

Max-Planck-Institut für demografische Forschung  
Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research  
Doberaner Strasse 114 · D-18057 Rostock · GERMANY  
Tel +49 (0) 3 81 20 81 - 0; Fax +49 (0) 3 81 20 81 - 202;  
<http://www.demogr.mpg.de>

---

MPIDR WORKING PAPER WP 2001-039  
DECEMBER 2001

**Convergence towards diversity?  
Cohort dynamics in the transition  
to adulthood in contemporary  
Western Europe**

Francesco C. Billari ([billari@demogr.mpg.de](mailto:billari@demogr.mpg.de))  
Chris Wilson ([wilson@demogr.mpg.de](mailto:wilson@demogr.mpg.de))

---

© Copyright is held by the authors.

Working papers of the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research receive only limited review. Views or opinions expressed in working papers are attributable to the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Institute.

*Convergence towards diversity?  
Cohort dynamics in the transition to adulthood  
in contemporary Western Europe*

**Francesco C. Billari and Chris Wilson**

Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research  
Doberaner Str. 114  
D-18057 Rostock, Germany  
e-mail: [billari@demogr.mpg.de](mailto:billari@demogr.mpg.de), [wilson@demogr.mpg.de](mailto:wilson@demogr.mpg.de)

**Abstract**

This paper addresses the transition to adulthood in developed countries. It reviews the main theories that have been employed in recent years to explain trends in such variables as age at leaving home, union formation, first marriage and first birth. The paper then examines the median ages at which women in nine European countries experienced these events and the inter-quartile range within each cohort. The results do not provide unequivocal support for any of the main theories. In conclusion we offer some speculative remarks on what form an alternative theory might take.

**Keywords:** transition to adulthood, convergence, Europe, individualization, Second Demographic Transition, theory.

**Main text:** 4,836 words

## **Introduction**

Faced with the complexities of the real world, scholars must make simplifying assumptions. In order to understand how complex societies operate, and how the members of such societies come to take demographic decisions, it is necessary to formulate and test relatively simple hypotheses. The formulation of such hypotheses requires the specification of a clear theoretical basis, while the testing usually involves quantitative assessments. In this paper we aim to investigate how young adults in contemporary European countries make various decisions that, taken together, encompass the main demographic aspects of the transition to adulthood. To do so we first review relevant theories and then carry out an analysis of data from the Family and Fertility Surveys of nine European countries. We then discuss our results and consider what implications they hold for the main theories used to explain early adult demographic behavior.

## **Theoretical background**

Attempts to formulate “grand theories” that explain demographic and family behavior within the context of wider social and economic “development” have a long history. The nature and historical roots of such a “developmental paradigm” have recently been discussed by Arland Thornton in his 2001 Presidential Address to the Population Association of America (Thornton 2001). As he shows, the use of the biological metaphor of development was employed as an analogy for society in Classical Rome and Greece, and led to an underlying assumption of linear change, or “progress”, as the basis for social transformation. “Describing this trajectory of societal development was the main activity of many scholars from the 1600s through the middle 1900s” (Thornton 2001: 459). Indeed, the list of scholars whose work can be regarded as developmental in style that Thornton presents amounts to a roll call of the intellectual precursors of social science. No matter how venerable its pedigree, in his address Thornton argued that such a perspective was “fundamentally flawed and should be totally rejected.” (2001: 460). In particular, he drew attention to the fact that several of the grand theories used to explain demographic change could be regarded as falling within the developmental paradigm. “Sometimes, we describe individuals and societies as moving through developmental stages and we speak of grand

developmental epochs: the first demographic transition; the second demographic transition; and, more recently, the postmodern demographic transition.” (Thornton 2001: 460). Certainly few would doubt that classical demographic transition theory embraces a unidirectional view of change. In the words of one of its earliest proponents, “Every country can be placed on a continuum of progress, as was predicted 50 years ago” (Kirk 1996: 382, referring to Kirk 1944).

The literature discussed by Thornton largely refers to the processes of demographic transition and the form of long-run socio-economic development that is often termed modernization and linked to the concept of convergence. However, numerous scholars have also considered the place of convergence in the developed world. Long run social and demographic trends in Western Europe have been studied in this light by Kaelble (1987, 1990, 1997), while convergence has also been addressed to organize research into such matters as social stratification, industrial sociology and welfare systems (Erikson et al. 1983, Crouch 1999, Kosonen 1995). Similarly, the explicit efforts to produce economic convergence within the European Union, as exemplified by the EU’s Cohesion Fund, have been a subject of considerable scholarly attention (Andreff 1999), while quantitative assessments of convergence play an important role in modern economic growth theory (Barro and Sala-i-Martin 1999). While scholars still debate the origins of economic convergence in Western Europe, there is no doubt that great homogenization has occurred in living standards since 1945. At the national level, real income per head is now almost certainly more homogeneous within the Europe Union than ever before. Such economic forces provide a powerfully convergent backdrop to grand sociological theorizing on convergence. For example, both Beck (1992) and Giddens (1994) have proposed that current trends in European society can best be viewed in terms of universal patterns of change, common to all “late modern” societies.

In contrast to theories that see change as predominantly occurring in similar ways in all developed countries, some scholars emphasize the role of institutional and cultural factors in generating diverse social and demographic outcomes. Indeed, Mayer (1997: 204) has

labeled attempts to find a single trajectory of socio-demographic change within the developed world as “misplaced universalism.” In contrast, he argues that long-standing differences in social and economic institutions play a decisive role in shaping how economic globalization impacts upon life course patterns (Mayer 2001). He suggests that at least four “ideal types” of society can be identified within Western Europe and North America: Scandinavian Social Democratic welfare states (e.g. Sweden); Continental Conservative welfare states (e.g. Germany); Southern European welfare states (e.g. Italy), and Liberal Market states (e.g. UK, USA). From this point of view, little if any convergence is to be expected in life course patterns, as long as the underlying institutional structures remain different. For understanding the demography of early adult life, the main institutional considerations are likely to be those which pertain to the education system, and the housing and labor markets.

An additional perspective on diversity in European family patterns comes from the work of Reher (1998) who points to enduring differences in family systems. He contrasts family patterns in Southern Europe (based on “strong” ties) with those of North-Western Europe, where, he argues, ties have been “weak” for centuries. These arrangements are seen as having significant impact on life course transitions. Similar views have been expressed by Hofstede (1981) and Micheli (2001). “In the Western World it is not difficult to identify areas where families and family ties are relatively ‘strong’ and others where they are relatively ‘weak’” Reher (1998:203). Moreover, “These divergent practices appear to have deep historical roots’ Reher (1998: 204). In a similar vein, Poos (1986:245) argues that, “In future, it will, it seems, be increasingly more difficult to single out earlier factors as monocausal agents of social change over the European landscape.”

