INVEST

A register-based account of period trends in partnership prevalence, entries, and exits by educational level for men and women in Finland

Marika Jalovaara
Linus Andersson

FLAGSHIP PROGRAMME

ACADEMY OF FINLAND

strategicRESEARCH

A register-based account of period trends in partnership prevalence, entries, and exits by educational level for men and women in Finland

ABSTRACT

BACKGROUND

The decline in marriage and increase in cohabiting unions represent a major change in family and fertility dynamics. Yet, no comprehensive description has covered period trends in the prevalence of marital and non-marital partnerships, or partnership entry and exit rates, across educational levels.

OBJECTIVE

We describe period trends in the proportion of partnered individuals and the flow of partnership formation and dissolution at ages 18–49 across educational levels for men and women in 1989–2019 in Finland.

METHODS

We use total-population register data that include full histories of co-residential partnerships regardless of marital status. We calculate the age-specific yearly prevalence of marriages, cohabitations, and all unions; and rates of union formation (among non-partnered population) and rates of separation (among the partnered population).

RESULTS

The prevalence of marriage declined across educational groups. Increases in the prevalence of cohabitation are slightly smaller than declines in marriage; as a result, the total prevalence of partnerships declined, especially among low-educated men and women. Union formation rates have declined recently, and separation rates have increased notably, but more so among the lower educated and in age groups below 35.

CONCLUSIONS

The increase of non-marital cohabitation has not fully covered for the decline in marriage. Increases in partnership instability are notable. All partnership trends and the educational gradients are remarkably similar among men and women in Finland.

CONTRIBUTION

We provide the first comprehensive population-level estimates of trends and patterns of the

partnership stock and flows of marital and non-marital partnerships by education for both men and women.

Introduction

Trends in union formation and dissolution form a core part of demographic knowledge. The nature of marital and, increasingly, non-marital couple partnerships affect the boundaries and demands of state functions, including social policy, taxation, and housing (Cherlin, 2016). Partnership dynamics are also linked with other demographic processes – fertility in particular (Thomson et al 2012).

Much research has documented socioeconomic differentials in partnership dynamics. In contemporary European societies, singlehood, non-marital cohabitation, and union instability are typically more common among lower-educated individuals (Perelli-Harris & Lyons-Amos 2016, Kalmijn 2013; Härkönen & Dronkers 2006, Wood et al 2014). A longstanding argument holds that the socioeconomic differentials in partnership dynamics are gendered (Stevenson & Wolfers 2007). Presumably, greater economic resources promote partnership formation and stability for men but have the reverse effect for women, owing to the higher opportunity costs of family formation for women. The empirical evidence is mixed, however (Kalmijn 2011).

Among the major fundamental shifts in family dynamics of the past decades are the decline in marriage and increases in nonmarital cohabitation and union instability (Lesthaeghe 2010). Simultaneously, levels of union stability and fertility remain substantially higher within marriages than in cohabitations (Thomson 2021, Jalovaara & Kulu 2018). The study of the changing nature of partnerships, and the interlinkages with socioeconomic status and gender, preoccupy entire subfields of demography and sociology (Schmock & Schwartz 2020). One important task in this literature is to provide reliable empirical descriptions of partnership trends over time and disparities across socioeconomic status and sex. The task of amassing such stylized facts helps policy actors, the general public, and scholars across disciplines to make accurate and informed inferences about the world and therefore constitutes a core task of demographic research.

Data-driven bottlenecks slow down this progress, however. While the growing significance of non-marital partnerships is recognized, empirical sources have not yet fully adjusted to this

(Sassler & Lichter 2020). The few sources that contain cohabitation histories and information on educational levels for men and women (e.g., Andersson, Thomson & Duntava 2017) cannot provide reliable estimates due to limited sample sizes. Consequently, knowledge on trends in partnership prevalence and rates is still largely based on marriage statistics (e.g., Eickmeyer 2022). In particular, we know of no analyses of period trends in partnering that distinguish between changes in marital and non-marital cohabitation for different educational groups and sex. It remains unclear whether increases in cohabitation have compensated for declines in marriage and whether such trends differ by education level for men and women.

