks in Austria, France, Hungary, and the UK, but not in the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden. Instead, higher relationship quality is associated with higher first birth risks in cohabitation in Sweden and Norway. Furthermore, married couples have a higher risk of first birth irrespective of relationship quality in most countries. These findings suggest that in contexts where the meaning of marriage and cohabitation are more similar, couples with higher quality relationships progress their relationships by having a first birth rather than marriage, although sizeable variation remains.

## **KEYWORDS**

Cohabitation; Marriage; Childbearing; Relationship quality; Europe; panel data

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**RELATIONSHIP QUALITY AND FAMILY FORMATION IN EUROPE.  
HOW COUNTRY CONTEXT SHAPES (UN)HAPPY COUPLES'  
TRANSITIONS TO MARRIAGE AND FIRST BIRTH**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The increase in cohabitation throughout most countries of Europe (Klüsener, 2015; Perelli-Harris et al., 2012) has raised questions about whether cohabitation is a stage in the marriage process or an alternative to marriage (Di Giulio, Impicciatore, & Sironi, 2019; Hiekel, Liefbroer, & Poortman, 2014; Perelli-Harris et al., 2014). This question has become particularly pertinent as childbearing within cohabitation has become more normative; a shared child may be a signal of a couple's commitment, and the couple may feel little need to marry (Berrington, Perelli-Harris, & Trevena, 2015; Klärner, 2015; Lappegård & Noack, 2015). On the other hand, as social norms requiring marriage have weakened and individuals are able to follow their own "biographies of choice" (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995), the symbolic importance of marriage may even have increased (Cherlin, 2004). Marriage may now be an expression of love and commitment to the partnership, instead of a prerequisite for family formation (Lappegård & Noack, 2015; Perelli-Harris et al., 2014). Here we study the meaning of marriage and cohabitation by investigating how relationship quality is associated with family transitions, namely marrying and having a first birth. We study these transitions in seven European countries to investigate how context shapes the importance of relationship quality for couples' family transitions.

Relationship quality is a key indicator for understanding a couple's commitment to the partnership, relationship functioning and maintenance, and stability (Le & Agnew, 2003; Le, Dove, Agnew, Korn, & Mutso, 2010; Rusbult, Agnew, & Arriaga, 2012). Yet, few have studied how relationship quality is associated with the progression of the relationship, specifically to marriage or childbearing (for an exception see Brown, 2000 who studied transition to marriage in the US). Understanding how relationship quality before marriage affects couple's transitions is vital for understanding subsequent partnership stability (Karney & Bradbury, 2020). Prior studies have investigated how relationship quality differs between cohabiting and married individuals; however, the studies have been cross-sectional and did not follow individuals over time. These studies show that, on average, cohabiting couples have lower relationship quality across Europe (Wiik, Bernhardt, & Noack, 2009; Wiik, Keizer, & Lappegård, 2012) and in the in the US (Brown & Booth, 1996; Brown, Manning, & Payne, 2017). Even cohabitators with the intention to marry their partner are on average less satisfied with their relationship than married individuals (Wiik et al., 2012), although this was not found in other studies (Brown et al., 2017; Tai, Baxter, & Hewitt, 2014; Wiik et al., 2009).

Prior studies suggest that cohabitation fundamentally differs from marriage; however, simply comparing cohabiting and married individuals masks the heterogeneity of cohabiting couples. For many couples, cohabitation is a stage in the marriage process or a setting for childbearing (Hiekel et al., 2014; Perelli-Harris et al., 2012). A study in Norway found that cohabiting couples who have intentions to marry have higher relationship quality (Wiik, Bernhardt, & Noack, 2010). Studies employing a prospective design showed that cohabitators with higher quality relationship are more likely to marry in the USA (Brown, 2000) and Sweden (Moors & Bernhardt, 2009), but these studies did not examine whether some couples progressed their relationship via childbearing instead of marriage.

Differentiating whether people first marry or have a child, as well as how relationship quality is associated with these transitions, is important when marriage and first birth are increasingly decoupled (Buchmann & Kriesi, 2011), and a large proportion have a first birth outside of marriage (Perelli-Harris et al., 2012). Having children may signify commitment to the relationship (Lillard & Waite, 1993; Perelli-Harris et al., 2014; Poortman & Mills, 2012), and potentially even a larger commitment than marriage (Berrington et al., 2015; Klärner, 2015; Lappegård & Noack, 2015). People may be more likely to choose to have children together when their relationship quality is higher to minimize the risk of breakup (Lillard & Waite, 1993). Previous research indicated that couples with a medium level of relationship quality are more likely to enter parenthood in the Netherlands (Rijken & Liefbroer, 2009; Rijken & Thomson, 2011). However, these studies did not consider the partnership context of the birth nor how the importance of relationship quality might be shaped by the country context.

Investigating whether people marry before a first birth, and the role relationship quality plays in these transitions, is vital for understanding how the meaning of marriage and cohabitation has changed throughout Europe. Countries differ in the prevalence of cohabitation, its association with disadvantage, and the cultural and social context which shapes norms about cohabitation (Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004; Hiekel et al., 2014; Lappegård, Klüsener, & Vignoli, 2018; Perelli-Harris, 2018; Perelli-Harris et al., 2014; Perelli-Harris & Sánchez Gassen, 2012). Whereas in most European countries the majority of couples now start living together unmarried, the rate at which they marry varies substantially (Di Giulio et al., 2019; Perelli-Harris et al., 2012). Potentially, when a transition is less accepted, relationship quality might not be the deciding factor for childbearing, in contrast to contexts where it is more accepted. Thus, the country context may shape the association between relationship quality and type of family transition.