From a logical point of view the arguments of Mayer, on the one hand, and Reher on the other can be seen as identifying two separate forces. Mayer’s line of argument stresses the path dependence of institutions, while Reher’s work places greater emphasis on the initial conditions from which modern European societies have developed. The potential significance of this distinction in understanding long-run social and demographic change is

discussed by Goldstone (1998). For present purposes, the most important point to note is that both the cultural inheritance model and the institutional constraints approach imply that convergence is not to be expected at the national level. “No matter how nearly universal the factors of modernization may be, once they enter into contact with different historical, cultural, geographical, or social realities, the end result will necessarily be different in each context” Reher (1998: 221). As an example of how a distinction between path dependence and initial conditions may be relevant to the interpretation of enduring differences we can turn to an example from the field of social capital. When discussing North-South contrasts in the level of trust in Italian society, Mutti (2000: 583) says, “Lack of institutional trust is not associated with a significant lack of interpersonal trust; this is better explained by the peculiar political and historical process of Italian state building rather than by familism.” Whatever the origins of enduring regional and national specificity, it is clear that it implies a very different view of the process of social change from unidirectional models.

Watkins (1990), studying the transformation of demographic regimes in Western Europe over the 1870-1960 period, argued that diversity within countries (starting from a regional perspective has diminished. A further dimension of diversity within developed societies that has drawn attention in recent years is the phenomenon of “individualization”, for which the emphasis is put at the individual level. Some scholars interested to explain behavior in contemporary Europe and North America have argued that increasing diversity is both in evidence and to be expected on theoretical grounds. Authors such as Kohli (1986) and Buchmann (1989) argue that while all countries can be expected to converge in their demographic behavior, increasing diversity at the individual level is to be expected. This arises because society is moving away from “standardized” scripts and towards greater individualization. In short, such theory predicts the “convergence towards diversity” mentioned in the title of this paper. Shanahan (2000) provides an introduction to the sociological literature concerning standardization and individualization of the life course. In this paper, as far as possible we avoid repeating his summary and focus below on more specifically demographic aspects of these changes.

Within the specifically demographic literature, the most widely employed theoretical framework involving individualization is that of the “Second demographic transition”. This has probably been the most influential model of contemporary demographic change in Europe since its formulation in the mid-1980s. However, the ubiquity with which the term has been applied over the last 15 years leads to two problems. Firstly, the term has gained such currency as a label for a set of supposedly inter-related changes that its usage has escaped from the control of its initial proponents. The first use of the term was deliberately cautious, with even the title of the article ending in a question mark: “*Twee demografische transitities?*” (Two demographic transitions?) (Lesthaeghe and Van de Kaa 1986). Whatever the caution of its creators, the widespread, looser use of the term can confuse the business of formulating precise tests. Moreover, as the authors of the term have noted in later work, rapid change in the demographic and life-course profiles of different parts of Europe has fundamentally altered the social landscape since the term was first proposed. For example, when first outlined, second demographic transition theory assumed that a positive relationship existed between movement through that transition and low fertility. “Sweden and Denmark have progressed furthest with the family formation changes that have led to very low fertility” (Van de Kaa 1987: 12). However, rapid falls in fertility in Southern Europe soon made this assumption untenable. The situation today is, of course, reversed. The countries that seem to be laggards in the second demographic transition have the lowest fertility, while the avant-garde of Scandinavia and Northern Europe have relatively high fertility. Recent work by Lesthaeghe (2000, 2001) has focussed on the role of second demographic transition variables in accounting for the marked tendency to delay childbearing in all developed countries and its influence on the extent of any recuperation at older ages of fertility foregone before age 30. In addition, authors writing within a second demographic transition framework have also acknowledged the strength of institutional and cultural determinants of fertility. For example, Lesthaeghe (2001: 27-28) lists 14 underlying social and economic changes that can be presumed to be relevant, and then adds, “Obviously, this list is by no means limitative (sic).”

However, while the literature inspired by the concept of the second demographic transition is large and detailed, its basic premises are well summed up by de Beer, Corijn and Deven (2000: 117). “The concept of the second demographic transition refers to important changes in family behaviour, such as an increase in unmarried cohabitation, the postponement of marriage and parenthood and an increase in childlessness.” As they also explain, drawing on definitions made in Van de Kaa (1997), there have been “three major shifts since the 1960s: (1) changes in contraceptive behaviour; (2) changes in the level and pattern of fertility; (3) changes in the timing, frequency and stability of unions.” In all cases, second demographic transition theory proposes, *ceteris paribus*, that we should expect to see increasing individualization of such life-course transitions within each country, but increasing homogeneity of national experience. Or, at least, evidence of change in the same direction. That is to say, convergence towards diversity. As de Beer, Corijn and Deven (200: 115) put it “The concept of the Second Demographic Transition ... suggests that European countries experience one common transition process. This implies that differences across European countries are temporary. Inter-country differences are due to the fact that countries are in a different stage of the transition process.” Similarly Van de Kaa (1987: 12) in discussing Southern Europe states that “The second transition is late, but there is little doubt that it has begun and will be completed.”

In sum, we can make a broad contrast between the different grand theories in terms of basic predictions for the nature and direction of demographic change in contemporary Europe. The work of scholars stressing cultural determinants of the life-course makes for straightforward summary. There should be enduring diversity at the national level. Institutional theory also posits continuing differences between countries, and additionally suggests increasing individual diversity within each country. A further element of difference between theories involves which countries might be expected to show similar trends. For example, institutional theorists expect countries with similar welfare state systems to show similar demographic profiles. Whereas, the same distinctions may not apply if more purely cultural factors are expected to be decisive. Second demographic transition theory can essentially be seen as one dimension of wider individualization theory,

with a similar expectation of convergence to diversity. It also implies a number of specific expectations with regard to relative change in the different countries of Europe. For example, as Lesthaeghe and Moors (2000: 165) put it, “Scandinavian countries have taken the lead in the ‘destandardization’ ... and so far no other country has joined their cluster.” In contrast, the countries of Southern Europe are generally seen as laggards in these terms.

### **Quantification and testing**

Although assumptions about convergence lie at the heart of many theories of social and demographic change, there is a surprising lack of quantitative assessment of its nature and strength in contemporary societies. This is especially true for systematic comparative analyses. In contrast, as mentioned above, quantitative assessments of convergence play an important role in economics, being fundamental contributions to modern economic growth theory (Barro and Sala-i-Martin 1999, Landau, Taylor and Wright 1996). Coleman (1998, 2001) provides a comprehensive review of recent convergence in the basic demographic indices of fertility and mortality among developed countries, while Wilson (2001) examines global convergence in the same variables. Summing up his results, Coleman (2001: 26) states that, “Convergence is to be expected on various plausible pretexts. But the data from 1950 to 1995 lead us to mixed conclusions.” In contrast, Wilson (2001) emphasizes the speed with which the first demographic transition has led to global convergence in the underlying demographic parameters of fertility (measured in the total fertility rate) and mortality (life expectancy). For example, he states that “it is highly likely that by 2010 a majority of the world’s population will live in places where fertility is below the level of long-run replacement, quite possibly by as early as 2005” (Wilson 2001: 165). The impending world-wide completion of the first transition makes it all the more important that demographers come to understand the determinants of post-transitional patterns (Arnett 2000: 478).

