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Time Spent Without a Cohabiting Partner: An Analysis Across Cohorts in France

Nicolas Rebière*, Nicolas Cauchi-Duval**°, Lyem Britah***,
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Abstract

While the share of people under age 65 without a cohabiting partner has been increasing in France since the late 1960s, the duration of these periods of solo living over the life course has never been studied. We calculate the aggregate length of time spent without a cohabiting partner for the cohorts born between 1926 and 1988 using data from the ERFI (2005) and EPIC (2013–2014) surveys, and use linear regressions to identify the factors behind the observed trends. These durations have evolved differently by gender and have shortened for women, who have benefited more than men from the decline in prolonged singlehood and early widowhood. For many years, social origin and educational level structured the length of time spent single, but their effects are progressively weakening. The first baby-boom cohorts (1945–1955) are an exception, having experienced the shortest periods without a cohabiting partner. The increasingly complex partnership trajectories of more recent cohorts thus correspond more to a shift in conjugal norms than to their rejection.

Keywords

solo living, singlehood, partnership trajectory, age and cohort, ERFI, EPIC, France

Klinenberg (2012) posited that the populations of industrialized countries, facing ever more frequent periods of living alone, would gradually learn to see this situation positively and even prefer to live in this way. The growing prevalence and acceptance of solo living⁽¹⁾ might thus signal a weakening of the conjugal norm.⁽²⁾

(1) Or *singlehood*, defined as ‘the situation of people who, temporarily or lastingly, are not (or no longer) in a couple relationship’ (Bergström et al., 2019, p. 101).

(2) Understood as the set of external or interiorized constraints that cause individuals to actively seek a lasting and exclusive shared emotional and sexual relationship with a person of the other sex.

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Translated by Catriona Dutreuilh



Since the 1970s, the prevalence of solo living has increased considerably among the under-65s in France, due mainly to the increase in age at first cohabiting union and the growing frequency of separation (Toulemon, 2012). Even including all romantic relationships seen as ‘serious’, whether cohabiting or not, 21% of individuals aged 26–65 in 2013 reported not having a partner (Bergström et al., 2019). Often depicted in the media as a sign of the acceptance and diffusion of a new lifestyle choice, this increase in singlehood might reflect a ‘disaffection’ for couple relationships (Arbouville and Bonvalet, 2003). In 2013, more than 70% of the 26–65 age group believed that one can have a successful life without a partner (Vivier and Courtel, 2018). A qualitative study added nuance to these results, however (Vivier and Courtel, 2018; Bergström et al., 2019); life is still punctuated by varied and repeated encouragements to form a (new) union, and couplehood remains strongly associated with happiness and personal fulfilment. Hence, ‘the opening of other ways to experience relationships seems to have strengthened rather than weakened the conjugal norm’ (Bergström et al., 2019, p. 121).

Quantitative studies of periods of solo living are still rare (Rault and Régnier-Loilier, 2019), with demographic analysis suffering from a certain conjugal tropism (Bergström, 2018). Generally focusing on episodes of union formation, cohabitation, or union dissolution—all linked to fertility—it implicitly sees periods of non-partnership as mere ‘interludes’ in the conjugal trajectory. Knowledge of trends in solo living is thus based above all, through complementarity, on cross-sectional observation, from one census to the next, of the age distribution of people living with a partner (Lefranc, 1995; Arbouville and Bonvalet, 2003; Daguët and Niel, 2010; Toulemon, 2012; INSEE, 2015). In France as elsewhere, the literature also provides only a partial and fragmented vision of the determinants of solo living via analyses of the factors associated with living in a one-person household (Gaymu et al., 2006; Schwanitz and Mulder, 2015; Sandström and Karlsson, 2019), being the head of a lone-parent family (Le Pape et al., 2015; Steinbach et al., 2016; Algava et al., 2021), or having never lived with a partner until a late age (Van den Berg and Verbakel, 2021).

This article’s first aim, therefore, is to apply a cohort approach to study changes in the duration of solo living in France at different completed ages. The EPIC survey of individual and partnership trajectories (*Étude des parcours individuels et conjugaux*, 2013–2014) provides data to determine this aggregate duration. In this survey, individuals with a partner were identified by asking respondents whether they considered themselves to be in a couple. This methodological choice is well suited to today’s society, where ‘being a couple’ is gradually becoming disconnected from any institutional definition (Prioux, 2005), but also from cohabitation (Régnier-Loilier, 2016; 2019; Giraud, 2023) and even from sexuality (Bidart, 2001). The earliest cohorts that can be studied longitudinally with EPIC survey data are the baby boomers. Using these cohorts as a starting point, and implicitly as a baseline, might lead to a false interpretation

of long-term trends in durations of singlehood, however, as these cohorts mark a 'break' with their predecessors, in terms of partnership behaviour especially, as shown by Bonvalet et al. (2011). We therefore decided to combine EPIC survey data with the 2005 ERFI survey (*Étude des relations familiales et intergénérationnelles*), the French version of the Generations and Gender survey⁽³⁾ to include older cohorts. As the only common reference for identifying unions in the two data sources is shared residence in the same dwelling, our analysis will focus mainly on long-term trends in *time spent without a cohabiting partner* (hereafter: TSWCP), i.e. not living with someone as a couple in a shared dwelling. This means that non-cohabiting unions are excluded from measures of time spent without a partner. The impact of this exclusion can nonetheless be estimated and discussed for the cohorts included in the EPIC survey.