The aim of this paper is to provide a comprehensive, granular, and representative description of period trends in partnerships. Using Finnish register data, which encompasses the longest-running population-wide source on non-marital cohabitation in the world, we provide a birds-eye perspective on trends in partnership dynamics. Specifically, we analyze the age-specific prevalence of marital, cohabiting, and all partnerships between 1989–2019 in Finland, across educational levels, for men and women in childbearing ages. Further, we provide information on trends in the rates of partnership formation and dissolution.

As a forerunner in changes in partnership dynamics associated with the second demographic transition, Finland provides a useful case for the present investigation. Along with the other Nordic countries, Finland is characterized by gender-egalitarian norms and institutions, high employment rates for women, and a universalistic welfare state. These factors are often thought to weaken the socioeconomic and gendered gradients of partnership dynamics (Goldschieder, Bernhardt & Lappegård 2015). Potential socioeconomic and gendered gradients in the partnership trends and patterns of partnership dynamics may therefore be interpreted as a lower-bound measure. Moreover, trends in partnership dynamics are relevant to understanding childbearing in light of the recent dramatic fertility decline in Finland and some other countries.

Data and methods

Data

We use individual-level data from Finnish population registers and focus on Finnish-born men and women aged 18–49. Using anonymized personal identification numbers, we link individuals' basic demographics to histories on marital and non-marital coresidential partnerships and completed educational degrees. Data on foreign-born individuals are

excluded due to scarcity of information from the time preceding immigration. We analyze the period 1989–2019 because information on non-marital cohabitation exists for this period. A coresidential couple is defined as two different-sex individuals registered as domiciled in the same dwelling for over 90 days, who are not close relatives (e.g., siblings or a parent and a child) and whose age difference is no more than 20 years. The age rule does not apply if the couple has shared children (for more detailed information, see Jalovaara & Kulu 2018).

Measures

We present three prevalence measures: the proportion of the population married, cohabiting, and partnered (either married or cohabiting). We complement the analysis with two basic measures of flows into and out of partnerships. To describe the flow into partnerships, we calculate the rates of entry into cohabiting or marital unions. Note that in contrast to most age-specific rates of marriage or union formation, we are able to specify the denominator in a meaningful way, as the population currently not cohabiting or married. To describe the flow out of partnerships, we calculate rates of union dissolution (separation or divorce). Here, the denominator is the population currently cohabiting or married.

All results are presented by sex, educational level, and 5-year age group. For parsimony and consistency, we present absolute levels of yearly prevalence and rates but invite readers to use the full processed data **(reference of this WP paper here once uploaded)** for further exploration using, for example, log scaling and group contrasts. Educational level refers to the highest level the individual had achieved by the end of the 5-year age range and is grouped into basic, medium, and tertiary education, following ISCED categories 0–2, 3–4, and 5–8 (UNESCO 2012). We refer to Jalovaara and colleagues (2022) for an overview of the shift towards higher educational attainment across the study period.

Results

Figure 1 shows that the proportion married has declined notably for all age groups, for all educational levels, and in the total populations for men and women. This marriage decline plateaus around 2005 for the oldest age groups but continues throughout the observation period for younger age groups. A remarkable decline in marriage is found for the two oldest age groups with basic education, where the proportion married declined from roughly 70 percent in 1989 to 34 percent in 2019. The smallest decline is found among the highly educated, which is still substantial: here the proportion married declined by more than 10

percentage points at all ages above 25 and by as much as 20 percentage points (men) for the oldest age group. Despite this change, the overall positive educational gradient is fairly stable across the observation period.