While convergence in measures such as total fertility and life expectancy has been quantitatively assessed, there is very little systematic comparative literature on the demographic markers of transition to early adulthood. The early adult years have been

characterized by Rindfuss (1991: 496) as demographically “dense”: “More demographic action occurs in these years than during any other stage in the life course.” This leads to great scope for generating diversity of outcome. Thus early adulthood is a laboratory for testing the grand explanatory schemas. However, systematic comparative studies remain rare, with analysis of individual countries still the norm. The need for comparative work has been emphasized by Goldscheider (2000: 11-12), “It is unlikely, however, that studies of single countries will provide the answers. Non-family living, both in young adulthood and other stages of the life course, is part of a package of recent family changes that have swept much of the industrialized world in the past quarter century, ‘the second demographic transition’. This makes research on Europe so important.” However, as Shanahan (2000: 671) notes, “The new individualization hypothesis is difficult to demonstrate by empirical study because it requires a systematic analysis of the timing and sequencing of adult transition markers based on adequate time series both before and after the mid-1960s.”

We are not able in this paper to meet this requirement fully. However, the Family and Fertility Surveys (FFS) carried out in the late 1980s and early 1990s in many European countries offer some measure of progress towards this goal. In the next section of the paper we examine median age and inter-quartile ranges in four markers of the transition to adulthood: leaving home, formation of first union, marriage and first birth. We also examine the sequence in which these events occur. The time series do not deal with the period before the mid-1960s, as the earliest events that contribute to this analysis date from circa 1965. However, we hope that any marked trend towards individualization over the following quarter century should be apparent from the results presented.

We present results in graphical form for five-year birth cohorts of women born 1946-50 to 1961-65. The numbers behind these graphs are given in the appendix, along with analogous results for men. The broad conclusions of the paper are the same for both sexes, and to avoid repetition only the female graphs are shown below. The data are taken from FFS surveys for nine Western European countries carried out around 1990: Austria, Belgium,

Finland, France, Germany (West), Italy, Portugal, Spain and Sweden. In selecting these countries we have attempted to provide examples of three of the four ideal types of modern welfare state identified by Mayer (2000). Sweden and Finland clearly fall into his "Scandinavian Social Democratic" type, whilst Italy, Portugal and Spain are obviously "Southern European". The remaining countries broadly fall into his "Conservative Continental" category. We also follow Mayer's suggestion in limiting the number of countries we attempt to study. As he puts it, "An individualizing strategy for comparisons - focussing on a few specific nations - will be more fruitful than a universalizing strategy" (Mayer 1997: 222). Our statistical presentation is kept deliberately elementary in order to enhance accessibility. Experience with more elaborate formulations in individual countries leads us to believe that the main conclusions are readily apparent in this simple data presentation. A focus on the median and inter-quartile range was used by Zeng Yi et al. (1994) for a comparative analysis of age at leaving home, and the present paper proceeds in similar fashion. The importance of studying the sequencing of events in the transition to adulthood has been put forward by, among others, Hogan (1978), Marini (1984), and Rindfuss et al. (1987). A more formal consideration of the topic of sequencing is given in Billari (2001).

## **Results**

We here discuss the results for women only (complete results for women and men are given in the appendix). We present a series of graphs. Figure 1 presents median age at each marker event, Figure 2 gives the inter-quartile range around each of these medians, and Figure 3 presents the sequence analysis. Figures 1 and 2 come in four parts, one for each marker, while three different sequencing variables are presented in Figure 3.

[Figures 1, 2 and 3 about here].

Taking the graphs in Figure 1 as a whole, it is clear that there are substantial on-going differences between the countries studied. In most cases, these persistent differences between countries are larger than any trends over time. For example, the median age at

leaving home given in Figure 1a varies by at least four years for each cohort, while change over time is modest. In so far as trends are apparent in the age at leaving home, they suggest a slight widening of inter-country differences, with the clearest changes being increasing age in Italy and Spain. Figure 1b, giving the age at first union for the various cohorts, shows somewhat more change, but the rank ordering of countries remains broadly stable, with the countries of Southern Europe again registering the highest values. As with leaving home, there is no evidence of convergence, but rather a slight trend towards greater diversity. Figure 1c on marriage is clearly distinctive in one regard: the experience of Sweden. This is so different from the rest of Europe, even from its Nordic partner Finland, as to merit being seen as *sui generis*. In effect, the social meaning of marriage has changed more fundamentally in Sweden than elsewhere (Hoem and Hoem: 1988). Not only is age at marriage much higher in Sweden than in the other countries considered here, but there is no value plotted for the final Swedish cohort; fewer than half of all women had married by the time of the survey. Most countries show an increasing age at marriage, and there has been more change in the rank ordering of countries than is evident in the first two graphs. Although there is a clear time trend in marriage age, it is hard to see much evidence of convergence. If anything, the results point to marginally greater diversity. Finally Figure 1d considers age at first birth. The well-known trend to delayed childbearing is evident here, but as in the rest of Figure 1 there is no sign of convergence. The spread of countries is in fact largest for the most recent cohort.

The results on median ages given in Figure 1 will be familiar to anyone who has studied the recent history of family formation in Europe. Figure 2, however, deals with less conventionally studied terrain: assessing within country diversity by means of the inter-quartile range. There is little or no sign in Figure 2a of a marked trend towards increasing diversity, as might be expected from the individualization hypothesis. However, it provides striking evidence of enduring differences across Europe. The age at leaving home is highly concentrated in Sweden, and to a lesser degree elsewhere in Northern Europe, while in Southern Europe the range is large and increasing. Although the North-South contrast is more modest in age at first union presented in Figure 2b, Italy remains distinctly more

diverse than any of the other countries. On average, there is an overall trend to a larger range, but the change over time remains less than the cross-sectional differences between countries. The distinctiveness of Swedish marriage patterns is again apparent in Figure 2c, with both the latter two cohorts failing to reach the 75% married level by the time of the survey. So significant has been the growth in non-marital cohabitation and childbearing in Sweden that it is quite likely that these cohorts will never reach the upper quartile. Some indication of the spread of late-marriage, or possibly non-marriage, to other countries is indicated by the fact that the most recent cohorts in Finland, France and Western Germany also had not passed the 75% level. In sum, there is evidence of increasing diversity in marriage age in all countries. Finally Figure 2d presents the inter-quartile range in age at first birth. This too has increased somewhat, but the change over time is smaller than the international differences. The largest change in the direction of diversity is seen in Italy and Spain.