This approach contributes doubly to the literature. First, it complements the cross-sectional measurement of solo living with an analysis along the life cycle to shed light on demographic trends 'without the distorting lens of external contingencies'⁽⁴⁾ (Samuel, 2008, p. 3). Second, it helps to identify shifts in the conjugal norm, as the mean length of time without a cohabiting partner for a given cohort reflects the interaction between processes which, in some cases, increase it (rise in age at first union, separations) and, in others, reduce it (earlier first union, repartnering, increase in age at widowhood). A decrease in this duration across cohorts, or its stability, would thus provide evidence that the conjugal norm has not disappeared over time, but now exists in new forms.⁽⁵⁾

Our second objective is to retrace cohort partnership trajectories, taking account of alternating periods of living solo or with a partner, to better understand possible fluctuations in TSWCP at different completed ages.

Our third objective is to study the link between certain individual characteristics and changes in TSWCP. Studies of successive repartnering and separation have shown that not all population categories are equally concerned and that these events are not independent of the partnership dynamics that precede them (Costemalle, 2015; Beaujouan, 2016; Costemalle, 2019). Singlehood is experienced differently according to gender, age, educational level, or social category, and may lead to changes in individual aspirations (Bergström et al., 2019). In short, successive periods of singlehood are just as important in conjugal trajectories as the periods of living with a partner because they may affect partnership choices. Certain individual characteristics could be associated differently, depending on the cohorts concerned, with the aggregate duration of periods of solo living (delayed first union, more frequent separations, later repartnering, etc.), thereby explaining its variability across cohorts.

(3) This approach has already been applied by others, notably Solaz (2021).

(4) For example, the French divorce reform produced a sharp increase in divorce in 2005 when observed cross-sectionally but with no substantial cohort effect when observed longitudinally (Mazuy et al., 2011).

(5) An increase in TSWCP could equally signal a weakening of the conjugal norm or a greater difficulty in respecting it.

I. Components of TSWCP: interaction and trends across cohorts

1. The four components of TSWCP and the effect of their interaction

Let us consider successive cohorts of individuals who have reached a given age. Four demographic phenomena have interacted and determined the number of years spent without a cohabiting partner up to this age: first union, union dissolution through separation, partner's death (widowhood), and repartnering.

Regarding first union, most of the population experiences a first union at the start of adult life, before age 30, but with upward or downward variability in the mean age at union across cohorts, a factor that affects the mean TSWCP in both directions. Permanent⁽⁶⁾ or prolonged singlehood,⁽⁷⁾ for its part, while affecting a relatively small share of the population, may also have a significant effect on the mean TSWCP in a cohort.

Not surprisingly, an increase in the frequency of separations across cohorts tends to lengthen TSWCP.

The declining frequency of widowhood, linked to the rise in life expectancy, has a dual impact: first, it prolongs the relationships that would have ended through death in previous cohorts when mortality was higher; second, a share of the people who separate would have lost their partner through death in any case if the earlier level of mortality had remained unchanged, meaning that not all separations have an effect on trends in TSWCP. For these two reasons, early widowhood,⁽⁸⁾ even if it concerns only a small share of the population, may itself have a non-negligible effect.

Last, the increased intensity and rapidity of repartnering after separation attenuate the increase in TSWCP.

Few studies have sought to combine these different situations. For France, Pennec and Gaymu (2011) focused on life trajectories after age 60 to assess trends in conjugal isolation among older adults. For the cohorts born between 1900 and 1950, the interaction between separation trends, mortality, and repartnering led them to conclude that 'unlike in the past, for both genders, the years of life gained in the future may only be years spent with a partner' (Pennec and Gaymu, 2011, p. 198). In the United States, a survey in 2014 showed that, for the 1931–1941 cohorts, an estimated 73% of years lived from age 20 were in a marriage, compared with 54% for the 1954–1959 cohorts (Munnell et al., 2017). The decrease in widowhood and remarriage has not cancelled out the aggregate effects of a tripling of the share of women who do

(6) In demographic analysis, singlehood was traditionally qualified as 'permanent' for people who were never-married at age 50, but we prefer to apply this term to people who remain single throughout their life (Bouchet-Valat, 2015) and to qualify singlehood up to a specific age as 'prolonged'.

(7) In Europe, the proportion of individuals who have never been in a cohabiting union at age 40 ranges between 3% and 10% across the different countries, with France occupying a median position (Bellani et al., 2017).

(8) Before age 55 (Delaunay-Berdaï, 2004; Volhuer, 2012).

not marry, a 3-year increase in age at first marriage and a sharp increase in divorce. However, this study disregards the effect of the increase in non-marital cohabitation, which, while less marked in the United States than in France,⁽⁹⁾ may have partially offset the decrease in time spent in a marriage.

2. Long-term trends in the components of TSWCP

In France as elsewhere, union formation in the 20th century was an almost universal experience shared by all generations, although 8% of men and 10% of women born in 1930 had never cohabited with a partner at age 45. This share subsequently fell by 3 percentage points for women born in the 1940s while stagnating for men (Robert-Bobée and Mazuy, 2005). From then on, prolonged singlehood up to age 45 remained relatively stable (Costemalle, 2015).

