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Partnership Behaviour in Postmodern Times: Singularization of Living Arrangements?

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The last decades of population development in industrialized countries are marked by postponed marriages - if ever they take place -, and the shortening of marriage duration by high divorce rates. Living in non-marital unions more and more is an alternative living arrangement - not only the initiating phase of the traditional legal marriage. This development will be described on the base of retrospective biographies. It will be discussed if consensual unions (within a common household or even as LAT "living apart together") are a result of the need for flexible, volatile life courses in postmodern times. The empirical base will be the GGS (Generations and Gender Survey), performed 2005 in Germany with a sample of 10,000 persons aged 18 to 79 years.

Conceptual framework

In advance the title had been chosen "Singularization of Living Arrangements - Partnership Behaviour in Postmodern Times". As will be demonstrated, this title would not fit the reality. Empirical data do not prove the pessimistic view with the hypotheses of an ongoing individualization and of a loss of importance of partnerships.

Of course we are knowing the decline of marriage rates and the increase of the divorce rates.

Figure 1: Marriage indicators 1950-2004

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Source: Eurostat

In the last 50 years, in Germany the number of marriages has nearly halved. In the EU15 (European Union of 15 countries as of 2003) it has dropped by a quart. Marriage figures for the recent European Union with 25 countries also are showing a nearly continuous shrinking number of marriages. The total first marriage rates in Germany have decreased from 0.92 in 1970 to 0.53 in 2000 for men, resp. 0.98 in 1970 to 0.59 in 2000 for women. That means, former times are gone when nearly every woman and the great majority of men had been married once in their lives. If recent trends continue, about 40 per cent of men and women will stay unmarried the whole life. We may add a remark on the historical change of divorce frequencies in the same time. The total divorce rate has quadrupled from 0.1 in the 1960s to 0.4 in the last decade.

Figure 2: Total divorce rates, 1960-2000

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Source: Eurostat

Becoming aware of this development, sociologists in the 1980s spoke of the individualization of living arrangements.

Explanations concerning the development of living arrangements

Attempts to explain the structural changes often are circular e.g. when they use the assumption that the increase of nonmarital unions is caused by a lower attractiveness of the institution of marriage. Other explanations start with ideological premises, for instance when they are arguing that marriages in principle gain high esteem and therefore only were postponed, but not omitted. Changes in others societal areas are cited like the advanced education, growing labour market flexibility, weakened economic opportunity for new cohorts, unfavourable housing conditions, and rising consumerism (Lesthaeghe, Moors 2000), furthermore feminism and the removal of juridical discrimination especially of consensual unions and nonmarital births (Prinz 1995: 81 pp.). In this manner descriptions of social change become more complete. Claims nevertheless were rash that population structure effects were caused by economic or emancipatoric developments. It is necessary to look for grounded theories.

The "Enquete-Kommission Demographischer Wandel" of the German Bundestag has listed (1) a value oriented approach, (2) an approach following the theory of post-modernisation and (3) the system theory (Deutscher Bundestag 1994: 110 pp.).

The value oriented approach is marked by arguments which demonstrate the threatening of the family or even the breakdown of the nuclear family (Popenoe 1988, Hoffmann-Nowotny 1988). This is seen as a consequence of value and norm change respectively their diminishing commitment force, whereas individualisation values as self fulfilment, self determination and autonomy gain higher acceptance (Klages 1984; Inglehart 1977, 1998). The civil family were underlying a process of de-institutionalisation. The future would show a "big variety of permanently changing and less stable living arrangements" (Hoffmann-Nowotny 1996: 121). The contemporary communitarism is modeling contrasting societal visions (Fukuyama 1999; Miegel, Wahl 1994).

Following representatives of the "post modernisation" behaviour patterns which have been dominant in former times are loosing their function of relief and steering. Therefore also in marital and familiar relations conflicts are igniting by greater options which otherwise are obligations to choose. Within "patch work" biographies phases of different familiar and extra familiar living arrangements would follow one another (Giddens 1992, 1994; Beck 1986; Beck, Beck-Gernsheim 1993, 1994).

In the system theory approach the change of living arrangements is the consequence of societal differentiation into functional divided section systems. This development would involve families. This would not mean a loss of functions but a change of functions of the family which should be understood as part of social networks and as a section system (Meyer 1993; Bengtson 2001).