When considering the issue of different family formation regimes, the study of the sequence in which people experience the various life course marker events offers a novel and particularly insightful perspective. The age at which events occur is to some extent constrained by both biological maturation and social convention. Thus the extent of diversity is inevitably circumscribed. However, a variable such as the percentage of individuals who leave home before forming a union, or who enter a first union before marriage, can potentially vary from zero to 100. As Figure 3 shows, this potential range is to a large extent realized within the European experience. Figure 3a shows the percentage leaving the parental home before forming their first union. The range in this variable is very large, from less than 10% in early cohorts in Spain to over 60% in all Swedish cohorts. Moreover, the values are mostly stable over time, with little change in the rank ordering. The percentage who form a union before marriage shows an increasing trend, but the changes over time are limited in Southern Europe. There is evidence in Figure 3b that much of Northern Europe is converging to a high value in this measure, but only very tentative signs of change in Italy, Spain, and Flemish Belgium. Finally Figure 3c considers the percentage of women who give birth before marriage. As with the measures of marriage

age, there is reason to regard Sweden as a case to itself. Again, there is evidence of change in some Western European countries in the direction of convergence to the Swedish level, but trends are modest compared with the continuing gap between Sweden and the rest. The countries of Southern Europe, along with Flanders, show virtually no convergent trend (see also Kiernan, 1999).

How can we summarize the results presented in these graphs? To say the least, they do not offer strong confirmation of either the individualization hypothesis in general or its specific variant in second demographic transition theory. Some variables show inter-country convergence for some cohorts, but more evidence points towards the persistence of national differences or towards greater diversity. Moreover, it is not clear that the supposed leaders of the trend towards individualization, the Nordic countries, fully justify that characterization. In fact, rather than destandardization, some aspects of the transition to adulthood seem remarkably homogeneous, especially in Sweden. Perhaps change there might be better seen as the establishment of a new “standard” script for early adult life, rather than individualization. Similarly, the countries of Southern Europe, especially Italy, often portrayed as laggards in the processes of the second demographic transition, emerge as the most diverse and hence most “individualized” in several respects. Some of the possible implications of these results are considered in the final section of the paper.

### **Conclusions and speculations**

We began this paper by asserting the need to make simplifying assumptions in order to make progress in understanding society. None of the unidirectional grand theories receives unambiguous support from our results. Rather than showing evidence for international convergence towards individual diversity, the results suggest instead surprisingly stable national patterns in the transition to adult life. In this respect, our conclusions mirror those of de Beer et al (2000: 124) when they say that their comparison of the Netherlands and Flanders indicates that “the different types of change in family and fertility behaviour cannot simply be interpreted in terms of one model of the second demographic transition.” They go on to conclude that “If even these two resembling (sic), neighbouring countries do

not experience the same transition process, it will be less likely still that other European countries go through one common process.” Our results confirm this expectation of diversity. Similar points have been made by Kuijsten (1996), Holdsworth and Elliot (2001) and Lesthaeghe (2001). Moreover, the institutional life course approach offers only a limited additional guide to the observed patterns. For example, in terms of its broad socio-economic policy environment it seems likely that Belgium (including Flanders) would be classed along with Western Germany. However, in many respects Flemish women show patterns of early adult life that are closer to those seen in Italy or Spain. Thus we echo the words of Hantrais (1997, 375-6), that policy “should be seen as one among many factors contributing to a compromise worked out in each national context in the face of competing, and often conflicting, demands”. Nor can cultural inheritance explain all. Some of the most dynamic changes evident in our results are seen in Italy and Spain, a fact that seems hard to explain in terms simply of cultural continuity.

Where does this leave the study of the transition to adulthood? What scope exists for fruitful generalization? In our view, the most insightful approach will be one recognizing the inherent path dependencies in socio-demographic change. We need to build theoretical structures capable of explaining multiple equilibria and the “lock-in” of institutional arrangements and cultural preferences. Although rare within demography (Kohler 2001), this approach has a more prominent place in economics (Arthur 1994). Rather than seeing life course changes as being driven by strongly determined trends towards country-level convergence, of either the simple form or the individualization variety, perhaps we should see recent trends as being “enabling”? With increasing wealth in European countries many of the material constraints on life course transitions have been reduced or removed. Thus, individuals in different societies are freer than ever before to give free rein to their preferences. Evidence from Europe suggests that these preferences differ according to cultural context. Institutional constraints clearly remain, in such matters as housing, education and the labor market. However, these constraints themselves are to a considerable degree culturally determined. It is through building theories capable of

addressing the enduring diversity of national experience that demographers will gain deeper insights into the nature of the early adult life course.

### **Acknowledgements**

Presentations based on this paper were given at the EURESCO Conference "The Second Demographic Transition in Europe", Bad Herrenalb, Germany, 23-28 June 2001, and at the Annual Conference of the British Society for Population Studies, Leeds, UK, 3-5 September 2001. We thank the participants at these conferences for useful feedback. The authors wish to thank the Advisory Group of the FFS programme of comparative research for its permission, granted under identification number 75, to use the FFS data on which this study is based. The views expressed in this paper are attributable to the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research.

## References

Andreff, Wladimir. "Nominal and real convergence," in Jozen M. vanBrabant (ed.) *Remaking Europe: The European Union and the Transition Economies*. Lanham.

Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen. 2000. Emerging adulthood: a theory of development from the late teens through the twenties," *American Psychologist* 55: 469-480.

Arthur, W. Brian. 1994. *Increasing Returns and Path Dependence in the Economy*. Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan University Press.

Barro, Robert J. and Xavier Sala-I-Martin. 1999. *Economic Growth*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Beck, Ulrich. 1992. *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. London: Sage.

Billari, Francesco. 2001. "The analysis of early life courses: complex descriptions of the transition to adulthood," *Journal of Population Research*, forthcoming.

Billari, Francesco, Dimiter Philipov and Pau Baizán. 2001. *Leaving Home in Europe: the Experience of Cohorts Born Around 1960*. Working Paper 2001-14, Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research. *International Journal of Population Geography*, forthcoming.

Buchmann, Marlis. 1989. *The Script of Life in Modern Society: Entry into Adulthood in a Changing World*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Coleman, David A. 1998. *Reproduction and Survival in an Unknown World: What Drives Today's Industrial Populations, and to What Future*. NIDI Hofstee Lecture, Amsterdam, May 1998

Coleman, David. A. 2001. *Populations of the Industrial World – a Convergent Community?* Oxford Working Paper on Population, 5.

Crouch, Colin. 1999. *Social Change in Western Europe*. Oxford.

De Beer, Joop, Martine Corijn and Fred Deven. 2000. "Summary and conclusions." In Joop De Beer and Fred Deven. (eds.) *Diversity in Family Formation: the 2<sup>nd</sup> Demographic Transition in Belgium and the Netherlands*. Dordrecht, Boston and London: Kluwer.