Figure 1. Proportion (%) of the population currently married by the level of education, men and women, Finland in 1989–2019
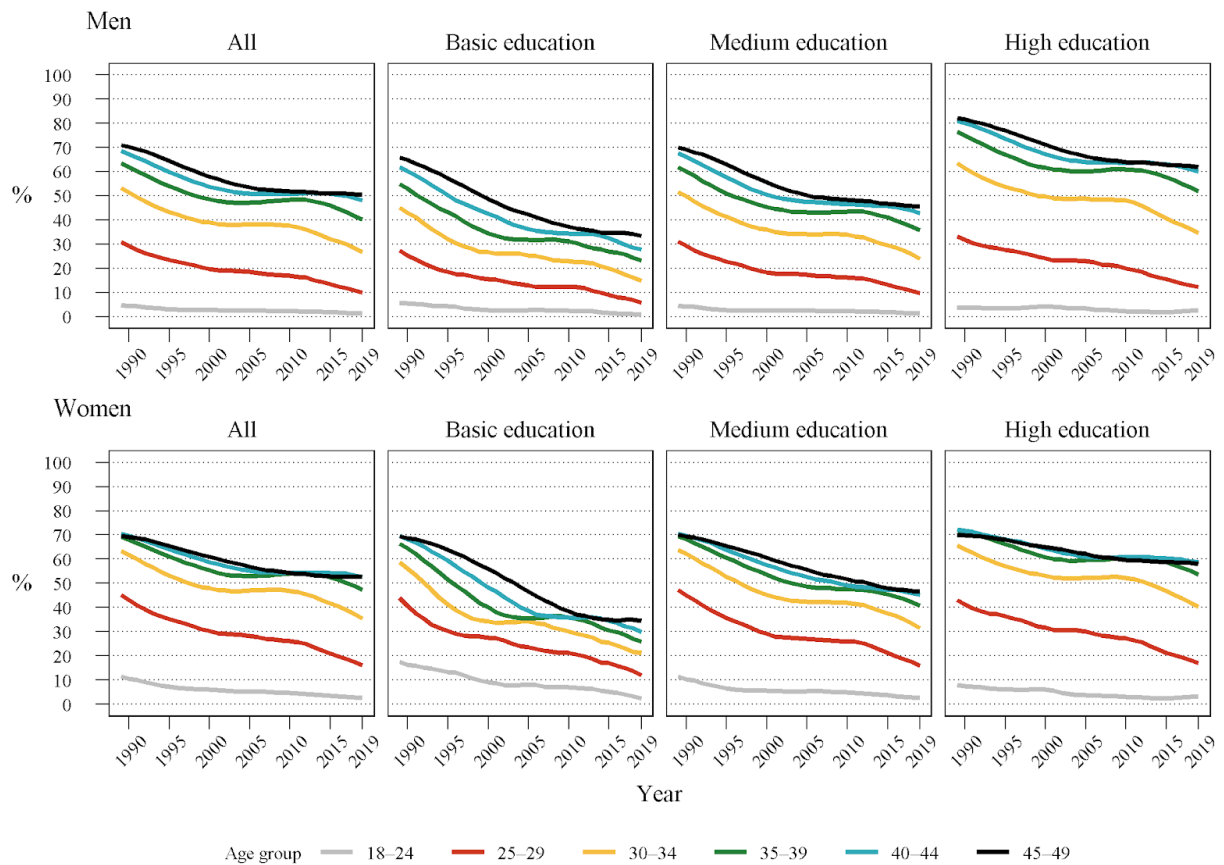
Next, Figure 2 shows that cohabitation increased in prevalence across the study period for men and women, in all age groups, and for all educational levels. Starting at very low levels in 1989 (3–15% across age groups), cohabitation prevalence reaches 16–40% in 2019. The prevalence and trend thereof are particularly marked just below the mean childbearing and marital age (age group 25–29), and particularly so for the highly educated, where more than two-fifths lived in a cohabiting union in 2019. The increases are less pronounced in younger age groups of the basic educated, where they end around 2000–2005.