The three approaches have in common that the development of the population structure is not seen only as the result of general societal developments but that they attach an active influence of populations to societies.

Singularization <> pluralization

"Individualization" of the life course may be accompanied by a "pluralization" of life styles. Pluralization in this context does not only mean that there is a plurality of possible courses, but also that there is a higher volatility to perform some episodes of main life courses and a broader chance resp. risk of transitions from one to another.

This may result to so called patchwork families with members from different living arrangements.

with cross sectional analyses of household statistics, Wagner, Franzmann, and Stauder (2001) have calculated indices of diversity for living arrangements for twelf countries of the European Union (both with the index of entropy and the index of diversity). They concluded that the heterogeneity of living arrangements in 1996 has had a maximum in Danmark and the United Kingdom, whereas Ireland and Spain have been at the opposite of the scale. Germany has been on position 4.

In this paper we will concentrate on living arrangements of young adults. So we will contribute to the discussions about young people and their ability to enter long-term personal commitments.

Empirical data

Data base

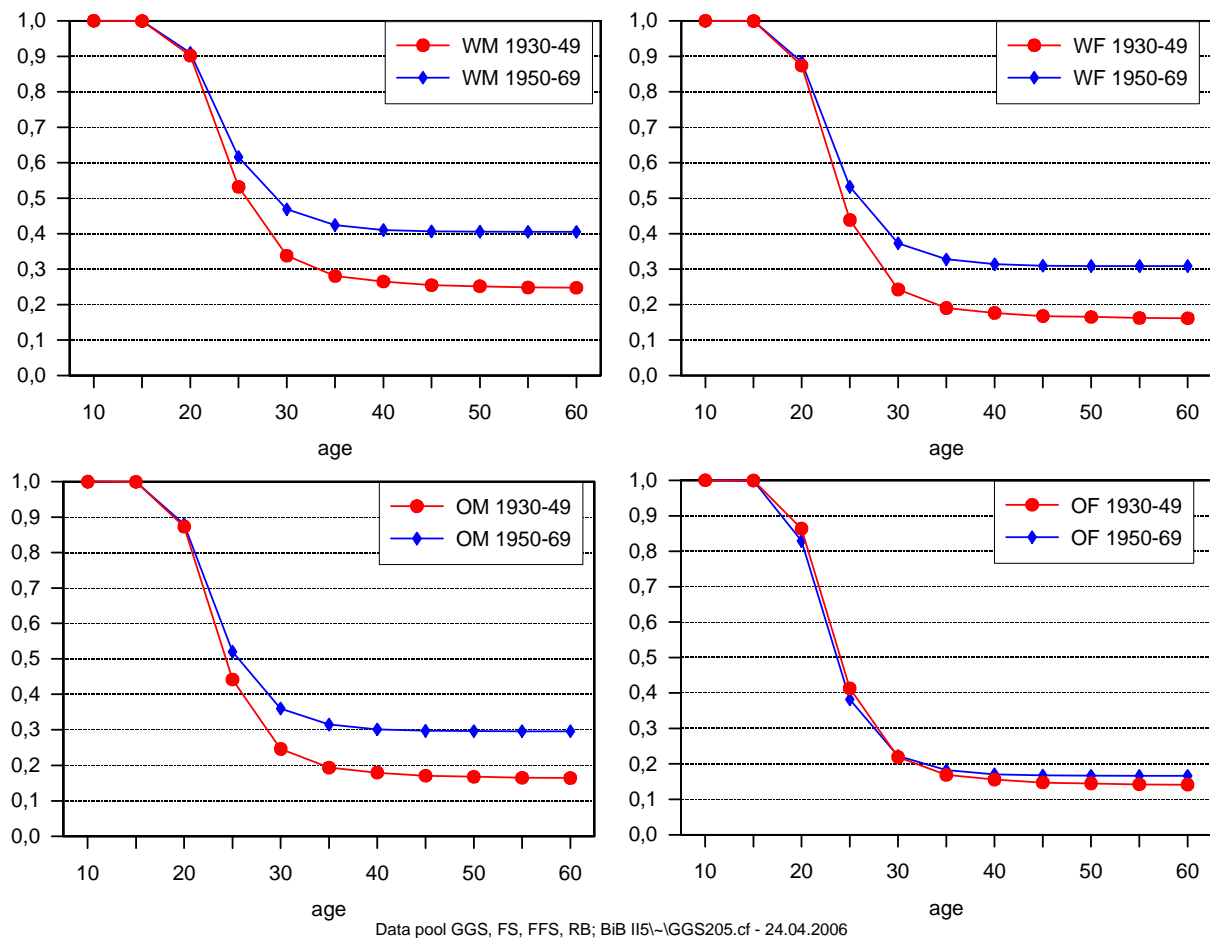
Besides official statistics, our data base consists of some demographic surveys, mainly the Generations and Gender Survey (GGS) which has took place in Germany in 2005 with 10,000 people at age 18 to 79. Other data have been given by the "Familiensurvey", performed 2000 by the Deutsches Jugendinstitut resp. the Family and Fertility Survey (FFS) from 1992 and the "Retrospective Befragung" from 1987. The latter two surveys in Germany had been organized by the BiB.