Here we investigate family transitions in seven European countries which differ in the social context surrounding cohabitation and non-marital childbearing: Austria, France, Hungary, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. We expand on previous literature by investigating how relationship quality is associated with marriage and entry into parenthood among cohabiting and married couples, and how this differs across countries, providing novel evidence on the meaning of cohabitation and marriage in these countries. In contrast to prior studies on relationship quality across countries (e.g. Wiik et al., 2012), we use a prospective cross-national design to study family transitions. Specifically, using data from the Generations and Gender Surveys and the British Understanding Society survey we follow respondents as they 1) transition from cohabitation into marriage or childbearing outside marriage, and 2) transition from marriage or cohabitation into parenthood. Taken together, these analyses shed light on the extent to which marriage signifies higher relationship quality, or whether having children is how contemporary couples express their bond.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES**

### **2.1 MARRIAGE, SOCIAL NORMS, AND LEGAL REGULATIONS**

With the deinstitutionalization of marriage, the increase in individualization, and destandardization of the life course more generally, people are able to form their own biographies (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Berghammer, Fliegenschnee, & Schmidt, 2014; Giddens, 1992). Previously, relationships were more regulated through social norms and institutional structures, and people were strongly discouraged from forming romantic relationships and having children without marrying. However, now the order of family transitions, and whether people make these transitions at all, is less regulated (Cherlin, 2004). As the standard life course has been replaced by ‘biographies of choice’ (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Berghammer et al., 2014), the function of relationships between intimate partners has shifted away from a setting for childbearing towards an individual path to self-fulfilment, often in pursuit of a ‘pure relationship’ (Giddens, 1992). As a consequence, the benefits to the individual have become even more important for the continuation of the relationship and whether to progress the relationship along greater levels of commitment, for example towards marriage and/or childbearing. These benefits are often encapsulated in the quality of the partner relationship, which has become even more central to these choices.

However, although social norms regarding family formation have become more lenient, they have not faded away; many people continue to view marriage as an important step, often preceding the first birth (Lappegård & Noack, 2015). These social norms often differ by country context,

varying according to acceptance of cohabitation, childbearing outside of marriage, and attitudes towards marriage (Treas, Lui, & Gubernskaya, 2014). In addition, cohabitation and non-marital childbearing are less accepted among some population subgroups, such as those with a migrant-background and some religious groups (Berrington, 2020; Kalmijn & Kraaykamp, 2018; Liefbroer & Rijken, 2019). Thus, people might choose to marry before having children when this is the prevailing social norm, irrespective of relationship quality.

Beyond social norms, partnerships are regulated through legal regulations. While marriage has become more deinstitutionalized as a social and cultural concept, cohabitation has become more institutionalized as a legal institution and this varies by country (Perelli-Harris & Sánchez Gassen, 2012). Although cohabitators' rights have expanded, generally cohabitators continue to have fewer rights and obligations than married couples, especially when no children are involved. For instance, cohabitators often do not have to go through the court system when dissolving their unions (Perelli-Harris & Sánchez Gassen, 2012). The latter is sometimes mentioned as a reason not to get married because there is less hassle when dissolving a union (Hiekel & Keizer, 2015). These differences in rights and responsibilities between cohabitation and marriage can vary considerably across contexts (Perelli-Harris & Sánchez Gassen, 2012), as discussed below.

## **2.2. RELATIONSHIP QUALITY AND MARRIAGE**

Despite the increase in cohabitation, marriage continues to be the dominant relationship form for most adults in mid-life in most European countries, especially for childbearing (Holland, 2017; Perelli-Harris et al., 2012; Vergauwen, Neels, & Wood, 2017). For many, cohabitation is a testing ground for the relationship, with the idea that when couples are happy with the relationship, they marry, and if not they break up (Hiekel & Keizer, 2015; Hiekel et al., 2014). Focus group participants across European countries emphasized that love is the main reason for marriage and marriage signals a stronger commitment to the partnership (Berghammer et al., 2014; Berrington et al., 2015; Hiekel & Keizer, 2015; Lappegård & Noack, 2015; Perelli-Harris et al., 2014). The wedding ceremony, especially, is a way to celebrate the couple's love and demonstrate commitment to friends and family (Berrington et al., 2015; Lappegård & Noack, 2015). In Norway and Sweden, cohabitators who were satisfied with and committed to the union more often planned to marry within two years (Wiik et al., 2010). Thus, we would expect that cohabitators with higher relationship quality would be more likely to marry than those in relationships of lower quality (Hypothesis 1a).



### **2.3. RELATIONSHIP QUALITY AND CHILDBEARING WITHIN COHABITATION OR MARRIAGE**

As marriage has become deinstitutionalized, it has become less of a social requirement for raising children (Cherlin, 2004, 2020). Instead, couples might choose to progress their relationship by having a child within cohabitation before they marry, if they marry at all. Children increase partners' commitment to the union (Brines & Joyner, 1999), and children are often mentioned as a stronger commitment to the relationship than marriage; even if the partnership ends, the partners remain connected via the child (Berrington et al., 2015; Klärner, 2015; Lappegård & Noack, 2015). Therefore, couples may aim to minimize the risk of partnership dissolution by having children only if they have a strong relationship (Lillard & Waite, 1993; Rijken & Liefbroer, 2009; Rijken & Thomson, 2011). In Germany people who were more satisfied with the relationship were more likely to intend to have a child with their partner (Berninger, Weiß, & Wagner, 2011). Thus, we would expect that cohabitators with higher relationship quality would be more likely to have a first birth than those in relationships of lower quality (Hypothesis 1b).

However, some couples with high relationship quality might be wary of what a young child might do to the couple's relationship dynamics (Rijken & Liefbroer, 2009). A Dutch study found that people with a medium level of relationship quality were more likely to have a birth (Rijken & Liefbroer, 2009). Furthermore, not all couples discuss having a birth extensively (Rijken & Knijn, 2009) and some may 'slide' into pregnancy (Sassler & Miller, 2017). Pregnancies are not always intended (Musick, 2002), and many other factors influence the decision to have a child with the partner, such as the age of the partners and their labour market attachment (Berninger et al., 2011). Therefore, relationship quality might not always be the deciding factor for childbearing.