Erikson, Robert, John H. Goldthorpe and Lucienne Portocarero. 1983. "Intergenerational class mobility and the convergence thesis: England, France and Sweden," *British Journal of Sociology* 34: 303-343.

Giddens, Anthony. 1994. "Living in a post-traditional society," in Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash (eds.) *Reflexive Modernisation*, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

- Goldscheider, Frances. 2000. "Why study young adult living arrangements? A view of the second demographic transition." Paper presented at the workshop *Leaving Home: A European Focus*, Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research, Rostock, Germany, September 2000.
- Goldstone, Jack A. 1998. "Initial conditions, general laws, path dependence and explanation in historical sociology," *American Journal of Sociology* 104: 829-845.
- Hantrais, Linda. 1997. "Exploring relationships between social policy and changing family forms within the European Union," *European Journal of Population* 13: 339-379.
- Hoem, Britta and Jan Hoem (1988), "The Swedish Family. Aspects of Contemporary Developments", *Journal of Family Issues*, 9(3): 394-424.
- Hofstede, G. 1981. *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-related Values*. London: Sage.
- Hogan, Dennis P. 1978. "The variable order of events in the life course," *American Sociological Review*, 43: 573-86.
- Holdsworth, Clare and Jane Elliot. 2001. "The timing of family formation in Britain and Spain," *Sociological Research Online* ([www.socresonline.org.uk](http://www.socresonline.org.uk))
- Kaelble, Hartmut. 1987. *Auf dem Weg zu einer europaeischen Gesellschaft*. Munich, Germany.
- Kaelble, Hartmut. 1990. *A social history of Western Europe 1880-1880*. Dublin, Ireland.
- Kaelble, Hartmut. 1997. "Europaeisches Vielfalt und der Weg zu einer europaeischen Gesellschaft," in Stefan Hradil and Stefan Immerfall (eds.) *Die westeuropaeischen Gesellschaften im Vergleich*. Opladen, Germany, 27-68.
- Kiernan, Kathleen. 1999. "Childbearing outside marriage in Western Europe". *Population Trends* 98: 11-20.
- Kirk, Dudley. 1944. "Population change and the post-war world," *American Sociological Review* 91, 28-35.
- Kirk, Dudley. 1996. "Demographic transition theory," *Population Studies* 50.
- Kohler, Hans-Peter. 2001. *Fertility and Social Interaction. An Economic Perspective*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kohli, M. 1986. "The world we forgot: a historical review of the life course," in V.W. Marshall (ed.) *Later Life*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Kosonen, Pekka. 1995. "European welfare state models: converging trends," *International Journal of Sociology* 4: 81-110.

Kuijsten, Anton. 1996. "Changing family patterns in Europe: a case of divergence?," *European Journal of Population* 12:2, 115-143.

Landau, Ralph, Timothy Taylor and Gavin Wright. 1996. *The Mosaic of Economic Growth*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Lesthaeghe, Ron. 1991. *The Second Demographic Transition in Western Countries: an Interpretation*. Working Paper, IPD, Brussels.

Lesthaeghe, Ron. 2000. *Europe's Demographic Issues: Fertility, Household Formation and Replacement Migration*. Working Paper 2000-6, IPD, Brussels.

Lesthaeghe, Ron. 2001. "Postponement and recuperation: recent fertility trends and forecasts in six Western European countries." Paper presented at IUSSP Seminar on "International Perspectives on Low Fertility", Tokyo, Japan, March 2001.

Lesthaeghe, Ron and G Moors. 2000. "Recent trends in fertility and household formation in the industrialized world," *Review of Population and Social Policy* 9: 121-170.

Lesthaeghe, Ron and Dirk Van de Kaa 1986. "Twee demografische transitie," in Dirk Van de Kaa and Ron Lesthaeghe (eds.) *Groei en Krimp*. Deventer, Netherlands: Van Loghum-Slaterus.

Marini, Margaret M. 1984. "The order of events in the transition to adulthood," *Sociology of education*, 57: 63-84.

Mayer, Karl Ulrich. 1997. "Notes on a comparative political economy of life courses," *Comparative Social Research* 16: 203-226.

Mayer, Karl Ulrich. 2001. "The paradox of global social change and national path dependencies: life course patterns in advanced societies," in A. E. Woodward and M.Kohli (eds.) *Inclusions-Exclusions*. London: Routledge.

Micheli, Giuseppe A. 2000. Kinship, family and social network. The anthropological embedment of fertility change in Southern Europe. *Demographic Research*, 3. Available online at <http://www.demographic-research.org/Volumes/Vol3/13/>.

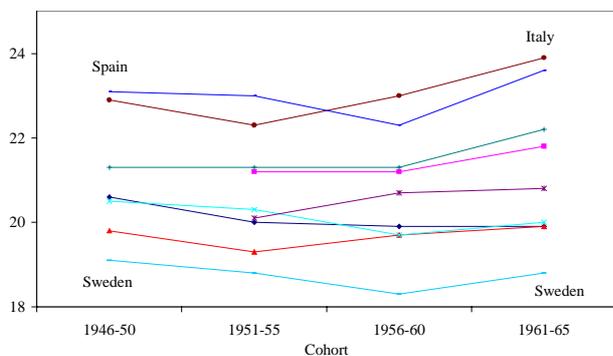
Mutti, Antonio. 2000. "Particularism and the modernization process in Southern Italy," *International Sociology* 15:4, 579-590.

- Poos, Larry R. 1986. "The pre-history of demographic regions in traditional Europe," *Sociologia Ruralis* 26:3/4, 228-247.
- Reher, David, Sven. 1998. "Family ties in Western Europe: persistent contrasts," *Population and Development Review* 24:2, 203-234.
- Rindfuss, Ronald R. 1991. "The young adult years: diversity, structural change and fertility," *Demography* 28:4 493-512.
- Rindfuss, Roland R., C. Gray Swicegood and Rachel A. Rosenfeld. 1987. "Disorder in the Life Course: How Common and Does it Matter?," *American Sociological Review*, 52:6, 785-801.
- Shanahan, Michael J. 2000. Pathways to adulthood in changing societies: variability and mechanisms in life course perspective," *Annual Review of Sociology* 26:667-692.
- Thornton, Arland. 2001. "The developmental paradigm, reading history sideways, and family change," *Demography* 38:4, 449-465.
- Tomka, Bela. 2001. "Demographic development in 20<sup>th</sup> century Hungary and Western Europe: convergence or divergence?," *Demographic Research*, forthcoming.
- Van de Kaa, Dirk J. 1987. "Europe's second demographic transition," *Population Bulletin* 42, 1.
- Van de Kaa, Dirk J. 1997. *Options and Sequences: Europe's Demographic Patterns*. Nethur Demography Paper, 39.
- Watkins, Susan Cotts. 1990. "From Local to National Communities: The Transformation of Demographic Regimes in Western Europe, 1870-1960", *Population and Development Review* 16: 2, 241-272.
- Wilson, Chris. 2001. "On the scale of global demographic convergence 1950-2000," *Population and Development Review* 27:1, 155-171.
- Zeng, Yi, Ansley J. Coale, Minja Kim Choe, Liang Zhiwu and Liu Li. 1994. "Leaving the parental home: census based estimates for China, South Korea, United States, France and Sweden," *Population Studies* 48: 65-80.