The median age at entry into cohabiting union of the 1930 cohort was 25.3 years for men and 22.5 years for women (Prioux, 2003). It then followed a U-shaped pattern, decreasing by 2 years for men and 1 year for women up to the cohorts born during the Second World War before returning to its previous level, mainly in response to the expansion of education and the rise in unemployment (Prioux, 2005). From the cohorts born in the late 1970s, time spent in education stopped increasing, and the median age levelled off (Rault and Régnier-Loilier, 2019).

Early widowhood as a reason for union dissolution has rarely been studied in France. Among women born between 1910 and 1920, a quarter (24%) experienced the death of their co-resident partner before age 60 versus just 16% among those born between 1930 and 1940 (Delbès and Gaymu, 2005). Using data from the 1999 Family survey, Delaunay-Berdai (2005) showed that, for men, the mean age at early widowhood (before 55 years) was 44 years, although 40% of the individuals concerned were under 35. First union dissolutions through separation increased only slowly before the baby-boom generations, but then accelerated sharply. At age 50, less than 5% of the 1926–1935 cohorts had already separated from a cohabiting partner, less than 10% in the 1936–1945 cohorts, but more than 25% of those born just after the war and almost 35% of those born in 1956–1964 (Solaz, 2021).

The effect of union dissolution on TSWCP has weakened progressively for the youngest cohorts due to more frequent repartnering. For the cohorts born in the 1930s, experience of more than one cohabiting union by age 50 was rare (4% of men and 5% of women); among those born 30 years later, the proportion was 25% (Solaz, 2021). As well as becoming more frequent, repartnering has also become more rapid: 53% of women (60% of men) had already formed a new cohabiting union within 4 years of a first separation that occurred in 1990–1994 compared with 30% (45% of men) among those who separated in the early 1970s (Beaujouan, 2012). Note the differential impact of these events

(9) In the early 1990s, 83.3% of French women aged 15–44 had already experienced non-marital cohabitation versus 71.9% of American women of the same ages (Heuveline and Timberlake, 2004).

on men and women, as is also the case for widowhood: widowers are twice as likely to form a new cohabiting union as widows and tend to do so more quickly (Volhuer, 2012). Last, the shorter the interval between two unions, the more stable the new relationship over time, especially when the partners are of reproductive age (Costemalle, 2019).

Second or higher unions may also be dissolved. While second cohabiting unions formed in the 1970s were dissolved more frequently than first unions, this pattern was reversed from the 1990s cohorts (Beaujouan, 2016). Moreover, the longer the duration of the first union, the lower the probability that the second will be dissolved (Costemalle, 2019).

Hence, even though the proportion of singles below age 60 has increased over time (from a cross-sectional perspective), we expect TSWCP at different completed ages to have followed a U-shaped curve across the cohorts of the 20th century, with the cumulative effect of earlier first union and less frequent permanent singlehood and widowhood initially more than compensating for the gradual increase in separations from the 1930 cohort. After reaching a low, we then expect the curve to start moving upward due to the increase in age at first union and the higher frequency of separation, and to increase only slowly thereafter, attenuated by the effects of more frequent repartnering and a shorter interval between unions. Our main purpose, therefore, is to identify which cohorts correspond to this turning point and to determine the speed at which TSWCP increases from then on.

Gender differences may also be observed, as each component of singlehood affects men and women differently. Women are more exposed to the decrease in prolonged singlehood and early widowhood, repartner less frequently, and do not have the same variations in age at first union as men.

3. The main sociodemographic factors associated with TSWCP

Certain social and demographic characteristics that remain quite stable over the life course⁽¹⁰⁾ influence several components of TSWCP.⁽¹¹⁾

Regarding permanent singlehood, Bouchet-Valat (2015) observed among female pre-war cohorts a propensity to never form a cohabiting union that increases with educational level. From the 1950 cohort, however, the likelihood for the most educated women of cohabiting with a partner caught up with that of less educated women. Conversely, while little difference by educational level was previously observed for men, starting with the first baby-boom cohorts, the risk of permanent singlehood increased more slowly for the most educated men than for the other groups.

(10) For example, occupational category has a potential impact on all components of living without a partner but varies with age and hence with the successive stages in an individual's partnership trajectory, so it is impossible to determine a mean length of TSWCP by occupational category.

(11) Number of children and fertility timing, for example, have a powerful influence on TSWCP between the first union and potential second one, although it is rare to have children before a first union.

Educational level is also strongly linked to age at first union. In the 1978–1987 group of cohorts, there is a 2-year difference in this age between men and women with 2 years of higher education compared to those with a lower-secondary level and who form unions at a younger age (Rault and Régnier-Loilier, 2019).

Due to the cumulative impact of the age difference between partners and higher mortality among men and among the disadvantaged social categories, most of those affected by early widowhood are women (Delaunay-Berdaï, 2005) and working-class people (Delaunay-Berdaï, 2005; Bouhia, 2008).

Repartnering and above all the interval between unions are influenced by previous partnership and family trajectories (Beaujouan, 2012). However, there are more low-educated women than highly educated women in second unions, while among men the proportions are similar (Beaujouan, 2011).

The effect of education on the risk of dissolving a cohabiting union is only significant for secondary-level education (Marteau, 2019), and only weakly so. For first unions, the effect of education is ‘neither clear, nor strong, nor stable’ (Mignot, 2009, p. 397). Focusing on second union dissolutions, we observe an effect of education for female respondents only, among whom those with no qualifications or a postgraduate qualification are more likely to separate than the others (Costemalle, 2019).