Finally, the gap between marital and cohabiting first birth rates might depend on relationship quality as well as the context. Even though marriage and parenthood have become more decoupled (Buchmann & Kriesi, 2011), married couples continue to have a higher chance of first birth than cohabitators (Perelli-Harris et al., 2012). Couples are still encouraged or feel pressure to have a birth (Balbo & Mills, 2011). However, considering that marriage is sometimes regarded as a preferred context for childbearing (Treas et al., 2014), married couples may be more subject to pressure to have a birth than cohabitators. If this is indeed the case, relationship quality may play a more important role in cohabitators' decisions to have a child, instead of other factors. Therefore, we might expect that cohabitators with higher relationship quality have a similar risk of a first birth as married people with higher relationship quality (Hypothesis 2).

## 2.4. VARIATION BETWEEN COUNTRIES IN COHABITATION AND MARRIAGE

Countries differ in the extent to which cohabitation is similar to marriage, or whether cohabitation is more of a trial or a prelude to marriage. Depending on social context, relationship quality may be differently related to the risk of marriage and the risk a first birth.

In countries where cohabitation is more widespread, couples may be less inclined to marry regardless of their relationship quality, especially before a first birth. The period when many couples have their first birth is surrounded with many financial obligations. Couples may prioritize housing and raising children over an official wedding, which can be costly (Berrington et al., 2015; Kravdal, 1999). Furthermore, when marriage provides fewer legal benefits compared to cohabitation, especially for parents, couples have fewer incentives to marry before a first birth (Hiekel & Keizer, 2015; Perelli-Harris & Sánchez Gassen, 2012).

In contrast, where marriage is expected, especially marriage before a birth, relationship quality might induce entry into marriage before the couple has a birth. As deviation from social norms is generally discouraged, marrying before having a birth might be more common in societies that are less accepting towards unmarried parenthood (Lappegård et al., 2018). When unmarried cohabitation is less accepted, couples may face more pressure to get married from family members, friends, and the wider social network (Åberg, 2003). Similarly, having married friends is positively associated with cohabitators' marriage intentions (Wiik et al., 2010). Indeed, although many couples in Central and Eastern Europe did not hold a favourable view of marriage, they often still planned to get married, dubbed 'conformists' (Hiekel et al., 2014).

These contrasting views would be noticeable across the countries in this study -Austria, France, Hungary, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom- as these differ in how normative cohabitation is. To guide our country-specific expectations, we compare these countries on several aspects, including norms about cohabitation and non-marital childbearing and its prevalence, and difference in legal regulations regarding marriage and cohabitation. See Table 1 for an overview of the country-specific expectations.

Norway and Sweden, where cohabitation is the most normative, have often been characterised as countries where cohabiting unions are indistinguishable from marriage (Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004). The majority of first births are within cohabitation in these countries (Perelli-Harris et al., 2012), and about 55 percent of all births are outside of marriage in both Norway (2007) and Sweden (2012)<sup>i</sup>. Marriage is often regarded as a 'capstone' of the relationship where people marry after they

have finished their reproductive career (Holland, 2013, 2017; Lappegård & Noack, 2015). About half of the cohabiting couples in a Norwegian survey were classified as refusing marriage or seeing it as irrelevant; however, slightly less than half were in cohabiting unions more similar to a precursor to marriage or a trial marriage (Hiekel et al., 2014). Nonetheless, even in these countries, married people have on average higher relationship quality than cohabitators (Wiik et al., 2009). Cohabitators have many similar rights and obligations to married couples in Norway and Sweden, although some differences remain (Perelli-Harris & Sánchez Gassen, 2012).

France is comparable to the Scandinavian countries; cohabitation is common and seen as an alternative to marriage (Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004). The majority of couples begin co-residential unions without marrying (Perelli-Harris et al., 2012), and about 48 percent of all births occur in cohabitation in 2005<sup>i</sup> (Eurostat, 2018), especially among the lower educated (Mikolai, Berrington, & Perelli-Harris, 2018; Perelli-Harris et al., 2010). Similar to the Nordic countries, many French cohabitators were classified as being in a prelude or trial marriage (Di Giulio et al., 2019), but more French cohabitators thought marriage was still relevant compared to Norwegian cohabitators (Hiekel et al., 2014). Furthermore, cohabitators in France had a lower quality relationship than their married counterparts (Wiik et al., 2012). In France, registered cohabitation (PACS) has become more popular, and PACS partners have very similar rights and obligations as married couples, but PACs are not able to inherit in the same way as married couples (Perelli-Harris & Sánchez Gassen, 2012). Because of this research, we expect that Norway, France, and Sweden fall in the first category of countries, where higher relationship quality increases the risk for first birth (Hypothesis 1b), but not the risk of marriage (not Hypothesis 1a), and cohabitators with higher relationship quality have a similar risk to have a first birth as married couples (Hypothesis 2).

Cohabitation in Austria, the Netherlands, and the UK is a common way for couples to start their relationships, but in contrast to Norway, France and Sweden, it is often a stage in the marriage process instead of a long-term relationship state (Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004; Perelli-Harris et al., 2012). Focus group research in these countries stressed that married couples were perceived to be more committed to the relationship, whereas cohabitation was framed as a way to maintain freedom (Berghammer et al., 2014; Berrington et al., 2015; Hiekel & Keizer, 2015). Austrians mentioned that marriage was important when children were involved (Berghammer et al., 2014) whereas some Dutch and British focus group participants viewed children as a larger commitment than marriage (Berrington et al., 2015; Hiekel & Keizer, 2015; Perelli-Harris et al., 2014). Nonetheless, more Austrian, Dutch, and British couples marry before having children compared to their French, Norwegian, and Swedish counterparts (Perelli-Harris et al., 2012); 29 percent in the Netherlands

(2002)<sup>i</sup>, 39 percent in Austria (2008), and 46 percent in the UK (2009) of all births are outside of marriage (Eurostat, 2018). Those who have children while cohabiting are more likely to be economically disadvantaged in the UK, but not in Austria and the Netherlands (Mikolai et al., 2018; Perelli-Harris et al., 2010). When no children are involved, cohabitators have far fewer rights and obligations than married couples in Austria and especially the UK (Perelli-Harris & Sánchez Gassen, 2012). In the Netherlands very few legal differences exist between married and registered cohabitators, but unregistered cohabitators enjoy far fewer rights and obligations (Perelli-Harris & Sánchez Gassen, 2012).