Figure 2. Proportion (%) of the population currently in a cohabiting union by the level of education, men and women, Finland in 1989–2019
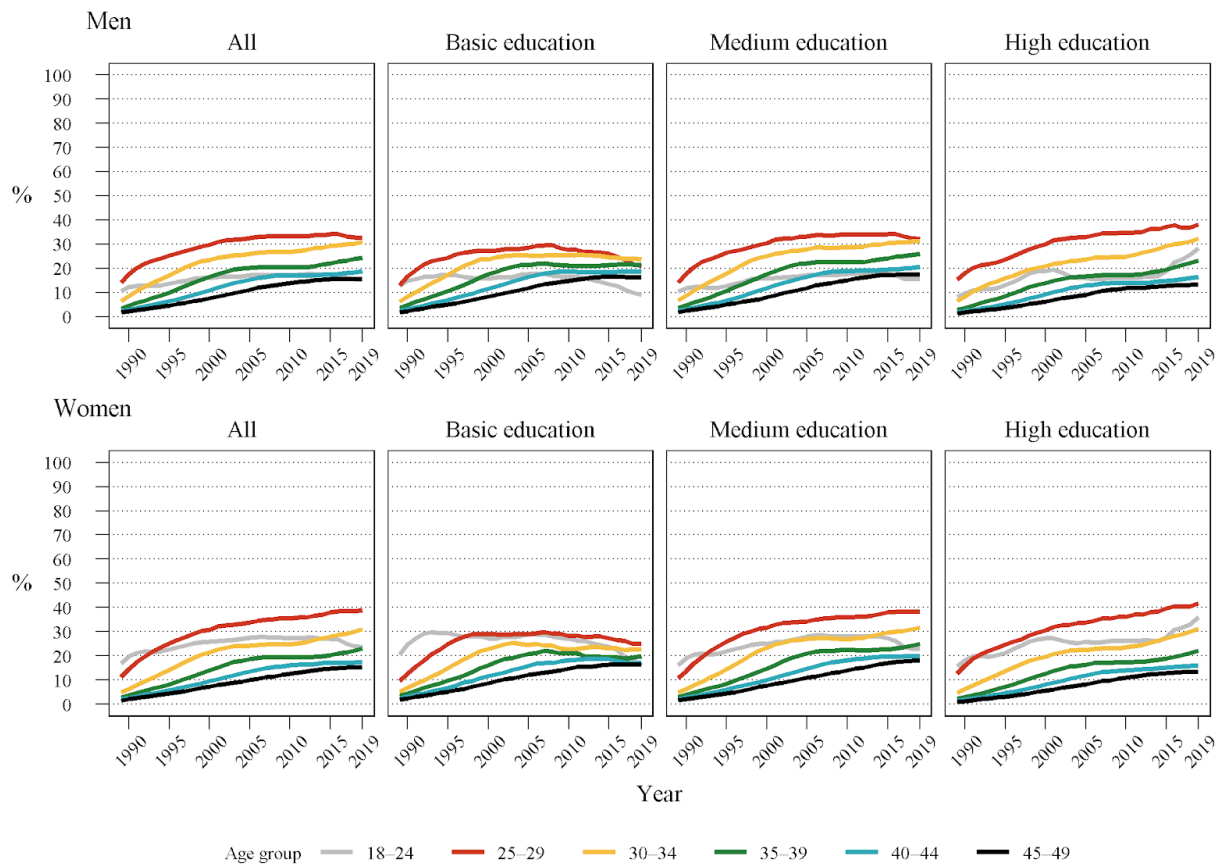
After having shown trends in the shares married or cohabiting, we now consider the total prevalence of partnerships, as captured by the proportion of the population in a union – either cohabitation or marriage. In contrast to Figures 1 and 2, we see more period stability. Partnership prevalence declined by a few percentage points across three decades (for example, from 72 percent to 68 percent in the oldest age group for men). Yet, while declines are marginal, it is noteworthy that they also appear in prime childbearing ages (the ages 25 to 34). There is a slight decline among the medium-educated, and a drastic decline (in some groups, more than 20 percentage points) among men and women with no education beyond the basic level.