Another common factor is a relative ‘intergenerational transmission of divorce’; people whose parents separated when they were minors more frequently dissolve their own unions (Costemalle, 2019).

Beaujouan (2016) identified additional factors linked to separation for women, whatever the union order. They include social background; children of parents in higher-level occupations and from the most advantaged social classes tend to separate less. Place of birth is also significant. Being born in France rather than abroad is linked to a higher separation risk.

II. Data and method

1. The ERFI and EPIC surveys

Our study draws on data from the first wave of the ERFI study, conducted in 2005 on 10,079 individuals born between 1926 and 1987,⁽¹²⁾ and from the EPIC survey of individual and partnership trajectories, conducted in 2013–2014 on 7,825 individuals born between 1948 and 1988. Designed with the aim of analysing individual trajectories, both surveys include information on the respondents’ partnership histories, although the nature of the observable unions differs between the two.

(12) For a detailed presentation of the ERFI survey, see Régnier-Loilier (2009). For the EPIC survey, see Rault and Régnier-Loilier (2019).

In the ERFI survey, past partnership history is understood as ‘having lived under the same roof with a partner for at least 3 consecutive months’, so only the history of cohabiting relationships can be traced. For each former partner, the survey records the start date of cohabitation, but also when and how the union was dissolved. The household composition table completes the history by identifying the date when, if applicable, a new partner moved into the dwelling with the respondent.

The EPIC survey, on the other hand, traces the history of all intimate relationships, cohabiting or not. Respondents were asked if they were currently in a relationship either ‘with a person who lives in the dwelling’ or ‘with a person who does not live in the dwelling’. If the answer was negative, respondents were asked, ‘Today, or in the past, have you ever had a partner or a romantic relationship that you considered as serious?’ Respondents with a partner at the time of the survey or who had experience of a serious romantic relationship were then asked to describe each one. They were asked to report when each relationship began, when and how it ended, if applicable, and the dates when cohabitation began and ended.

2. Time spent without a partner

We were thus able to retrace 10,147 (ERFI) and 9,349 (EPIC) cohabiting unions lasting at least 3 consecutive months and to calculate for each individual and each completed age the length of TSWCP. For the EPIC survey respondents, we also calculated a ‘total’ length of time spent without a partner based on the 14,699 identified unions (cohabiting or not), which showed that trends in singlehood and in living without a cohabiting partner both follow the same pattern (Figure A.1).

Given that, for earlier cohorts, entry into a cohabiting union was almost exclusively through marriage (Sardon, 1996), these durations were calculated based on the minimum legal age of marriage for men, i.e. from the respondents’ 18th birthday.⁽¹³⁾ This choice is subjective but has little real impact, as a very small proportion of the observed cohabiting unions began before age 18 (1.5%).

3. Analysis strategy

We first estimated the mean length of TSWCP for men and women across cohorts at various completed ages (25, 35, 45, 55, and 65 years) and the corresponding coefficients of variation to describe the evolution of mean TSWCP and its dispersion over a broad range of cohorts.

We then analysed how the increasing complexity of partnership trajectories is reflected in the TSWCP. The prevalence of various partnership trajectories was calculated, excluding the rare individuals who reported two cohabiting unions over a single period. We also decomposed the lengths of TSWCP by

(13) Age at leaving the parental home was not used as it would artificially reduce TSWCP, given that a child may never leave the parental home or may delay departure until a first union is formed (Bozon, 1994).

the stage in the partnership trajectory with which they are associated (no union, singlehood preceding a first union, dissolution through separation, and dissolution through partner's death).

Last, we identified the specific effect of each variable liable to affect TSWCP using multivariate models. We first modelled TSWCP at each age for each sex using linear regression models for all person-years.⁽¹⁴⁾ We then modelled this same aggregate duration using several linear regression models, this time for individuals and stratified by sex, completed age, and 10-year cohort.

The analysis concerns aggregate TSWCP at various ages, but since many of the available sociodemographic variables refer to the respondent's situation at the time of the two surveys, we selected the potentially discriminating variables that change only slightly or not at all over time. Based on results observed in the literature, in addition to sex and cohort, we selected educational level, social category of the parental household,⁽¹⁵⁾ and nationality, and controlled for the intergenerational transmission of separation by distinguishing respondents who lived with both parents during childhood⁽¹⁶⁾ from the others.

III. Results

1. Change in TSWCP across cohorts

Figure 1 illustrates the mean TSWCP for men and women across cohorts between their 18th birthday and different completed ages.

Overall, TSWCP follows a U-shaped curve for both sexes. It declines from the cohorts born before 1930 until the end of the 1940s, then starts moving upward. Before age 45, however, women's TSWCP is always lower than that of men at a given age, while that of women born before 1930 is higher from age 45, as it is for all cohorts of women at age 65.⁽¹⁷⁾

At age 35, for example, men born in 1928 had lived for 8.6 years, on average, without a partner since age 18, the same length of time as those born in 1961, but longer than the men born in 1947 (7.1 years). At the same age, the decrease in TSWCP for women born between 1928 and 1949 (from 8.1 years to 5.6 years) is more pronounced, and the subsequent increase is also more moderate (never more than 7.3 years). The same trend is observed at older ages. Hence, if this

(14) The different years concerning a single individual are specified as belonging to a single cluster.