Finally, in Hungary, while early family formation has remained common (Holland, 2017), cohabitation has increased among more recent cohorts (Perelli-Harris et al., 2012). Whereas it used to be a short prelude to marriage, recently it has become a more durable stage before marriage (Hoem, Kostova, Jasilioniene, & Mureşan, 2009). Although the country has a strong tradition of marriage, many Hungarian cohabitators did not have a favourable view of marriage despite plans to marry, potentially because of social pressures (Hiekel et al., 2014). Marriage is generally the context for childbearing (Mikolai, 2012; Perelli-Harris et al., 2012), however about 34 percent of births in 2004<sup>i</sup> are outside of marriage (Eurostat, 2018). Cohabitators have fewer rights and obligations than married couples (Szeibert, 2015). Based on prior research, we expect that Austria, Hungary, the Netherlands, and the UK are in the second category of countries, where higher relationship quality increases the risk for marriage (Hypothesis 1a), but not the risk of childbearing within cohabitation (not Hypothesis 1b), and cohabitators with higher relationship quality do not have a similar first birth risk as married couples (not Hypothesis 2).

	Cohabitators' relationship quality leads to marriage (H1a) or first birth within cohabitation (H1b)	Cohabitators with higher relationship quality have a similar risk of a first birth as married people (H2)
Norway	First birth	Yes
Sweden	First birth	Yes
France	First birth	Yes
Austria	Marriage	No
Netherlands	Marriage	No
United Kingdom	Marriage	No
Hungary	Marriage	No

**Table 1:** Country-specific expectations regarding the association between relationship quality and relationship progression

### 3. DATA AND METHOD

#### 3.1. DATA

To investigate the association between relationship quality and family transitions, we employed the Generations and Gender Surveys (GGS), conducted in 17 European countries, and the British Understanding Society survey (also known as the UK Household Longitudinal Study or UKHLS). The GGSs ([www.ggp-i.org](http://www.ggp-i.org)) were comprised of comparable nationally representative samples of people aged 18 to 79 (18 to 45 for Austria). The surveys were held in Austria in 2008/2009, France in 2005, Hungary in 2004/2005, Netherlands in 2002/2004, Norway in 2007/2008, Sweden 2012/2013. Second waves were collected about three years after the original interviews in 12 countries and two countries were followed up using register data (Norway and Sweden). Of these 17 countries, we selected six: Austria, France, Hungary, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Norway. The other countries either did not include necessary measurements or sample sizes were insufficient to study family transitions (see methods and measurement sections). The number of respondents per country in wave 1 ranged between 5,000 (Austria) to 14,881 (Norway).

The UKHLS ([www.understandingsociety.ac.uk](http://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk)) is a UK nationally representative household-based longitudinal survey (University of Essex: Institute for Social and Research, NatCen Social Research, & Kantar Public, 2019) which began in 2009. Later waves were collected annually for a total of 8 waves. The UKHLS started with approximately 40,000 households (51,000 individuals). We studied respondents from the waves which collected information on relationship quality (waves 1, 3, and 5) and followed them until wave 8 in 2016/2017. We used the relationship histories file (University of Essex: Institute for Economic and Social Research, 2019) of waves 1 to 6, and added later relationship changes (waves 7 to 8).

We selected men and women in different-sex relationships who answered the relationship quality questions. To answer our research questions, we studied two samples for each country. First, we investigated how relationship quality was associated with the risk of marriage or having a first birth within cohabitation, focusing on cohabiting respondents aged 45 or younger who had not experienced a first birth and who had been living together for less than five years at time of the interview. The second samples were comprised of married or cohabiting respondents aged 45 or younger, who had not had a first birth, and who had lived together for less than five years. People in both samples were censored when they became 46, separated<sup>1</sup>, or did not make the transition(s) we studied by the end of the observation period. We selected people who lived together for five years or

less because the majority make the transition to marriage or first birth within this period, and people who haven't made this transition are increasingly selective the longer the observation period. However, shortening the selection, for instance to two years, drastically reduced the number of transitions, making investigation impossible in the majority of the countries.

Several differences stand out between the samples in Table 2. First, women were more likely to be included in the sample than men in all countries, but especially in France. In the samples for Analysis 1 and 2, the mean age ranged from about 27 in France to almost 31 in Norway. The average relationship duration prior to the first wave ranged from 1.8 in the UK to 2.4 in Austria and the Netherlands (in Analysis 1). Previous relationship experience was more common in Norway and less common in Hungary, but the time to event or censoring was relatively similar across all countries.

### **3.2. METHOD**

In a first set of analyses, we focussed on respondents who were in a childless cohabiting union with durations of five years or less. To study transitions from these cohabiting unions, we used competing risk hazard models in which respondents were followed from the month of first interview to the month of marriage (1) first birth (2) or censoring. Remaining cohabiting was the base category in these models. Second, we study transitions to first births among cohabiting and married respondents. In hazard models we analyse the probability of a first birth in any given month (0: no birth, 1: birth). In both sets of analyses, the duration dependence was time since interview in months. Censoring occurred if unions dissolve, or respondents attrit from the survey. If the date of marriage, birth, or separation was missing, this date was randomly imputed while taking into account other relationship transitions. For example, if people separated after wave 1 and entered a new relationship before wave 2, we randomly imputed the separation date between wave 1 and the start of the new relationship.

### **3.3. MEASUREMENTS**

*Relationship quality* is our main explanatory variable. Relationship quality is a multidimensional concept encompassing positive and negative relationship evaluations, which have been measured in different ways (Fincham & Rogge, 2010; Funk & Rogge, 2007). Here, most countries measured general relationship satisfaction on a scale from 0 ("not at all") to 10 ("completely"). Dutch couples were asked to what extent they agree with the statement "we have a good relationship" on a reversed scale from 1 ("strongly agree") to 5 ("strongly disagree"). In the UK, relationship quality was asked as relationship happiness, on a scale of 1 ("extremely unhappy") to 7 ("perfect"). To allow comparison across the different countries, we standardized relationship quality per country based on the sample of partnered respondents aged 45 years or less, before any further selections were made. Although a more extensive measurement might capture different dimensions of relationship quality,

the single item measurement has been frequently used in the demographic and sociological literatures (e.g. Boertien & Härkönen, 2018; Brown et al., 2017; Wiik et al., 2012).