Decline of marriages

Data on marriages as from official statistics as from our surveys are showing an important decline of nuptiality. In West Germany, about 40 per cent of men born after 1950 stay unmarried for all their lives. This has risen from a level of about 25 per cent with men born between 1930 and 1949. The prevalence not to be married once a life with women has decreased from less than 20 per cent with women born 1930-1949 to 30 per cent with women born 1950-1969. For younger men and women, i.e. born later than 1970, it has not possible to calculate prevalence rates.

In East Germany, nuptiality is still a little higher: “only” 30 per cent of men born after 1950 stay unmarried, compared to about 20 per cent with men of older cohorts. Our survey data for East German women are showing nearly no change: the prevalence to stay unmarried after an age of 35 years is still less than 20 per cent.

Figure 3: Never married, prevalence; WM = West Germany males, WF = West Germany females, OM = East Germany males, OF = East Germany females



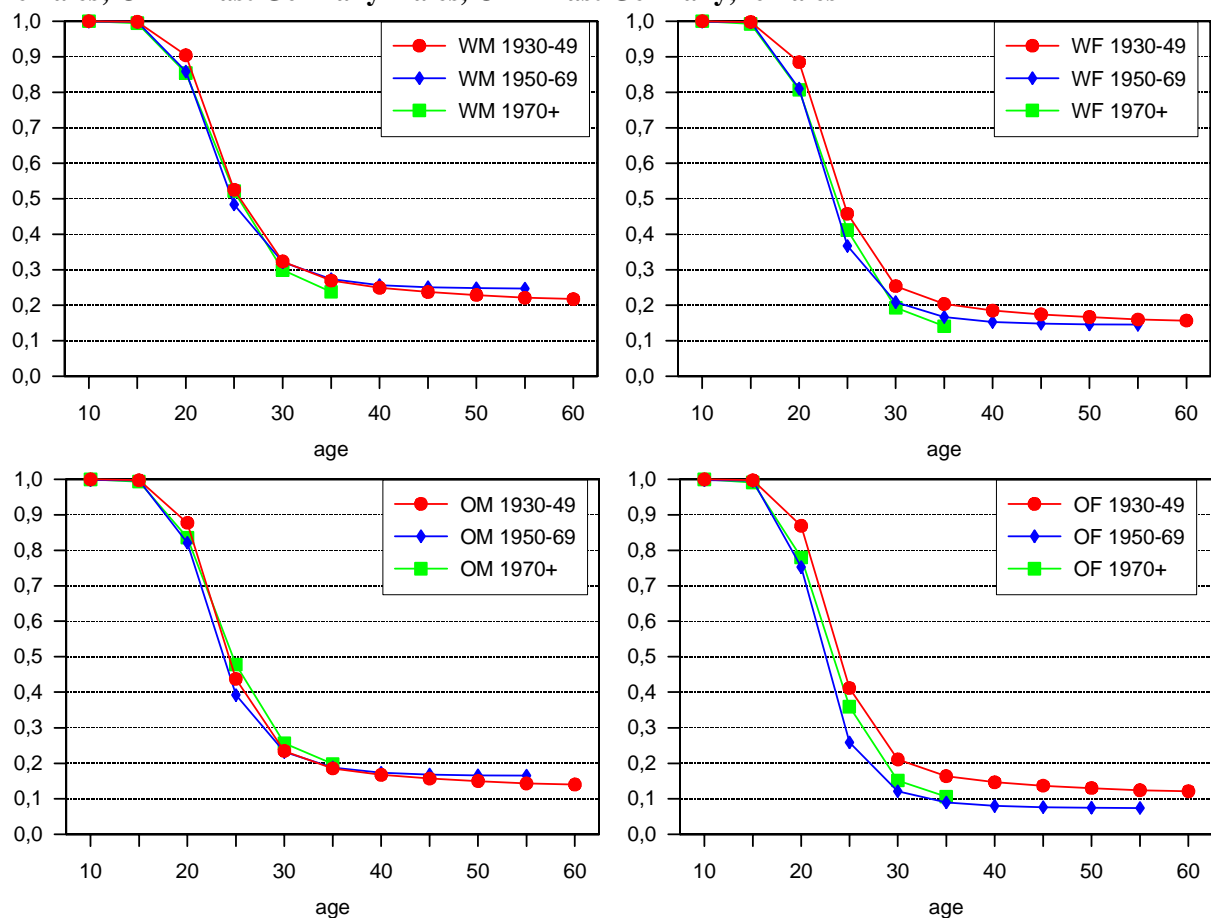
Constance of union formation