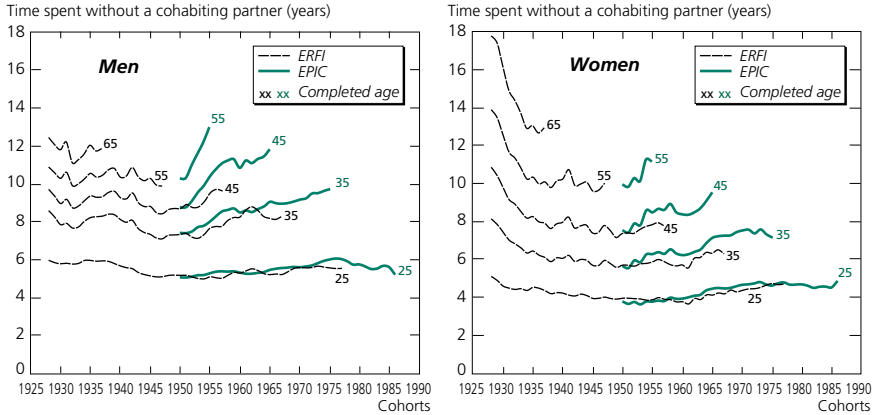
(15) Estimated via the social category of the parent(s) with whom the respondent lived, based on a principle similar to INSEE's seven major occupational categories. The construction method is detailed in Amossé and Cayouette-Remblière (2022).

(16) Up to the respondents' 15th birthday in ERFI and 18th birthday in EPIC.

(17) For the oldest cohorts, TSWCP is overestimated, as the recorded year of cohabitation could not be before 1950 in the ERFI survey. To measure these durations, we therefore assumed that all cohabitating unions supposedly beginning in 1950 actually began in the years of the respondent's 18th birthday. While the levels differ, this does not distort the differences between the sexes nor the trends across cohorts from age 45.

is confirmed, the mid-1940s cohorts will be those with the shortest TSWCP at each age considered. For men born in 1947, the mean durations are 5.1 years at age 25, 7.1 years at age 35, 8.5 years at age 45, and 9.9 years at age 55; for women, they are 4.0 years, 6.0 years, 7.7 years, and 10.0 years at the same ages.

Figure 1. Mean lengths of TSWCP across cohorts (in years) by sex, completed age, and survey



Interpretation: At age 25, men born in 1955 had lived for 5.1 years, on average, without a cohabiting partner since their 18th birthday according to the ERFI survey and 5.3 years according to EPIC.

Coverage: All respondents born between 1926 and 1988.

Sources: ERFI (INED-INSEE, 2005) and EPIC (INED-INSEE, 2013–2014); authors' calculations.

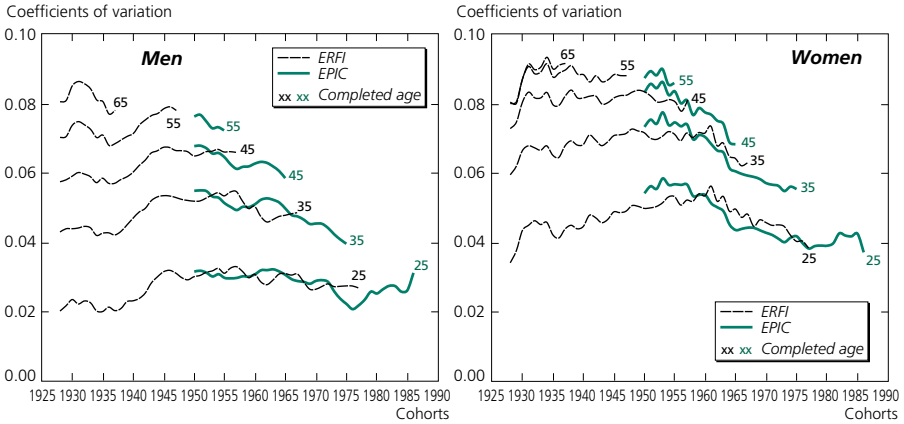
The increasing diversity of individual partnership trajectories, linked to advancing age, gives rise to an almost automatic dispersion of TSWCP across completed ages, here observed via the coefficient of variation⁽¹⁸⁾ (Figure 2). However, at each completed age, TSWCP becomes increasingly homogeneous (dispersion decreases) as mean duration increases, and vice versa. Moreover, at all completed ages, women's TSWCP, generally lower than those of men, are also more dispersed. The heterogeneity of TSWCP is thus attributable more to union behaviours that tend to reduce time spent without a partner than to other behaviours that tend to increase it.

2. TSWCP and more complex partnership trajectories

For all the cohorts studied, most men and women are in a first union from age 35 (Figure 3). Even when first unions are less frequent, at least 57% of men (at age 35 for the 1972 cohort) and 48.9% of women (at age 65 for the 1928 cohort) are in a first union. That said, the place occupied by first unions in partnership trajectories has declined steadily across cohorts due to more frequent and earlier separation. For example, while no more than 17.4% of men and 13.3% of women

(18) The coefficient of variation is the ratio of the standard deviation of TSWCP to its mean and is dimensionless. The higher the coefficient of variation, the greater the dispersion around the mean.

Figure 2. Coefficients of variation of time spent without a cohabiting partner across cohorts by sex, completed age, and survey



Interpretation: The coefficient of variation for women born in 1980 is 0.039.

Coverage: All respondents born between 1926 and 1988.

Sources: ERFI (INED-INSEE, 2005) and EPIC (INED-INSEE, 2013–2014); authors' calculations.

in the 1937 cohort had separated by age 65, these same proportions are observed at age 35 for men born in 1953 and at age 25 for women born in 1977.