In the second set of analyses we specified whether individuals were *cohabiting or married*. This measurement was time varying, and updated if the respondent married after the interview, but before they experienced a first birth or were censored.

We control for only a few variables due to insufficient sample size in most countries. These measurements are previous relationship experience, gender, age, the duration of the relationship before the interview, and time since interview. In additional analyses we also controlled for education (high or other) (available upon request). Including this variable led to the same conclusions, and any differences are noted throughout the result section.

*Gender* was included since the association between relationship quality and family transitions might be gender specific (Brown, 2000). The association between relationship quality and family transitions were mostly similar for men and women, any significant differences were noted through the results section (results available upon request). *Previous relationship experience* was defined as whether or not the respondent lived with a partner previously before living with the current partner. *Relationship duration* before first wave was included because (for some) it is associated with relationship quality and family transitions. Lastly, *age* at time of the interview and *month since first wave* were included.

Analyses 1: Cohabiting couples														
	Austria		France		Hungary		Netherlands		Norway		Sweden		United Kingdom	
	%/M	SD	%/M	SD	%/M	SD	%/M	SD	%/M	SD	%/M	SD	%/M	SD
<i>Transition</i>														
No transition	47.9		43.0		41.2		47.7		37.7		54.7		58.2	
Marriage	28.4		30.2		37.6		34.7		13.8		13.8		23.9	
First birth	23.7		26.9		21.3		17.6		48.5		31.5		17.9	
Relationship Quality	0.1	0.8	0.2	0.9	0.2	0.8	0.3	0.9	0.1	0.9	0.0	0.9	0.1	1.0
<i>Gender</i>														
Male	41.2		28.9		40.7		41.7		49.8		42.6		45.1	
Female	58.8		71.1		59.3		58.3		50.2		57.4		55.0	
<i>Age</i>														
	28.0	4.9	26.8	4.6	27.2	4.0	29.2	4.8	30.8	6.9	26.9	4.9	28.2	5.9
<i>Relationship history</i>														
No previous relationship	69.6		76.5		85.5		77.3		56.3		67.5		69.9	
Had previous Relationship	30.4		23.5		14.5		22.7		43.7		32.5		30.1	
Relationship duration before wave (yrs)	2.4	1.4	2.3	1.5	1.8	1.2	2.4	1.3	2.4	1.5	1.9	1.4	1.8	1.4
Time to event or censoring in months	26.1	17.3	23.3	12.3	25.3	16.9	27.3	15.0	27.1	14.5	28.3	18.9	23.7	21.1
Number of respondents	194		149		221		216		327		289		1,090	
Number of observations	5,058		3,473		5,591		5,904		8,606		8,171		25,860	
Analyses 2: Married and cohabiting couples														
	Austria		France		Hungary		Netherlands		Norway		Sweden		United Kingdom	
	%/M	SD	%/M	SD	%/M	SD	%/M	SD	%/M	SD	%/M	SD	%/M	SD
<i>Transition</i>														
No transition	57.9		59.8		55.7		56.3		45.6		59.3		60.4	
First birth	42.2		40.2		44.3		43.7		54.4		40.7		39.6	
Relationship Quality	0.2	0.7	0.2	0.8	0.2	0.7	0.3	0.8	0.1	1.0	0.1	0.9	0.2	1.0
<i>Marital Status<sup>a</sup></i>														
Cohabitation	73.6		77.5		65.6		75.2		59.7		87.5		65.5	
Marriage	26.4		22.5		34.4		24.8		40.3		12.5		34.5	
<i>Gender</i>														
Male	43.7		32.1		45.3		44.1		48.7		42.0		45.6	
Female	56.3		67.9		54.7		55.9		51.3		58.1		54.4	
<i>Age</i>														
	28.5	5.1	27.3	4.8	27.4	3.7	29.6	5.1	30.7	6.5	27.3	5.1	29.0	5.9
<i>Relationship history</i>														
No previous relationship	71.7		77.5		81.3		77.6		55.7		68.1		73.4	
Had previous Relationship	28.4		22.5		18.8		22.4		44.3		31.9		26.6	
Relationship duration before wave (yrs)	2.5	1.4	2.4	1.5	1.8	1.3	2.5	1.4	2.6	1.5	2.0	1.4	2.1	1.5
Time to event or censoring in months	32.2	17.3	26.4	11.8	30.1	16.8	31.3	13.8	28.8	15.1	30.6	19.2	30.5	24.4
Number of respondents	261		209		384		286		456		329		1657	
Number of observations	8,399		5,526		11,570		8,941		13,739		10,063		50,586	

**Table 2:** Percentages, means, and standard deviations for transitions and independent variables by country

**Source:** Generations and Gender surveys and UK Household Longitudinal Study.

**Note:** <sup>a</sup> Time varying, descriptives refer to marital status at first interview



## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1. MARRIAGE OR CHILDBEARING WITHIN COHABITATION

Descriptive statistics for the country samples are presented in Table 2, confirming some important differences across countries. First, looking at the sample of cohabiting childless respondents, we note that higher shares of Swedish (32%) and Norwegian (48%) respondents had experienced a first birth compared with respondents from other countries, followed by France (27%). The share who married during the follow-up period, on the other hand, was highest in Hungary (38%), followed by the Netherlands (35%), France (30%), Austria (28%), and the UK (24%).

Next, we investigated how relationship quality was associated with marriage or having a first birth within cohabitation in Table 3 (Model 1), with competing risk hazard models for each country. The results indicated that cohabitators who had a higher level of relationship quality were more likely to marry in Austria (RRR=2.08,  $p = .023$ ), Hungary (1.75,  $p = .005$ ), and the United Kingdom (RRR=1.41,  $p < .001$ ); the coefficient was similar in France, but it was only marginally significant (RRR=1.46,  $p = .085$ ). Although the association between higher relationship quality and marriage was positive in the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden, it failed to reach statistical significance at the chosen level ( $p < .05/.10$ ).