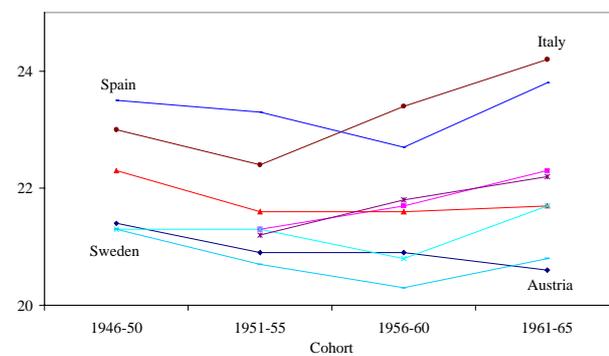
## Figures

Figure 1. Median ages at marker events by cohort. Women.

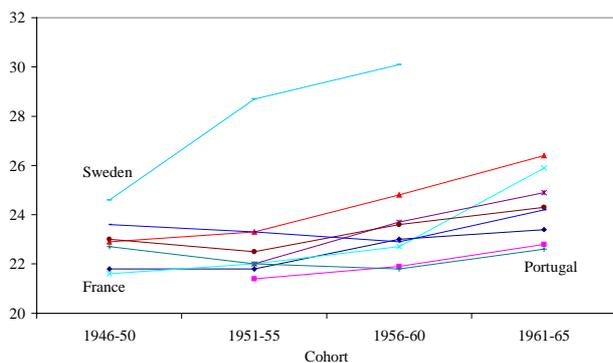
a) Leaving home



b) First union



c) First marriage



d) First birth

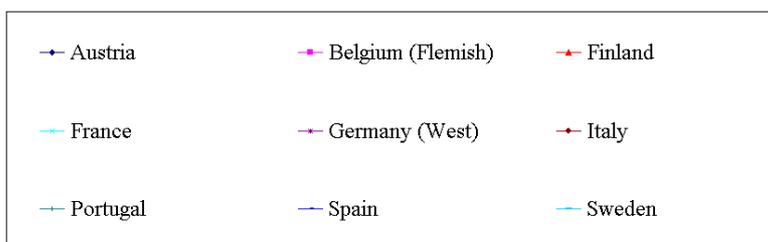
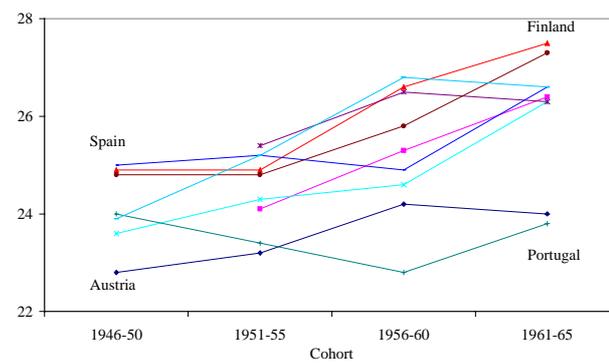


Figure 2. Interquartile range of marker events by cohort. Women.

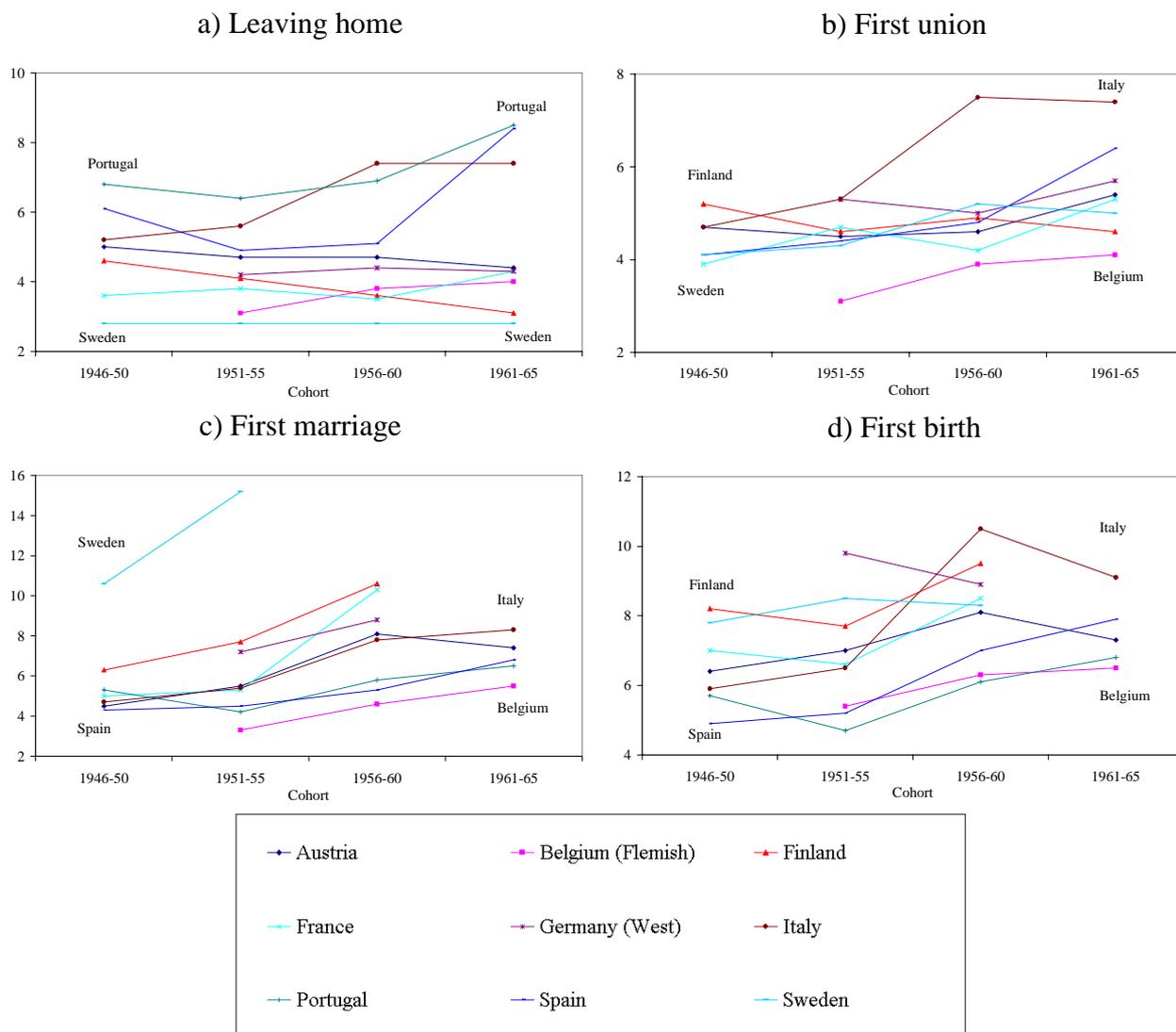
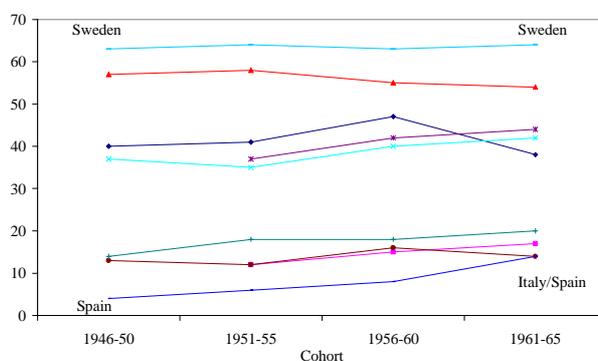
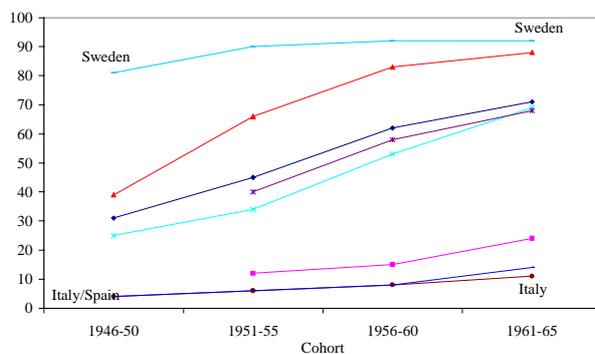