The impact of separations on changes in TSWCP is weakened by the combined effect of four factors. First, repartnering has become more frequent and earlier. Among the older cohorts, only 12.8% of men in a cohort had experienced more than one cohabiting union before their 65th birthday; from the 1960s cohorts, this proportion is reached by age 35. For women born in 1984, it is at age 25 that the share having experienced at least two unions reaches the level observed at age 65 for the oldest cohorts (10.1%).

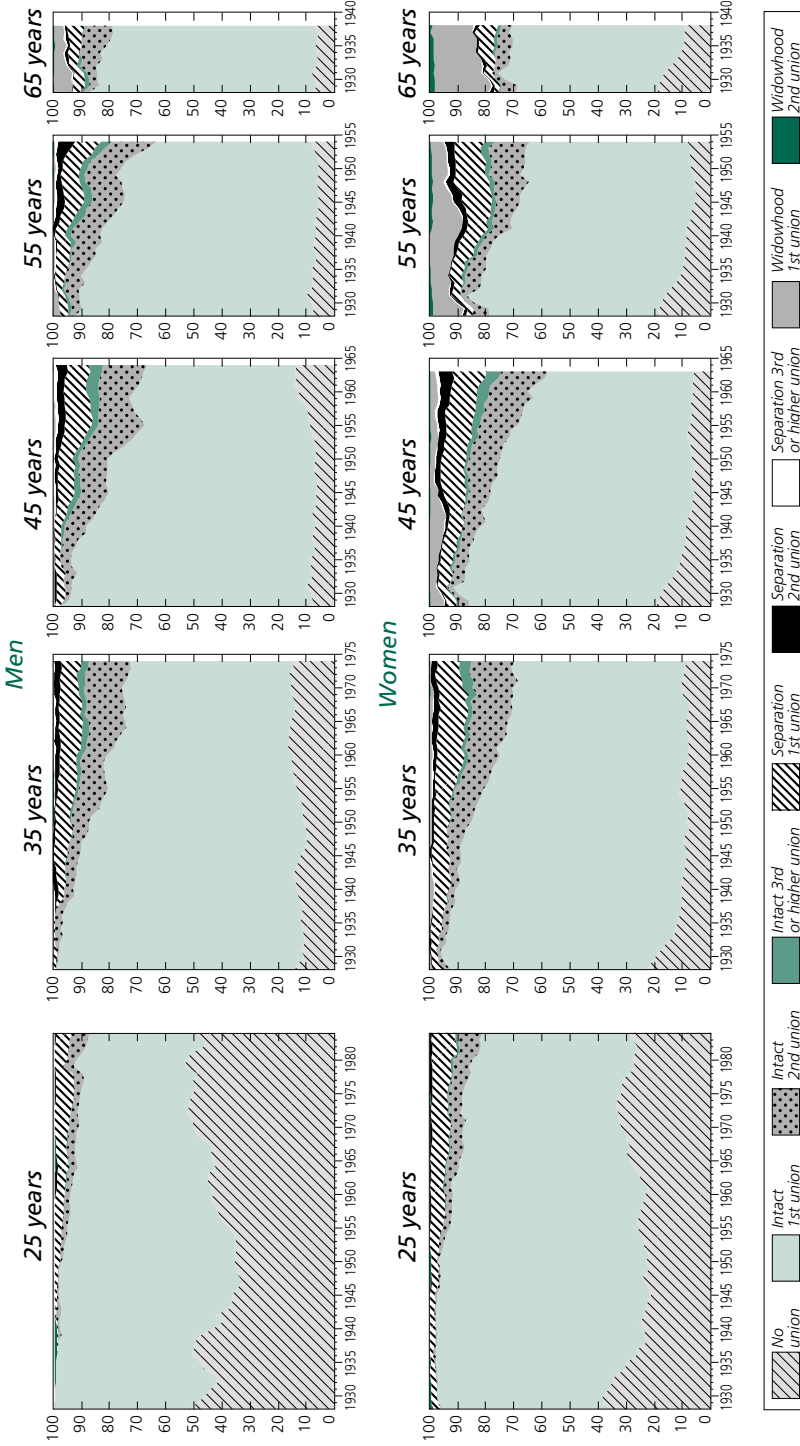
Second, the long-term reduction in women's prolonged singlehood⁽¹⁹⁾ is the main reason behind the decrease in TSWCP in the 1931–1943 cohorts, of which the share linked to this factor falls from 50% to close to 30%. While between 16.3% and 18.8% of women born between 1928 and 1931 had never been in a union at age 55, among those born between 1939 and 1944 the proportion was between 6.6% and 8.8% (Figure 4).

Third, the frequency of widowhood, mainly affecting women, has also decreased. While more than 20% of women born before 1930 were widowed at age 65, the share was just 15% among those born in 1938.

Fourth, we observe a temporary drop in TSWCP preceding the first union, the main component of men's total TSWCP at all ages. It alone explains practically all the decrease in TSWCP among men born between 1928 and 1949 and the subsequent increase for young men. For women, the share of TSWCP that precedes each union increases in parallel with the decline in permanent

(19) Here, prolonged singlehood is understood as never having been in a cohabiting union lasting at least 3 months at age 55.