Figure 3. Proportion (%) of the population in union (marriage or cohabitation) by the level of education, men and women, Finland in 1989–2019
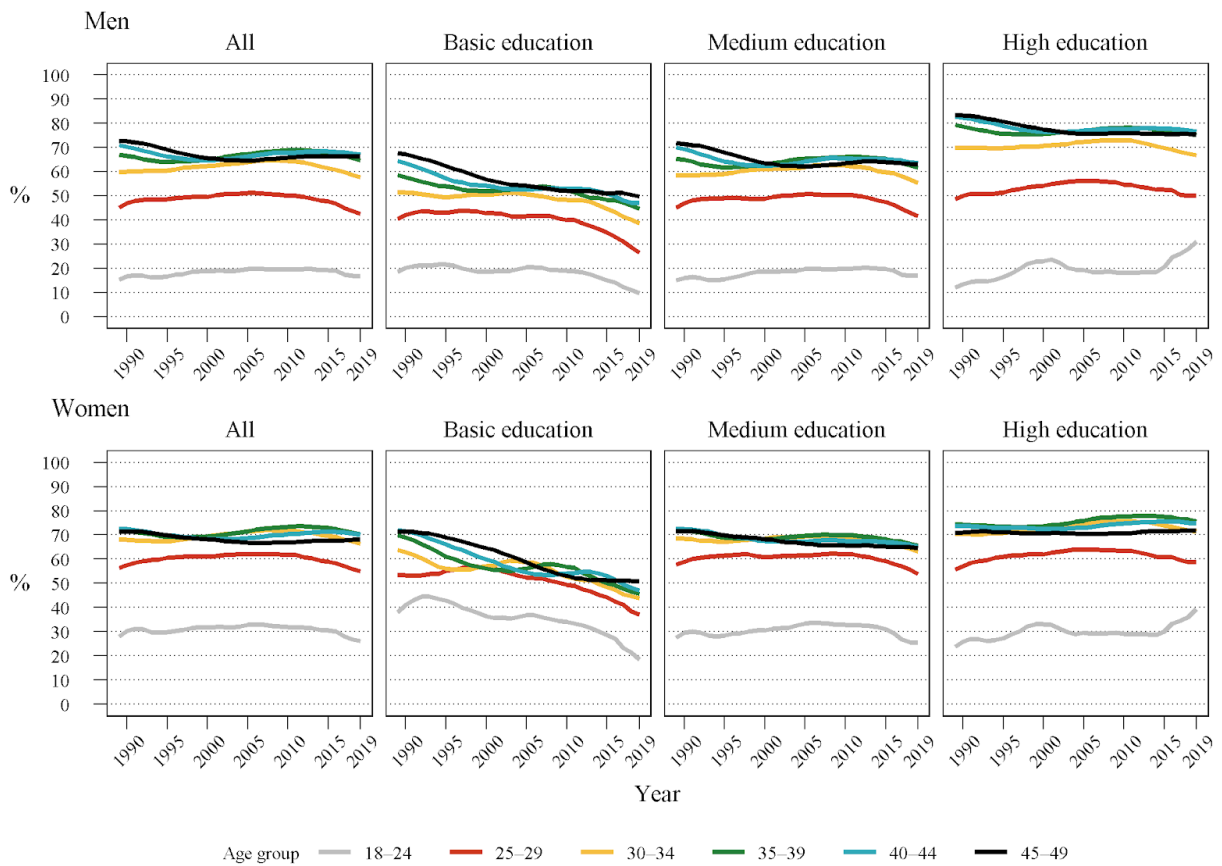

Figure 4 reports the yearly inflow into unions. Total rates of entry into a union (either marriage or cohabitation) initially increased for all age groups, but the trend plateaued around 2005 or decreased somewhat thereafter. We see a positive educational gradient in partnership entry across the study period and a notable slump among the basic educated after the turn of the millennium. Again, trends and disparities across educational groups are similar for men and women.