Based on household statistics we do know of the growing number of consensual unions. We also are aware of the longer duration of these unions and of the fact that even after the birth of a child more and more couples decide to stay unmarried.

But the most important act of union building is not seized by official statistics: when does it take place, who cohabits with whom, what is the impact of children? As Germany is concerned, the number of registered consensual unions is very small and as far as I know it has not yet become a topic of population statistics. So we are dependent on survey data to get figures and even an idea of what is going on in partnership building and formation of partnership's households.

We analyzed the first unions, i.e. partnerships living in a common household either unmarried - which is the overwhelming majority - or those who started as married couples (“shot-gun marriages”).

Figure 4: Never cohabited, prevalence; WM = West Germany males, WF = West Germany females; OM = East Germany males, OF = East Germany, females



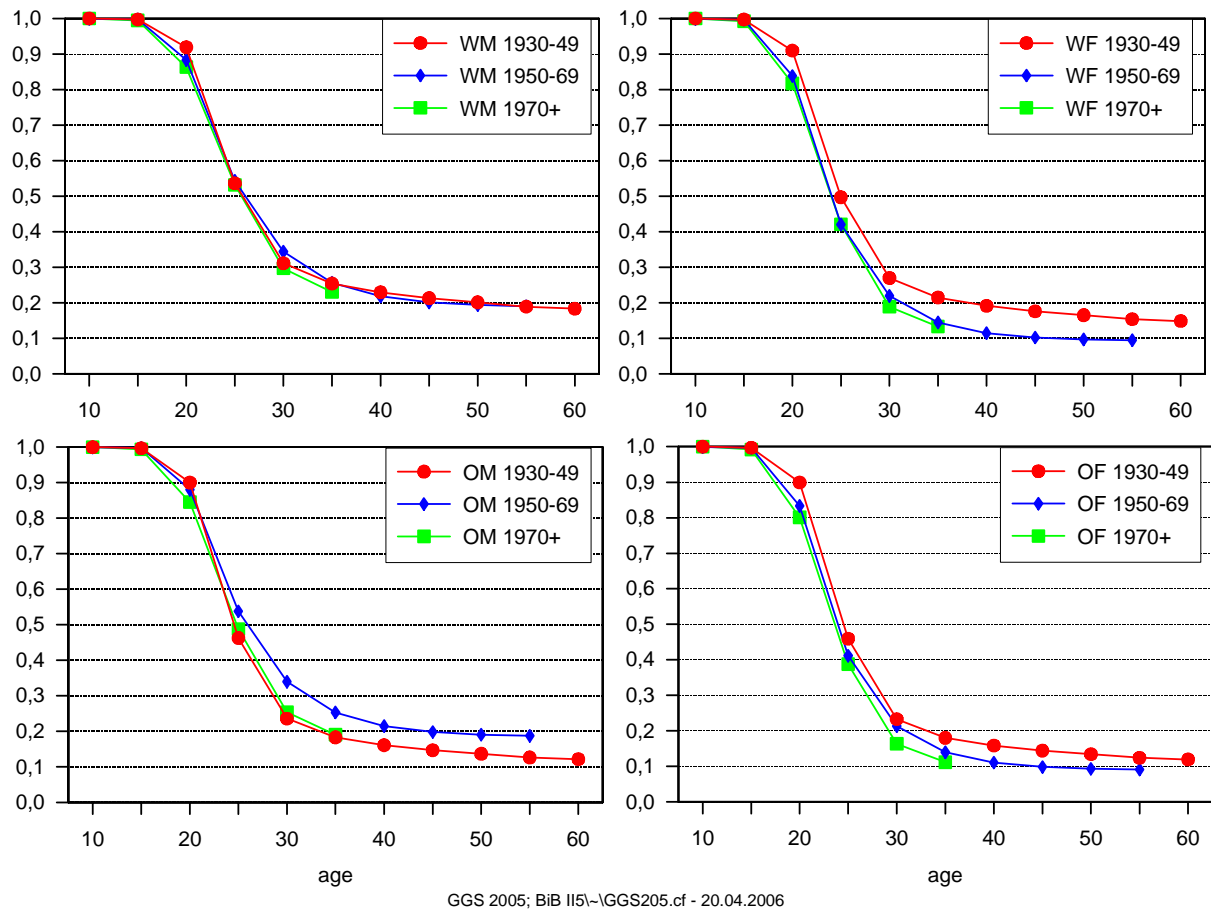
Data pool GGS, FS, FFS, RB; BiB I15\-\GGS205.cf - 24.04.2006