Figure 3. Distribution of partnership trajectories at completed ages by cohort and sex

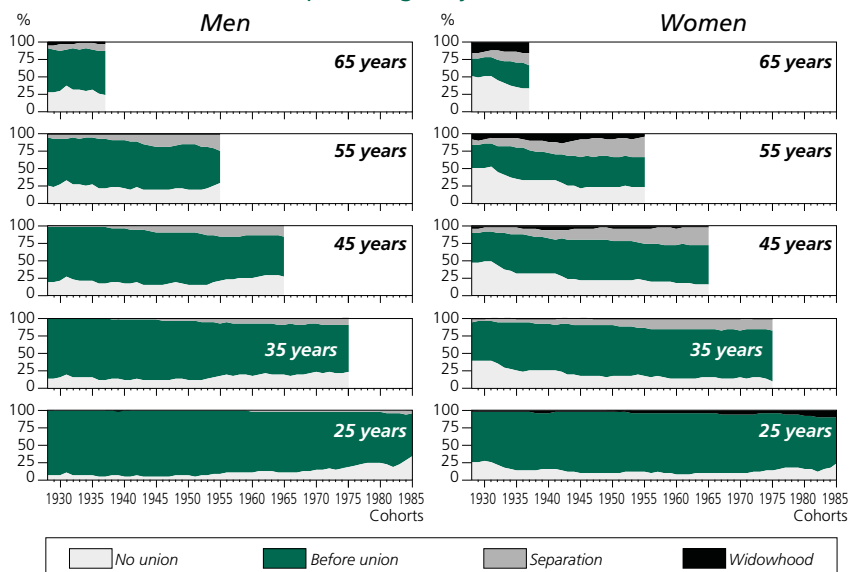


Interpretation: At age 25, 38% of women born in 1930 had never been in a cohabiting union, and 59% were in their first cohabiting union.

Coverage: All respondents born between 1926 and 1988 never reporting more than one cohabiting union on the same date.

Sources: ERFI (INED-INSEE, 2005) and EPIC (INED-INSEE, 2013–2014); authors' calculations.

Figure 4. Decomposition of time spent without a cohabiting partner at completed ages by cohort and sex



Interpretation: At age 45, 56% of the mean TSWCP for men born in 1965 is explained by the period of singlehood before the first cohabiting union, 15% by a period of separation following a first cohabiting union, and 15% by the years of singlehood of men who have never had a cohabiting partner.

Coverage: All respondents born between 1926 and 1988.

Sources: ERFI (INED-INSEE, 2005) and EPIC (INED-INSEE, 2013–2014); authors' calculations.

singlehood whose contribution, at age 55, reaches a level similar to that observed for men in the most recent cohorts.

3. Effect of individual characteristics on TSWCP

Controlling for the different characteristics of the model, TSWCP increases with age (Table 1). On average, for each additional year lived after age 18, it increases by 0.28 years for men and 0.27 years for women.

Concerning the association between year of birth and TSWCP, we observe a slow rise for men between the 1938–1947 and 1948–1957 cohorts, followed by a more pronounced increase up to the 1968–1977 cohorts. For women, it decreases markedly between the 1928–1937 cohorts and the baby boomers, followed by smaller increase than for men.

For women, increasing educational level is linked to a rise in TSWCP, but for men the relationship is less linear. Regarding the least educated men, TSWCP for men with 2 or more years of higher education is 0.4 years longer, while for those with a vocational lower-secondary qualification it is more than half a year shorter.

Men whose parents were farmers have a longer TSWCP. While women with parents in the highest social categories have the same TSWCP as those

Table 1. Linear regression of aggregate time spent without a cohabiting partner at each age, for men and women

	Men		Women	
Constant	-0.46	*	-1.39	***
Completed age (time variable)	0.28	***	0.27	***
Group of cohorts (Ref. = 1948–1957)				
1928–1937	-0.44	°	1.20	***
1938–1947	-0.53	*	0.03	
1958–1967	1.10	***	0.30	°
1968–1977	1.20	***	0.50	***
1978–1987	0.13		-0.16	
Highest qualification (Ref. = None; Primary)				
Lower-secondary vocational	-0.55	***	0.37	*
Upper secondary	-0.08		1.20	***
2+ years tertiary	0.40	*	1.80	***
Social category of parental household (Ref. = Clerical/sales worker)				
Higher-level occupation	0.47		0.10	
Intermediate	0.37	°	-0.05	
Self-employed	-0.02		-0.34	
Farmer	0.87	***	-0.79	**
Manual worker	-0.04		-0.42	°
Other	0.14		-0.57	**
Don't know	0.14		-0.68	°
Lived with both parents during childhood (Ref. = Yes)				
No	-0.01		0.24	
Nationality (Ref. = French)				
Foreign		0.26		1.20 **
Numbers		7,720		10,108
Person-years		242,493		311,905
<i>Interpretation:</i> A statistically significant positive (negative) coefficient indicates that, for the category concerned, TSWCP is longer (shorter) than for the reference category.				
<i>Statistical significance:</i> *** $p < .1\%$. ** $p < 1\%$. * $p < 5\%$. ° $p < 10\%$.				
<i>Coverage:</i> All respondents born between 1926 and 1988.				
<i>Sources:</i> ERFI (INED–INSEE, 2005) and EPIC (INED–INSEE, 2013–2014); authors' calculations.				

raised in clerical-worker households, those with parents in the other social categories have a shorter TSWCP.

Parental separation during childhood appears, finally, to have no effect on the TSWCP of the individuals concerned.