Figure 4. Rates of union (marriage or cohabitation) formation by the level of education, men and women, Finland in 1989–2019
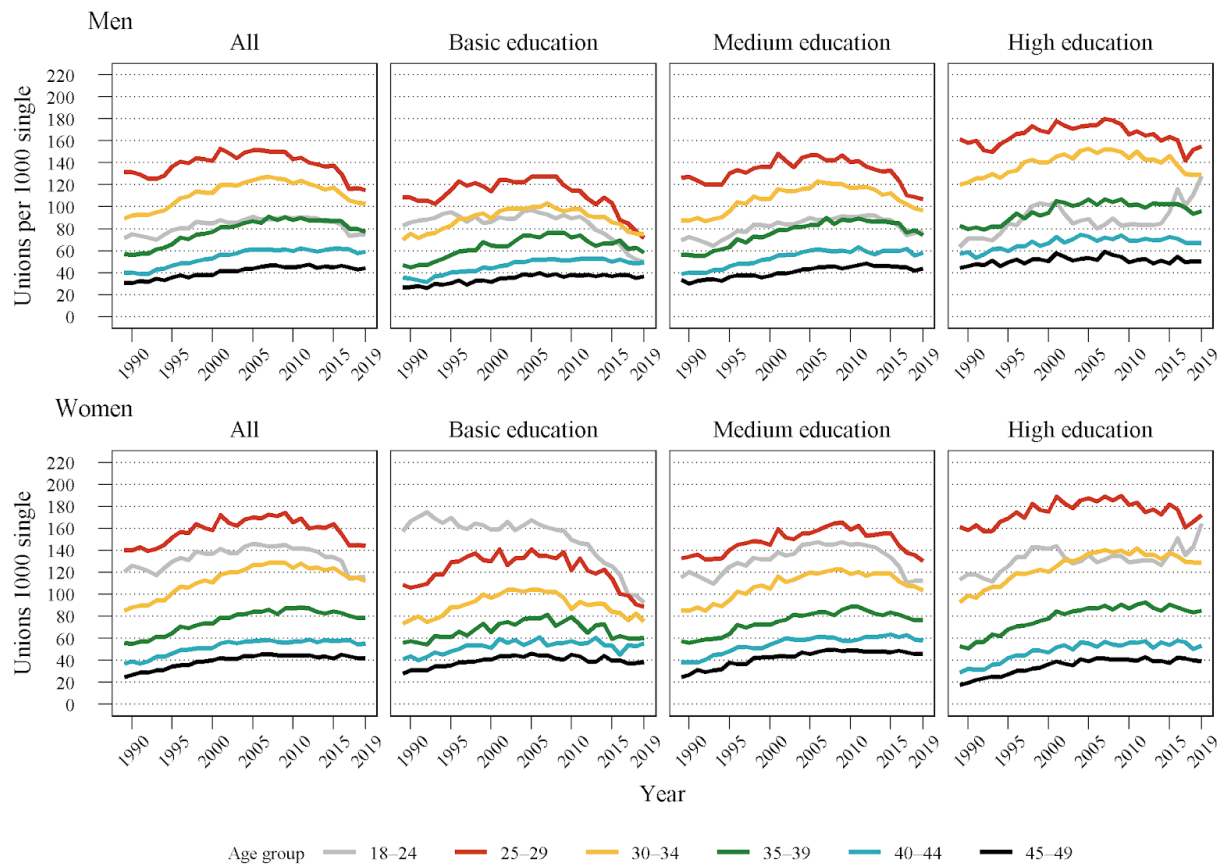
Finally, Figure 5 shows yearly outflow from unions. A clear trend towards higher separation rates is pervasive across the time-period and for all age-groups. It is particularly salient among the lowest educated, but also for the medium educated, there is an increase from 20 to 40 separations per thousand unions among the oldest, and from 60 to 100 per thousand among the age group 25–29. Separation rates are lowest (and also most stable across time) among highly educated men and women. Separation rates are highest and increase the most, in absolute terms, in the young age groups, where cohabitations also are much more common than marriages.