Our pooled data sets are showing a surprise: With men, there is nearly no change between the cohorts from 1930 to our youngest cohorts born about 1985, neither for men in West Germany nor with men in East Germany. At age of about 25 years half of them have entered a union. About 20 per cent don't ever live in an union, somewhat less in East Germany than in West Germany.

Also with women one can hardly see an change of behavior. Reaching the age of 25 half of women as in West as in East Germany had built an union. About 15 per cent of women in West staid without a partner for all their lifes, about 10 per cent in East.

A remark should be given to the lines of the youngest cohorts in West Germany. They are showing that these men and women born after 1970 even start earlier to live together with a partner. Maybe that this result will be affirmed by further research. Otherwise it might be an artefact due to underreporting of earlier unions by the older cohorts.

Figure 5: Never cohabited, prevalence; WM = West Germany males, WF = West Germany females, OM = East Germany males; OF = East Germany females; GGS 2005

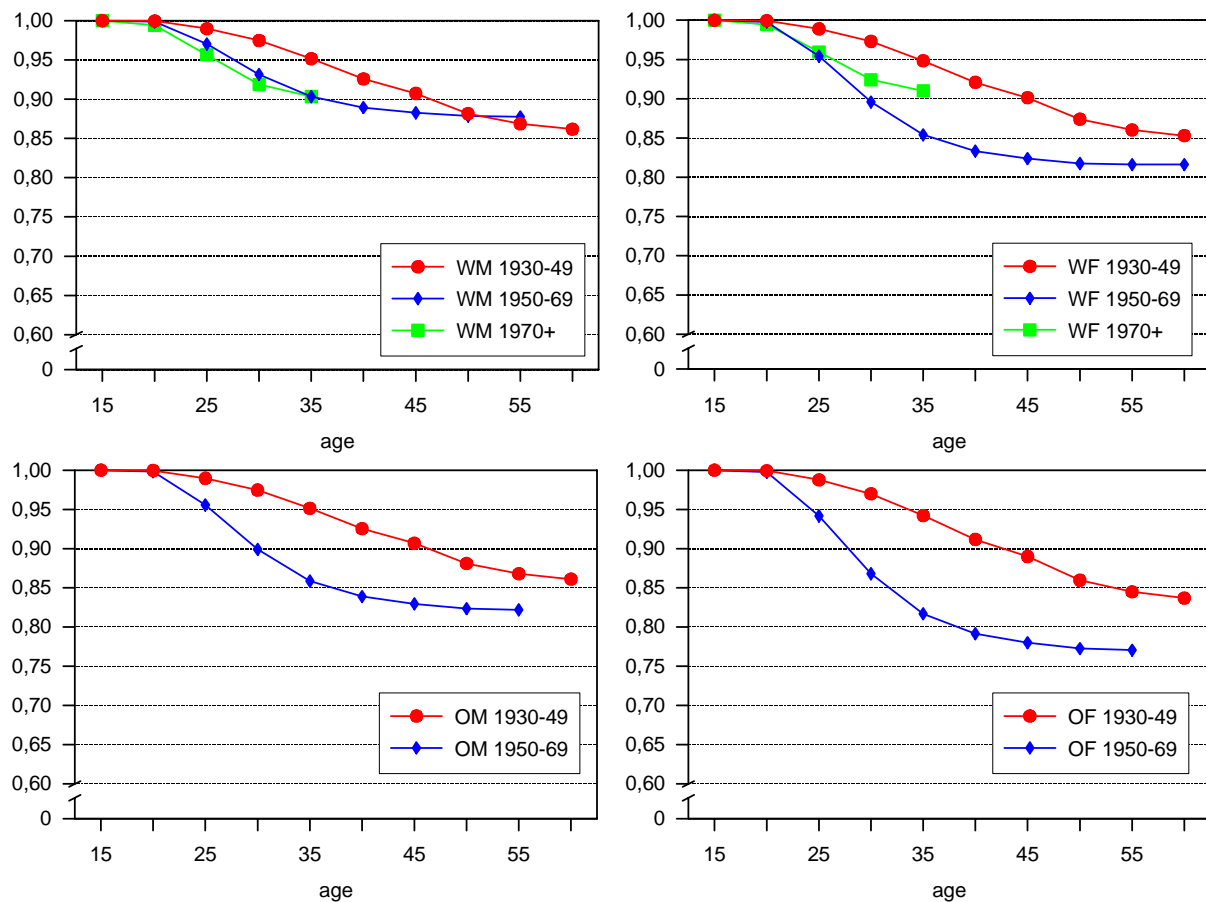


Duration of first marriages

Following our data, the survival of first marriages is about 85 per cent. In West Germany as for the cohorts born 1930-1949 as those of 1940-1959, up to an age of 55 years, 85 per cent of marriages are stable. In East Germany, the survival of marriages is lower for younger cohorts: about 80 per cent with men and 75 per cent with women born 1950-1969. Optical recognition of the survivor function may lead to the assumption that these propensities do not change at ages over 55 years.

For the younger cohorts, born 1970+, the survivor function of marriages is nearly the same with men of the middle cohort, whilst it is higher with women. Due to the small data base comparable figures for East Germany could not be calculated.

Figure 6: Survival of first marriages; WM = West Germany males, WF = West Germany females, OM = East Germany males, OF = East Germany females



Data pool GGS, FS, FFS, RB; BiB II5\-\IGGS205.cf - 24.04.2006

Duration of unions

Analysing the duration of first unions we should remember that here both types are included, consensual unions and marital unions. There are important differences survivor functions compared to those of marital unions only: The lines for the middle cohorts are well below those of the oldest cohorts. There is no subgroup where these lines are crossing or narrowing each other as it has been the case with marriages. On the other hand, it is evident, that the survival of unions of the youngest cohorts is very near to the middle cohorts.