Figure 3. Sequencing between events (% experiencing specific sequences by cohort). Women.

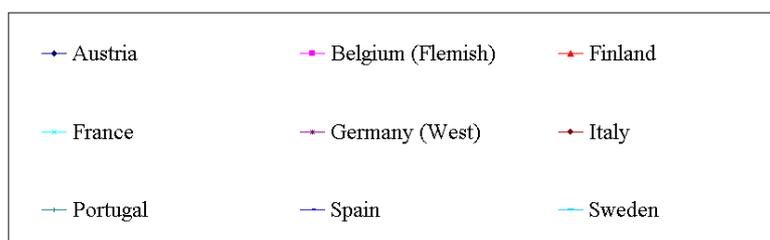
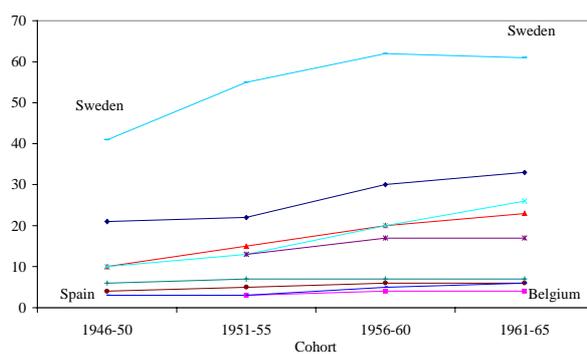
a) Leaving home before the first union



b) First union before first marriage



c) First birth before first marriage



*Appendix*

Table 1. Birth cohorts analysed and date of the FFS surveys.

	<i>Cohorts</i>	<i>Date</i>
Austria	1946-65	1995-96
Belgium (Flemish)	1946-65	1991-92
Finland	1946,47,53-57,63- 67(men) 1946-65 (women)	1992 (men), 1989 (women)
France	1946-65	1994
Hungary	1946-65	1993 (men), 1992-93 (women)
Italy	1946-65	1995-96
Portugal	1946-65	1997
Spain	1946-65	1994-95
Sweden	1949,59,64 (men) 1949,54,59,64 (women)	1993 (men), 1992-93 (women)
West Germany	1946-65	1992

Table 2. Median ages at events in the transition to adulthood.

## a. leaving home

Gender	Men				Women			
	Cohort 1946-50	1951-55	1956-60	1961-65	1946-50	1951-55	1956-60	1961-65
Austria	22.8	22.3	22.2	21.5	20.6	20.0	19.9	19.9
Belgium (Flemish)		22.6	23.0	23.7		21.2	21.2	21.8
Finland	21.8	20.8	21.5	21.8	19.8	19.3	19.7	19.9
France	22.2	21.6	21.1	22.1	20.5	20.3	19.7	20.0
Germany (West)		21.8	22.3	22.5		20.1	20.7	20.8
Italy	24.8	24.9	25.8	27.3	22.9	22.3	23.0	23.9
Portugal	24.1	22.9	24.3	24.4	21.3	21.3	21.3	22.2
Spain	25.9	24.8	25.0	26.0	23.1	23.0	22.3	23.6
Sweden	20.2		20.2	20.1	19.1	18.8	18.3	18.8

## b. first union

Gender	Men				Women			
	Cohort 1946-50	1951-55	1956-60	1961-65	1946-50	1951-55	1956-60	1961-65
Austria	24.0	23.7	23.1	23.9	21.4	20.9	20.9	20.6
Belgium (Flemish)		22.9	23.3	24.3		21.3	21.7	22.3
Finland	24.2	24.2	24.3	24.7	22.3	21.6	21.6	21.7
France	23.5	23.8	23.1	23.9	21.3	21.3	20.8	21.7
Germany (West)		23.6	24.1	25.3		21.2	21.8	22.2
Italy	25.8	25.8	26.7	28.9	23.0	22.4	23.4	24.2
Spain	26.8	25.3	25.9	26.6	23.5	23.3	22.7	23.8
Sweden	23.2		23.1	23.0	21.3	20.7	20.3	20.8

## c. first marriage

Gender	Men				Women			
	Cohort 1946-50	1951-55	1956-60	1961-65	1946-50	1951-55	1956-60	1961-65
Austria	24.8	24.8	25.8	28.1	21.8	21.8	23.0	23.4
Belgium (Flemish)		23.2	23.8	25.3		21.4	21.9	22.8
Finland	24.6	27.8	28.3	>29.9	22.9	23.3	24.8	26.4
France	24.1	25.3	26.3	29.6	21.6	22.0	22.7	25.9
Germany (West)		25.8	27.0	29.1		22.0	23.7	24.9
Italy	25.9	26.1	27.4	29.6	23.0	22.5	23.6	24.3
Portugal	25.1	24.0	25.0	25.6	22.7	22.0	21.8	22.6
Spain	27.0	26.1	26.8	28.1	23.6	23.3	22.9	24.2
Sweden	28.7		32.1	>29.2	24.6	28.7	30.1	>29.1