Turning to the competing event, a first birth, we see from Model 1 of Table 3 that relationship quality was not significantly associated with having a birth within cohabitation in most countries ( $p > .10$ ). The only exception was Sweden, where cohabitators reporting higher relationship quality had a higher first birth risk within cohabitation than their counterparts in lower quality relationships (RRR=1.65,  $p = .002$ ). In Norway there was also a positive, although only marginally statistically significant, association between relationship quality and the risk of having a first nonmarital birth (RRR=1.20,  $p = .077$ ).

Taken together, these findings were partly in line with Hypothesis 1a; We found evidence that higher relationship quality was associated with marriage in all countries except Sweden, Norway and the Netherlands. Also, we expected to find that this association should be particularly strong in countries where cohabitation and nonmarital births is less accepted than in contexts where it is common and institutionalized. Higher relationship quality was associated with the risk of getting married in Austria, France, Hungary, and the UK, but not in the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden. The findings for the Netherlands and France are in contrast to our expectations; Higher relationship quality was associated with the risk of marriage for France even though cohabitation and non-marital

childbearing is widely accepted there (Noack, Bernhardt, & Wiik, 2014). In the Netherlands, relationship quality was not associated with marriage, even though non-marital fertility was relatively uncommon during the time of the interview (Eurostat, 2018). However, considering the relatively liberal attitudes towards marriage and cohabitation in the Netherlands (Hiekel & Keizer, 2015; Treas et al., 2014), this result is less surprising.

On the other hand, in some countries, we expected higher relationship quality to be associated with having a birth within cohabitation (Hypothesis 1b), and that this was especially the case in countries where non-marital childbearing was more accepted, specifically Norway, France, and Sweden. Our results indicated that relationship quality was only significantly related to non-marital childbearing in Sweden and Norway. Thus, we confirm Hypothesis 1b only in countries exceptionally accepting of non-marital childbearing. Again, our findings for France are in contrast to the expectations.

Regarding the controls, we see from Table 3 that age was positively related to a first nonmarital birth in France and Sweden. In Norway and the United Kingdom, on the other hand, a higher age decreased the chance of a nonmarital birth, relative to marriage or remaining in a childless cohabiting union (base). Age was positively related to marriage in the United Kingdom, but negatively in Norway. Next, in the United Kingdom, respondents who had a prior union were less likely to marry, whereas relationship duration at time of interview was positively associated with marriage in Sweden and the United Kingdom. Finally, months since interview was positively related to first birth in France, but negatively related to both events in the United Kingdom. In Norway, exposure time was positively associated with marrying.

	Austria Model 1					France Model 1					Hungary Model 1					Netherlands Model 1					
	Marriage		First birth			Marriage		First birth			Marriage		First birth			Marriage		First birth			
	RRR	SE	RRR	RRR	SE	RRR	SE	RRR	RRR	SE	RRR	SE	RRR	RRR	SE	RRR	SE	RRR	RRR	SE	
Relationship quality	2.08	*	0.67	1.56	0.45	1.46	#	0.32	0.99	0.18	1.75	**	0.34	1.04	0.18	1.18	0.19	1.22	0.29		
<i>Controls</i>																					
Age	1.00		0.03	1.02	0.03	1.00		0.04	1.08	*	0.04	1.01		0.03	1.02	0.04	0.99	0.03	0.98	0.04	
Gender (male =ref.)																					
Female	0.98		0.28	1.45	0.44	1.24		0.41	0.62	0.24	0.75		0.18	0.96	0.30	1.17	0.29	1.44	0.49		
Relationship history (no prior union=ref.)																					
Had prior union	0.97		0.32	0.89	0.31	0.61		0.27	0.78	0.32	1.01		0.37	1.13	0.53	0.99	0.33	1.21	0.56		
Relationship duration (years)	1.01		0.10	0.96	0.10	1.06		0.11	0.88	0.10	0.94		0.09	1.15	0.14	1.05	0.10	1.20	0.16		
Months since interview	0.98	*	0.01	1.01	0.01	1.02		0.02	1.04	**	0.02	1.00		0.01	1.01	0.01	0.99	0.01	1.02	0.01	
Constant	0.01	***	0.01	0.00	***	0.01	***	0.01	0.00	***	0.01	***	0.01	0.00	***	0.02	***	0.01	0.00	***	0.01
	Norway Model 1					Sweden Model 1					United Kingdom Model 1										
	Marriage		First birth			Marriage		First birth			Marriage		First birth								
	RRR	SE	RRR	RRR	SE	RRR	SE	RRR	RRR	SE	RRR	SE	RRR	RRR	SE						
Relationship quality	1.04		0.16	1.20	#	0.12	1.18	0.24	1.65	**	0.26	1.41	***	0.11	1.07	0.08					
<i>Controls</i>																					
Age	0.93	*	0.03	0.95	***	0.01	1.03	0.03	1.05	*	0.02	1.02	#	0.01	0.95	***	0.01				
Gender (male =ref.)																					
Female	0.91		0.29	0.80	0.14	1.28	0.43	1.03	0.23	0.96	0.12	1.25	0.18								
Relationship history (no prior union=ref.)																					
Had prior union	0.79		0.30	0.90	0.18	1.34	0.49	1.22	0.30	0.61	**	0.10	1.21	0.22							
Relationship duration (years)	1.01		0.10	0.98	0.05	1.30	*	0.15	1.12	0.09	1.11	*	0.05	0.98	0.06						
Months since interview	1.03	**	0.01	1.00	0.01	1.02	0.01	1.00	0.01	0.99	*	0.00	0.99	**	0.00						
Constant	0.02	***	0.02	0.12	***	0.06	0.00	***	0.00	0.00	***	0.00	0.01	***	0.04	***	0.02				

