

The ideal and *de facto* timetable for transition to adulthood in Europe: A comparative view from the ESS

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Background

It is a well stylized fact that “with increasing economic prosperity there has been a transition to post-materialism which can be characterized by substantial changes in attitudes to marriage, family and sexuality” (van de Kaa, 1987, cit. in: Blossfeld, 1995: 7). Increased individualization and the emancipation of women are typically viewed as the driving forces that explain the decline of births and the new partnership dynamics over the recent decades, with a systematic trend towards delayed first marriage, increasing cohabitation and rising union disruption (Alwin, 1996: 176). Demographers consider these phenomena in Western societies as being part of the so-called *second demographic transition*.

There are, however, important cross-national variations in the timing and intensity of people’s key life-course events across countries. On the one hand, from the micro-economic perspective, more education and better job opportunities for women increase the opportunity costs of getting married and of having children. Yet, the institutional

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national context, that is to say, the characteristics of the family, the labour market and the welfare state shape the family and work trade-off and may facilitate diverse strategies of family formation in each given country (Blossfeld, 1995). On the other hand, van de Kaa's value-driven theory (1987) emphasizes that these differences are due to the cultural-specific characteristics that facilitate or impede demographic change. Protestantism, for instance, stressing the importance of individual autonomy and consequently women's economic independence, would have favoured these changes whereas Catholicism would have delayed them. Reher (1998) also stresses the importance of historical and cultural patterns of family formation which differentiate Northern and Southern Europe.

Our scope

Using recent data from the Round 3 of the European Social Survey (ESS 2006/2007), this study will provide a detailed comparative picture as whether there are similarities/differences across European countries with regard to: (a) the actual timing of key life events in the transition to adulthood; and (b) attitudes regarding the ideal age and sequencing norms of early life course transitions. The ESS offers comparable information across countries through a standardized interview questionnaire, methodology and procedure. We will try to elucidate whether such similarities/differences among young adults are linked to economic constraints (e.g. unstable attachment to the labour market) or lifestyle options (e.g. inclination to postpone the assumption of long-term family commitments).

First, we will perform a comparative analysis of individuals' age at leaving the parental home, age at first union, age at first marriage, and age at parenthood across European

societies. Then, we will compare the age norms that govern the timetable of these key transitions across societies, as well as the gap between ideal and actual timing of early life course transitions. We will also explore cross-national variations in the conception of adulthood, assessing how important is it for a person to have left the parental home, to have a full-time job, to have lived with a spouse or partner, or to have become a mother/a father to be considered an adult across countries. Similarities/differences will also be shown regarding before/after what age women/men are considered too young/too old to do or experience certain things such as leaving the educational system, having first sexual intercourse, living with a partner, marrying or becoming parents. In so doing, not only will we be able to capture inter-country differences, but also intra-country differences according to gender or educational level.

A wide range of studies have demonstrated that although the link between preferences and actual (future) behavior is ambiguous, at best (Lesthaeghe, 1983, 1998), nevertheless it indicates the extent to which certain events, for instance parenthood, still assume a central position in people's lives. When asked how many children they think is the ideal number in a family, preferences seem to converge in Europe. Available evidence suggests that most women are inclined toward the two-child norm, irrespective of their educational attainment. The reason for which they end up having fewer or no children in some institutional contexts "must be found elsewhere than in a theory of labour-specific or education-based human capital accumulation on the individual level" (Hoem, 1993: 101). Hereby, we compare the ideal and *de facto* timetable of key life course events, including parenthood. By comparing different countries, this study aims at identifying those exogenous factors that may impact on the choices made by women

and men on the family formation process, while also accounting for individual preferences.

Second, some attitudinal profiles will be shown with regard to how much women and men approve or disapprove if a woman/a man chooses never to have children, lives with a partner without being married, has a child within a nonmarital partnership, has a full-time job and children aged under 3, or gets divorced while having children aged under 12. Data will help us ascertain empirically whether there are different models in Europe concerning family roles. Women's and men's different expectations regarding family life transitions might be attributable to gender-specific socialization during childhood and adolescence, since men and women are traditionally raised with different aspirations and receive different education and training which direct their future ambitions and family/professional options (Lesthateghe and Moors, 1995: 220). In addition, female vs. male upbringing is expected to be more unequal in traditional family systems with strict gender-specific labour divisions.

The data

The analysis will be based on data from the European Social Survey (ESS), a biennial multi-country survey covering over 30 countries. The first round was fielded in 2002/2003, the second in 2004/2005 and the third in 2006/2007. The present work will be confined to data from Round 3 (2006/2007), which includes two specific "rotating" modules: (a) *Timing of life* and (b) *Personal and social well-being*.

Countries included in the analysis

The 25 countries that we include in the analysis are as follows: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Latvia, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, UK, and Ukraine.

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