Figure 5. Separation rates by level of education, men and women, both marriages and cohabitations, Finland in 1989–2019
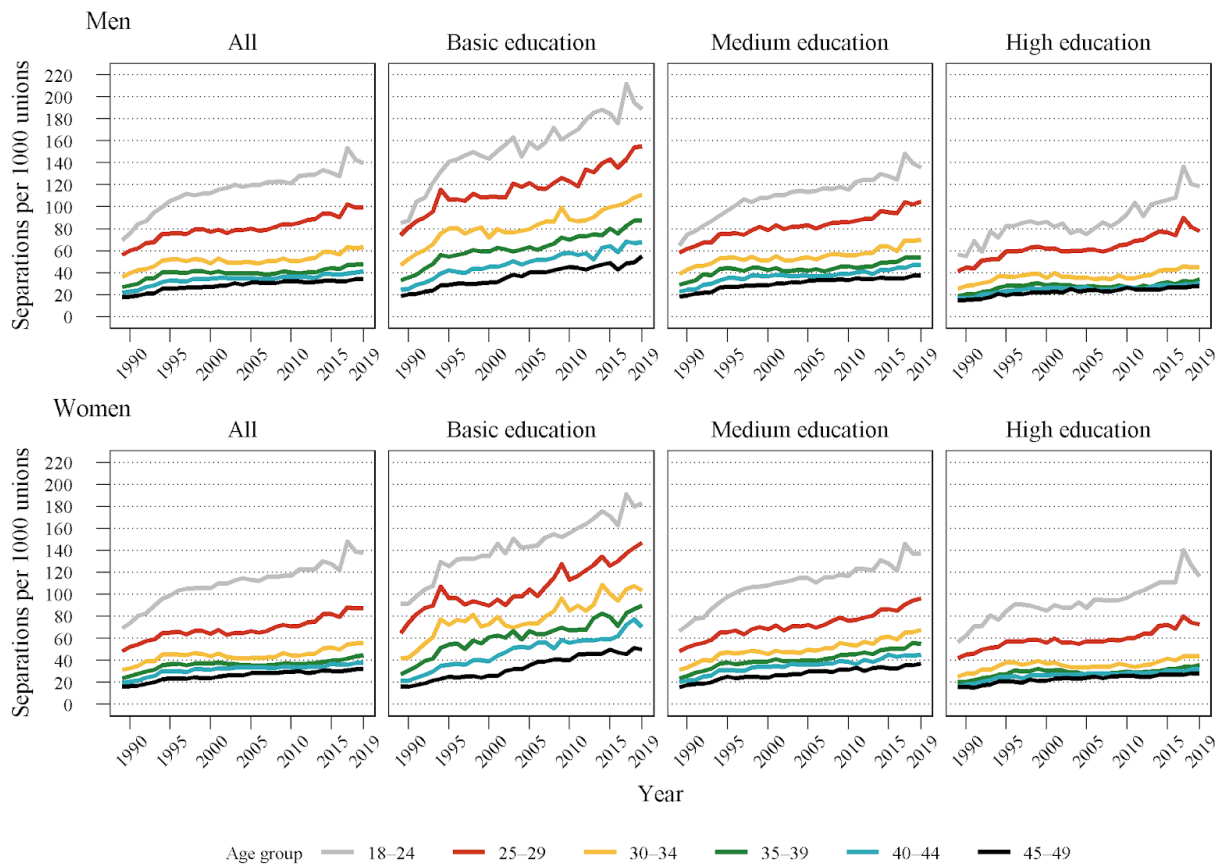
Conclusions

Period trends in marriage and cohabitation, at the intersection of socioeconomic status and gender, are often used as empirical foundations for theoretical frameworks on social stratification, gender relations, and fertility (Goldscheider, Bernhardt & Lappegård 2015). Yet, quality statistics of long-term trends in partnership prevalence across sex and education are sparse.

This study has described trends in partnership prevalence during the past thirty years in Finland. We show, for the first time, trends in the proportion married, cohabiting, and in any union (married or cohabiting) across education and sex. We find, as does previous research, that marital decline is universal across educational groups (Cherlin 2016). The positive educational gradient therein was present and prevailed across the study period. Partially contradicting prevailing narratives on gendered socioeconomic gradients in partnering (see Kalmijn 2011), the increase in cohabitation and decline in marriage is universal across

education and sex in Finland. Also, in contrast to much common knowledge (e.g., Illouz, p. 150), we conclude that the proportion of individuals of childbearing age who are in a couple union is fairly stable across the last thirty years, remaining unchanged or declining by about 6 percentage points, for some age groups. Rather, the composition has shifted toward more cohabiting unions.

Where previous studies analyzed either cohabiting or marital stability, we have analyzed union entry and exit of either union form. We conclude that union instability has increased across age groups and educational levels. Entry into unions has also become more frequent, at least from age thirty. Again, trends and patterns are on average similar for men and women. The trend to higher union instability is remarkable among the lowest educated, although it must be noted that this group forms a diminishing and increasingly marginal stratum of the population.