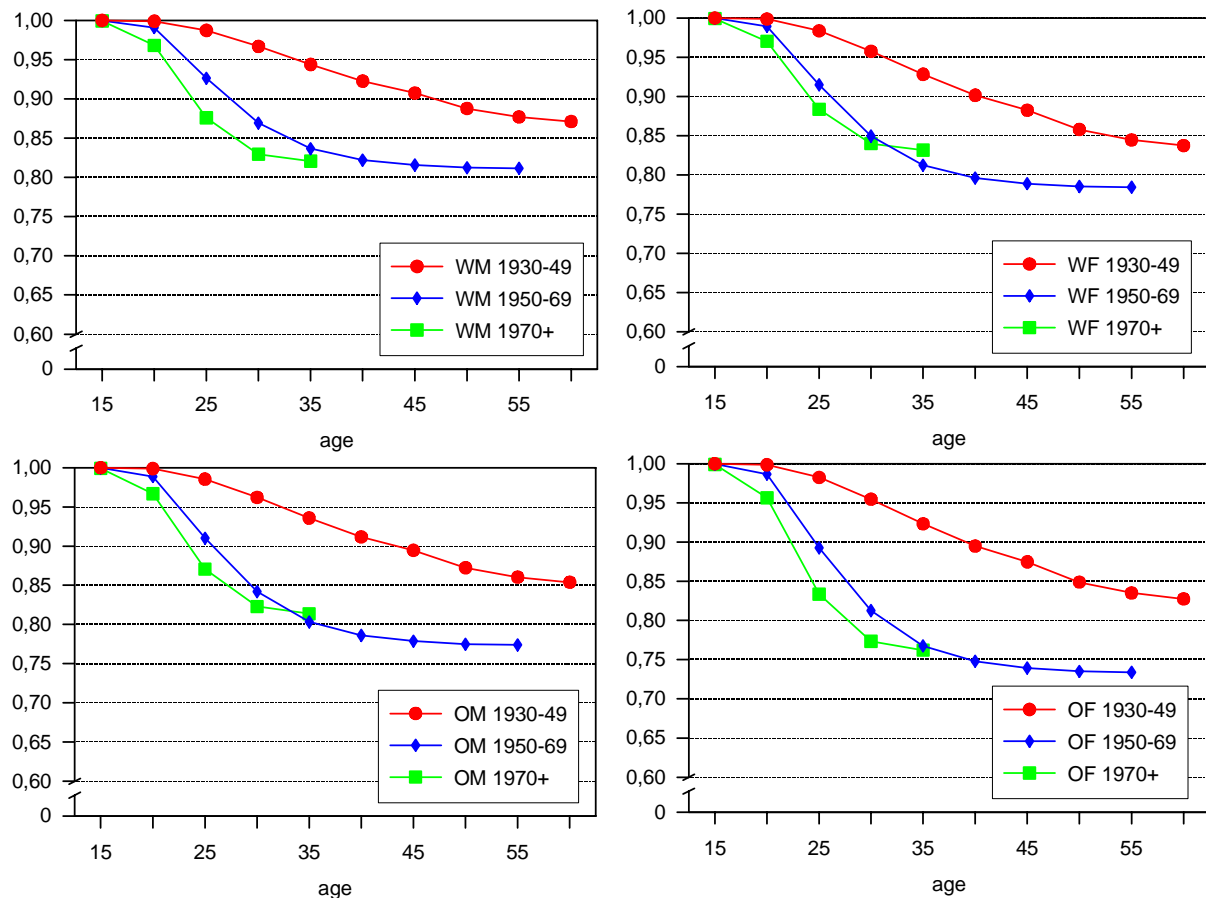
For the oldest cohorts, born 1930-1949, the propensity to stay in a stable union is about 85 per cent with men both in West and East and with females in West. East German women have a somewhat lower survival rate.

Union durations both of the middle and the younger cohorts obviously resemble each other.

Compared to the oldest cohorts the risk of dissolutions of the younger cohorts in general is much more higher.

Looking at the ages until 35, up to a quarter of their unions - in West a little bit less than in East - end in disruption. Having reached the age of about 35, the risk of dissolution apparently is rather low.

Figure 7: Survival of first unions; WM = West Germany males, WF = West Germany females, OM = East Germany males, OF = East Germany females



Data pool GGS, FS, FFS, RB; BiB II5\~\GGS205.cf - 24.04.2006

Conclusions

Sequencing fallacy

Our approach may suffer from an aspect of longitudinal analyses mentioned by Billari and called „sequencing fallacy“.

"However, a picture drawn using only a measure of central tendency can be misleading. The temptation to read the sequence of median ages as a picture of standard sequences in real life courses is very strong. This is a well-known aggregation fallacy of family life cycle analyses, but it continues to be an issue in the analysis of the transition to adulthood. One could call it a 'sequencing fallacy'." (Billari 2001a, S. 124)