**Table 3:** Analysis 1: Transitions from childless cohabitation to marriage and non-marital childbearing, competing risk hazard models per country, relative risk ratios shown. **Source:** Generations and Gender surveys and UK Household Longitudinal Study. # p<.1, \* p<.05, \*\* p<.01, \*\*\* p<.001

## 4.2. FIRST BIRTH WITHIN MARRIAGE OR COHABITATION

Next, we studied whether relationship quality was associated with having a first birth within both marriage and cohabitation, testing Hypothesis 2, where we expected that cohabitators with higher relationship quality had similar first birth risks to married couples, specifically in countries more accepting of cohabitation. Descriptive statistics for the samples of respondents in childless marriages and cohabiting unions are presented in Table 2 (sample 2). From this table we first note that in most countries around 40% to 45% of respondents experienced a first birth by the end of the follow-up period. In Norway, as many as 54% had had a first child, reflecting the older age profile of the Norwegian sample. Also, we see from Table 2 that the majority of respondents in most countries were cohabiting. The share of cohabitators was particularly high in Sweden (88%), whereas around two-thirds of respondents in Austria, France and the Netherlands were cohabitators.

Results from the hazard models of first birth are shown in Table 4, Model 2. This again showed that relationship quality was unrelated to having a first birth in almost all countries; the association failed to reach significance in Austria, France, Hungary, the Netherlands, Norway, and the United Kingdom. However, in Sweden relationship quality was positively associated with the risk of first birth (OR=1.41,  $p=.006$ ). These findings generally mirror our findings from analysis 1. Furthermore, in all countries, being married increased the risk of having a first birth substantially, although the association between marriage and childbearing failed to reach statistical significance in Norway. Marriage was positively associated with first birth in Austria (OR=1.86,  $p=.002$ ), France (OR=1.96,  $p=.003$ ), Hungary (OR=3.00,  $p<.001$ ), the Netherlands (OR=3.81,  $p<.001$ ), Sweden (OR=1.60,  $p=.023$ ), and the United Kingdom (OR=2.73,  $p<.001$ ).

Interactions between partnership type and relationship quality for first birth were investigated in Model 3 in Table 4. These analyses showed that the association between relationship quality and the risk of first birth did not differ between married and cohabiting couples in most of the countries. However, in Sweden this interaction reached marginal significance ( $p=.094$ ), which indicated that relationship quality was more positively associated with having a first birth for cohabitators than for married individuals. This interaction was not very robust however; when education was included, the interaction term was no longer significant. Thus, we conclude that generally even among couples with the highest levels of relationship quality, married individuals had a higher risk of having a first birth than cohabitators. The same applies to the less happy couples: married individuals still had higher first birth risks than cohabitators even when they had relatively low relationship quality.

	Austria				France				Hungary				Netherlands												
	Model 2		Model 3		Model 2		Model 3		Model 2		Model 3		Model 2		Model 3										
	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE									
Relationship quality <i>Partnership status (cohabitation=ref.)</i>	1.30	0.26	1.55	0.43	1.08	0.16	1.02	0.19	1.09	0.14	1.03	0.17	1.10	0.14	1.18	0.26									
Married	1.86	**	0.38	2.29	**	0.59	1.96	**	0.44	1.87	*	0.47	3.00	***	0.53	2.88	***	0.56	3.80	***	0.75	3.94	***	0.85	
<i>Interaction</i>																									
Relationship Quality*Married			0.57	0.25			1.15	0.35			1.14	0.29			0.90	0.24									
<i>Controls</i>																									
Age	1.03	0.02	1.03	0.02	1.05	*	0.02	1.05	*	0.02	1.00	0.02	1.00	0.02	0.99	0.02	0.99	0.02							
Gender (male =ref.)																									
Female	1.00	0.20	1.00	0.20	1.29	0.32	1.29	0.32	1.17	0.19	1.16	0.19	0.83	0.17	0.83	0.17									
Relationship history (no prior union=ref.)																									
Had prior union	0.84	0.20	0.86	0.20	0.79	0.23	0.77	0.23	1.10	0.22	1.10	0.22	1.09	0.29	1.09	0.29									
Relationship duration (years)	0.97	0.07	0.96	0.07	1.06	0.08	1.06	0.08	0.95	0.06	0.95	0.06	1.04	0.07	1.04	0.07									
Months since interview	1.01	0.01	1.01	0.01	1.02	0.01	1.02	0.01	0.99	0.01	0.99	0.01	1.02	*	1.02	*	0.01								
Constant	0.00	***	0.00	0.00	***	0.00	0.00	***	0.00	0.01	***	0.01	0.01	***	0.01	***	0.00	0.01	***	0.00					
<i>Interaction</i>																									
<i>Controls</i>																									
Age	0.94	***	0.01	0.94	***	0.01	1.01	0.02	1.01	0.02	0.96	***	0.01	0.96	***	0.01									
Gender (male =ref.)																									
Female	0.77	#	0.14	0.77	#	0.14	0.87	0.16	0.90	0.16	0.95	0.08	0.95	0.08											
Relationship history (no prior union=ref.)																									
Had prior union	0.81	0.16	0.81	0.14	1.46	#	0.28	1.46	*	0.28	0.97	0.10	0.97	0.10											
Relationship duration (years)	0.93	0.05	0.94	0.05	1.15	*	0.07	1.16	*	0.07	1.01	0.03	1.01	0.03											
Months since interview	1.00	0.01	1.00	0.01	1.00	0.01	1.00	0.01	0.99	***	0.00	0.99	***	0.00											
Constant	0.21	***	0.08	0.20	***	0.08	0.01	***	0.00	0.01	***	0.00	0.03	***	0.01	***	0.01								

**Table 4:** Analysis 2: Transitions from childless cohabitation or marriage to first birth, risk hazard models per country, odds ratios shown.