## d. first birth

Gender	Men				Women			
	Cohort 1946-50	1951-55	1956-60	1961-65	1946-50	1951-55	1956-60	1961-65
Austria	26.5	27.2	26.9	28.8	22.8	23.2	24.2	24.0
Belgium (Flemish)		26.4	27.4	28.3		24.1	25.3	26.4
Finland	27.3	28.7	29.6	>29.8	24.9	24.9	26.6	27.5
France	26.0	27.5	27.8	28.8	23.6	24.3	24.6	26.3
Germany (West)		28.8	29.9	31.0		25.4	26.5	26.3
Italy	28.0	29.0	30.7	34.4	24.8	24.8	25.8	27.3
Portugal	27.2	26.0	26.7	27.3	24.0	23.4	22.8	23.8
Spain	29.1	27.8	29.0	30.8	25.0	25.2	24.9	26.6
Sweden	26.9		29.7	>29.2	23.9	25.2	26.8	26.6

Source: own elaboration on FFS microdata.

Table 3. Interquartile differences on ages at events in the transition to adulthood (years).

## a. leaving home

Gender	Men				Women			
	Cohort 1946-50	1951-55	1956-60	1961-65	1946-50	1951-55	1956-60	1961-65
Austria	6.5	9.0	7.2	7.8	5.0	4.7	4.7	4.4
Belgium (Flemish)		3.5	4.1	5.1		3.1	3.8	4.0
Finland	5.9	5.8	5.0	5.0	4.6	4.1	3.6	3.1
France	4.2	5.1	4.3	5.0	3.6	3.8	3.5	4.3
Germany (West)		5.2	5.6	5.6		4.2	4.4	4.3
Italy	8.3	6.6	7.8	9.0	5.2	5.6	7.4	7.4
Portugal	7.6	6.5	9.5	10.0	6.8	6.4	6.9	8.5
Spain	6.8	5.2	6.2	8.6	6.1	4.9	5.1	8.4
Sweden	3.8		3.8	3.5	2.8	2.8	2.8	2.8

## b. first union

Gender	Men				Women			
	Cohort 1946-50	1951-55	1956-60	1961-65	1946-50	1951-55	1956-60	1961-65
Austria	5.5	5.9	7.0	6.2	4.7	4.5	4.6	5.4
Belgium (Flemish)		3.9	4.3	5.7		3.1	3.9	4.1
Finland	6.0	7.3	7.5	7.2	5.2	4.6	4.9	4.6
France	3.7	5.5	5.8	5.8	3.9	4.7	4.2	5.3
Germany (West)		6.7	7.0	8.8		5.3	5.0	5.7
Italy	5.5	6.0	7.3	>9.7	4.7	5.3	7.5	7.4
Spain	5.2	6.7	5.7	8.3	4.1	4.4	4.8	6.4
Sweden	5.1		6.4	5.6	4.1	4.3	5.2	5.0

## c. first marriage

Gender	Men				Women			
	Cohort 1946-50	1951-55	1956-60	1961-65	1946-50	1951-55	1956-60	1961-65
Austria	7.2	6.6	7.5	>11.3	4.5	5.5	8.1	7.4
Belgium (Flemish)		4.3	5.7	>8.5		3.3	4.6	5.5
Finland	8.7	>16.0	>12.7	>3.0	6.3	7.7	10.6	>6.2
France	5.4	8.0	>15.5	>8.6	5.0	5.3	10.3	>11.3
Germany (West)		10.4	>12.2	>7.0		7.2	8.8	>9.7
Italy	5.4	5.6	8.5	>8.3	4.7	5.4	7.8	8.3
Portugal	3.5	4.6	6.1	8.3	5.3	4.2	5.8	6.5
Spain	5.7	6.3	6.6	>9.0	4.3	4.5	5.3	6.8
Sweden	15.8		>6.1	>1.3	10.6	15.2	>6.1	>3.6

## d. first birth

Gender	Men				Women			
	Cohort 1946-50	1951-55	1956-60	1961-65	1946-50	1951-55	1956-60	1961-65
Austria	11.3	7.0	12.1	>11.3	6.4	7.0	8.1	7.3
Belgium (Flemish)		8.0	7.6	>5.6		5.4	6.3	6.5
Finland	10.7	11.4	>11.7	>2.9	8.2	7.7	9.5	>5.3
France	8.1	10.7	>8.5	>7.3	7.0	6.6	8.5	>10.8
Germany (West)		>15.9	>10.9	>6.5		9.8	8.9	>8.7
Italy	8.9	7.8	11.7	>6.8	5.9	6.5	10.5	9.1
Portugal	4.9	5.8	7.5	8.9	5.7	4.7	6.1	6.8
Spain	6.2	7.7	7.7	>6.7	4.9	5.2	7.0	7.9
Sweden	8.9		>8.7	>3.2	7.8	8.5	8.3	>6.1

Source: own elaboration on FFS microdata.

Table 4. Sequencing between events.

## a. leaving home before first union (%)

Gender	Men				Women			
	Cohort 1946-50	1951-55	1956-60	1961-65	1946-50	1951-55	1956-60	1961-65
Austria	47	49	48	55	40	41	47	38
Belgium (Flemish)		15	18	22		12	15	17
Finland	57	63	61	59	57	58	55	54
France	43	47	53	49	37	35	40	42
Germany (West)		54	51	53		37	42	44
Italy	31	21	27	32	13	12	16	14
Portugal*	12	13	20	19	14	18	18	20
Spain	9	12	19	28	4	6	8	14
Sweden	69		69	73	63	64	63	64

\*leaving home before first marriage

## b. first union before first marriage (%)

Gender	Men				Women			
	Cohort 1946-50	1951-55	1956-60	1961-65	1946-50	1951-55	1956-60	1961-65
Austria	46	52	83	82	31	45	62	71
Belgium (Flemish)		14	19	31		12	15	24
Finland	45	86	85	93	39	66	83	88
France	35	49	65	81	25	34	53	69
Germany (West)		49	67	74		40	58	68
Italy	4	11	14	15	4	6	8	11
Spain	9	12	19	28	4	6	8	14
Sweden	87		94	94	81	90	92	92

## c. first birth before first marriage (%)

Gender	Men				Women			
	Cohort 1946-50	1951-55	1956-60	1961-65	1946-50	1951-55	1956-60	1961-65
Austria	18	24	30	40	21	22	30	33
Belgium (Flemish)		3	2	4		3	4	4
Finland	12	25	23	43	10	15	20	23
France	10	14	23	32	10	13	20	26
Germany (West)		13	9	15		13	17	17
Italy	4	5	5	4	4	5	6	6
Portugal	5	7	7	8	6	7	7	7
Spain	3	7	6	7	3	3	5	6
Sweden	48		64	62	41	55	62	61