From a birds-eye perspective, the most palpable trend in partnering patterns is not a strong decline in the share of the population in couple unions – we find this decline to be moderate. Neither is the defining feature a rapid growth of disparities between educational groups or between men and women. Notable educational differences existed already in the late 1980s, and they were exacerbated by union instability and lower partnering prevalence among the lowest educated.

It is also noticeable that all period trends are superimposed on men and women of all educational levels. Critically, a characteristic feature of partnering during the past 30 years is the decline of marriage and the increase in union instability for both men and women across all educational groups. We hope that the rudimentary stylized facts presented here will aid a balanced narrative on partnering trends. We have limited this brief report to a selection of estimates that covered only some of the demographic aspects of partnering trends. We encourage further exploration to scrutinize, as well as provide alternative perspectives to period trends in partnering.

Acknowledgments

References

Andersson, G., Thomson, E., & Duntava, A. (2017). Life-table representations of family dynamics in the 21st century. *Demographic Research*, *37*(35), 1081–1230. https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2017.37.35

Cherlin, A. J. (2016). A happy ending to a half-century of family change? *Population and Development Review*, *42*(1), 121–129.

Eickmeyer, K. (n.d.). *Age variation in the first marriage rate, 1990 & 2017* (FP-19-05; Family Profiles). National Center for Family & Marriage Research. https://doi.org/10.25035/ncfmr/fp-19-05

Goldscheider, F., Bernhardt, E., & Lappegård, T. (2015). The Gender Revolution: A Framework for Understanding Changing Family and Demographic Behavior. *Population and Development Review*, *41*(2), 207–239. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1728-4457.2015.00045.x

Härkönen, J., & Dronkers, J. (2006). Stability and Change in the Educational Gradient of Divorce. A Comparison of Seventeen Countries. *European Sociological Review*, *22*(5), 501–517. https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcl011

Illouz, E. (2013). *Why love hurts: a sociological explanation*. John Wiley & Sons.

Jalovaara, M., & Kulu, H. (2018). Separation risk over union duration: An immediate itch? *European Sociological Review*, *34*(5), 486–500.

Jalovaara, M., Andersson, L., & Miettinen, A. (2022). Parity disparity: Educational differences in Nordic fertility across parities and number of reproductive partners. *Population Studies*, *76*(1), 119–136. https://doi.org/10.1080/00324728.2021.1887506

Kalmijn, M. (2011). The influence of men's income and employment on marriage and cohabitation: Testing Oppenheimer's theory in Europe. *European Journal of Population/Revue Européenne de Démographie*, *27*(3), 269–293.

Kalmijn, M. (2013). The educational gradient in marriage: A comparison of 25 European countries. *Demography*, *50*(4), 1499–1520.

Lesthaeghe, R. (2010). The Unfolding Story of the Second Demographic Transition. *Population and Development Review*, *36*(2), 211–251. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1728-4457.2010.00328.x Perelli-Harris, B., & Lyons-Amos, M. (2016). Partnership patterns

in the United States and across Europe: the role of education and country context. *Social Forces*, *95*(1), 251–282.

Sassler, S., & Lichter, D. T. (2020). Cohabitation and Marriage: Complexity and Diversity in Union-Formation Patterns. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *82*(1), 35–61. https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12617

Smock, P. J., & Schwartz, C. R. (2020). The Demography of Families: A Review of Patterns and Change. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *82*(1), 9–34. https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12612

Thomson, E. (2021). Cohabitation in the Life Course. In *Oxford International handbook of social policy* (p. Forthcoming). Oxford University Press.

Thomson, E., Winkler-Dworak, M., Spielauer, M., & Prskawetz, A. (2012). Union Instability as an Engine of Fertility? A Microsimulation Model for France. *Demography*, *49*(1), 175–195. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13524-011-0085-5

UNESCO. (2012). *International standard classification of education: ISCED*. UNESCO Institute for Statistics Montreal.

Wood, J., Neels, K., & Kil, T. (2014). The educational gradient of childlessness and cohort parity progression in 14 low fertility countries. *Demographic Research*, *31*, 1365–1416.