**Source:** Generations and Gender surveys and UK Household Longitudinal Study. # p<.1, \* p<.05, \*\* p<.01, \*\*\* p<.001

## 5. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

In nearly every European country, cohabitation and childbearing within cohabitation has increased (Di Giulio et al., 2019; Klüsener, 2015; Perelli-Harris et al., 2012), raising questions about who continues to marry. Here we studied how country context shapes the dynamics of family formation and progression to marriage or childbearing by focusing on relationship quality. We find that marriage continues to be an important marker for relationship progression, on at least a symbolic level, in most European countries under study; in four out of seven countries higher relationship quality was associated with getting married, and in all but one country married couples were more likely than cohabiting couples to have a first birth.

We expected that cohabitators who had higher quality relationships would be more inclined to marry before having a first birth in contexts that were less accepting of non-marital childbearing, but less likely to marry in more accepting contexts. Our findings partly support this view; in Austria, France, Hungary, and the UK higher relationship quality was associated with the risk of marriage, but not in the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden. Instead of marriage, in Sweden, and to a lesser extent Norway, higher relationship quality was associated with having a first birth within cohabitation. To some extent this pattern aligns with the findings from countries where cohabitation and non-marital childbearing is a more normative arrangement. In countries where cohabitation is less normative, such as Austria, Hungary, and the UK, relationship quality is associated with the risk of marriage. In countries where cohabitation is more accepted, such as Sweden and Norway, on the other hand, relationship quality is associated with entry into parenthood. However, our findings regarding France and the Netherlands do not align with this pattern; even though cohabitation is common and accepted in France (Noack et al., 2014), we still find relationship quality is associated with marriage but not childbearing within cohabitation, whereas in the Netherlands it is not associated with either transition.

Although cohabitation and having a first birth within cohabitation has become more common, this study finds that people with higher relationship quality continue to marry, indicating that cohabitation is not indistinguishable from marriage. Instead, in most countries, couples reporting higher relationship quality marry and then have a first birth. Married couples are also more likely to have a first birth than cohabitators at every level of relationship quality, and even among the higher quality couples, marriage mostly precedes first birth. This is not the case in one of the countries where cohabitation is most accepted however, namely Norway. Considering that in Norway and Sweden norms about marriage, cohabitation, and non-marital childbearing are quite liberal (Di Giulio et al., 2019; Holland, 2013; Lappegård & Noack, 2015; Treas et al., 2014) and cohabitation provides similar

(legal) benefits as marriage (Perelli-Harris & Sánchez Gassen, 2012), marriage may be a less relevant marker for family formation there.

Therefore, this study indicates that where cohabitation is less accepted, or marriage has a higher symbolic value, couples who have a higher relationship quality choose to get married and subsequently have an eventual first birth. In contrast, in contexts where cohabitation and non-marital childbearing is more accepted, higher relationship quality is associated with having a first birth, irrespective of marriage, suggesting that marriage and cohabitation differ less in their meaning. The deinstitutionalization of marriage might therefore lead higher quality couples to bypass marriage in their formation of families, opting to have a first birth regardless of marriage. However, it must be noted that marriage has retained much of its symbolic value, even in contexts where marriage is largely deinstitutionalized (Cherlin, 2020; Lappegård & Noack, 2015). Potentially couples with higher quality relationships still might choose to get married, but they do so after childbearing and childrearing, also known as the capstone marriage (Cherlin, 2004; Holland, 2013). As marriage becomes more deinstitutionalized throughout Europe, we might see a switch in the influence of relationship quality as it leads to first birth within cohabitation instead of marriage. Also, whereas prior studies sometimes (implicitly) suggest that marriage induces couples' relationship quality (Brown et al., 2017; Wiik et al., 2012), for instance via enforceable trust (Cherlin, 2004), our results point to a different mechanism, namely the selection of couples with higher relationship quality into marriage in most countries. Partly because in many countries cohabitators with higher relationship quality are more likely to marry, married couples are on average in higher quality relationships than cohabitators, hence contributing to the relationship quality differential between cohabitation and marriage seen in many studies (Wiik et al., 2012).

This study has some limitations. First, not only does the societal context differ, people within countries differ in their views of marriage too (Hiekel et al., 2014), which influences marriage decisions (Žilinčíková & Hiekel, 2018). This within-country diversity and how it interacts with the societal context might be important for understanding how people with a higher relationship quality progress their family formation and offers a potentially promising avenue for future research. Furthermore, we restricted our sample to countries where a sufficient number of people made transitions to marriage and first birth within cohabitation and marriage. This meant that countries where these transitions were rarer, with a smaller sample size, were less likely to be included in this study. Potentially, the associations between relationship quality and family transitions are different in these contexts, but that remains a topic for future research. The sample size was also an issue in the countries that were included. Due to the small sample size, and the rarity of some family

transitions, we were unable to include many control variables to take into account the selectivity of making certain family transitions. Even though we have included the most important factors, others such as income and family background could not be included to avoid over specifying the analytical models. Relatedly, relationship quality could have a small association with childbearing in all countries but did not reach significance due to our smaller sample size. Therefore, our findings should be interpreted with care and provide a descriptive answer on how relationship quality shapes family formation differently across countries, but not a definitive answer. Furthermore, the data that we used contained different measurements of relationship quality across countries, such as relationship happiness and relationship satisfaction. Potentially these different measurements impact couples' relationship progression differently and future research might benefit from using cross-national longitudinal data that is more comparable, which thus far has not been available. Finally, relationship quality was measured at one point in time even though it may change (rapidly).

In total, this study highlights the importance of relationship quality for family transitions. Although prior studies on family formation focused on a variety of individual and couple characteristics, such as economic factors, relationship quality is a key, yet understudied, mechanism. This study shows that relationship quality is important for family formation, but the influence that it has differs by context. In contexts where cohabitation is more widespread, higher relationship quality is associated with a non-marital birth, whereas couples still tend to marry before childbearing in contexts where marriage is preferred. Thus, marriage remains a distinct institution, with cohabitation only a step on the path to family formation in most countries.

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i Percentages provided for the (first) year of the first wave: Austria 2008/2009, France 2005, Hungary 2004, Netherlands 2002, Norway 2007, Sweden 2012, UK 2009

ii Analysing separation as a different competing risk outcome did not change our conclusions.



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