Last, regarding nationality, foreign women have a higher TSWCP.

In the models run for each cohort group, completed age, and sex, the role of the various individual characteristics across ages or cohorts exhibits minimal significant change, probably due to the small sample size. This is especially the case among men, for whom none of the selected variables is significantly associated with TSWCP (Appendix Table A.1). For women, some salient features emerge, however (Table 2): having a qualification equivalent to at least 2 years of tertiary education significantly increases TSWCP, especially for older women.

Table 2. Linear regressions of women's time spent without a cohabiting partner by cohort and completed age

	1928–1937					1938–1947			
	25	35	45	55	65	25	35	45	55
Constant	7.0***	9.5***	11.5***	13.9***	16.7***	7.0***	9.1***	11.3***	14.0***
Highest qualification (Ref. = None; Primary)									
Lower-secondary vocational	0.8**	0.9	1.1	1.1	1.4	0.6**	1.3**	1.3*	1.0
Upper secondary	1.3	4.7	8.5	12.0	16.0	0.7	1.5	1.3	0.5
2+ years tertiary	1.1***	2.6***	3.7**	4.9**	6.0**	1.4***	2.2***	2.5***	2.9**
Social category of parental household (Ref. = Clerical/sales worker)									
Higher-level occupation	-2.0	-5.3**	-8.4***	-12.0***	-15.0***	1.9***	4.2***	3.2*	2.1
Intermediate	0.2	0.3	0.0	-0.7	-0.8	0.1	-1.0	-1.9	-2.3
Self-employed	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.4	0.6	-0.8**	-1.8*	-2.7*	-3.6*
Farmer	0.7	0.8	0.9	0.8	1.1	-0.2	-1.3	-2.4*	-3.1*
Manual worker	-0.4	-1.0	-1.6	-2.0	-1.4	-0.2	-0.3	0.0	0.1
Other	0.2	-0.3	-0.8	-1.2	-1.1	-0.9**	-1.9**	-2.4*	-2.8*
Don't know	0.6	-0.2	-1.0	-1.8	-1.6	-0.8	-1.9*	-2.6	-3.2
Lived with both parents during childhood (Ref. = Yes)									
No	-0.4	-0.4	0.1	1.1	1.7	0.3	0.4	0.4	0.5
Nationality (Ref. = French)									
Foreign	0.5	0.8	0.2	-1.0	-2.4	1.0	3.7	5.6	6.9
Numbers	n = 687					n = 803			

	1948–1957				1958–1967			1968–1977		1978–1987
	25	35	45	55	25	35	45	25	35	25
Constant	6.5***	8.7***	11.2***	14.5***	6.5***	9.0***	11.4***	7.3***	9.9***	6.7***
Highest qualification (Ref. = None; Primary)										
Lower-secondary vocational	0.4	0.5	0.5	0.2	0.1	-0.2	-0.4	-0.3	-1.3*	0.3
Upper secondary	1.1***	1.5**	1.3	1.1	0.7*	0.7	0.6	0.4	-0.6	1.0**
2+ years tertiary	2.1***	3.1***	3.6***	4.0***	1.6***	1.9***	1.7	1.1***	0.7	1.2***
Social category of parental household (Ref. = Clerical/sales worker)										
Higher-level occupation	-0.1	0.0	-0.5	-1.5	0.0	0.9	1.4	0.2	1.1	0.2
Intermediate	-0.1	-0.4	-0.8	-1.7	0.2	0.9	1.4	-0.2	0.3	0.1
Self-employed	-0.2	-0.7	-1.7	-2.8	-0.1	-0.2	-0.3	-0.1	0.7	0.2
Farmer	-0.5	-1.6*	-3.0**	-4.8**	0.2	-0.2	-0.5	-0.1	0.0	-0.4
Manual worker	-0.4	-0.8	-1.0	-1.6	0.0	0.0	-0.2	-0.6*	-0.4	-0.2
Other	-0.4	-0.7	-1.5	-2.5	-0.4	-0.8	-1.3	0.0	1.1	-0.3
Don't know	-0.1	-0.4	-0.4	-0.6	-0.7	-1.0	-1.6	-0.1	1.1	0.0
Lived with both parents during childhood (Ref. = Yes)										
No	-0.3	-0.4	0.2	0.5	0.4	0.6	1.6	-0.4	-0.3	0.1
Nationality (Ref. = French)										
Foreign	-0.1	0.6	1.3	1.9	0.6	1.5	1.6	0.6	2.4*	0.6
Numbers	n = 1,249				n = 1,167			n = 1,107		n = 919

Interpretation: A statistically significant positive (negative) coefficient indicates that, for the category concerned, time spent without a cohabiting partner is longer (shorter) than for the reference category.

Statistical significance: *** $p < 1\%$. ** $p < 1\%$. * $p < 5\%$.

Coverage: All respondents born between 1926 and 1988.

Sources: ERFI (INED-INSEE, 2005) and EPIC (INED-INSEE, 2013); authors' calculations.

However, while this effect persists across cohorts, it weakens progressively. It is most discriminating for women born between 1948 and 1957, among whom, having an upper-secondary qualification is significantly linked to TSWCP. As observed for all individuals, the higher the level of education, the longer the TSWCP. The social category of the household is also correlated with TSWCP. For women born in 1928–1937, having been raised in a household with parent(s) in a higher-level occupation reduces the TSWCP, while the reverse is true for women born between 1938 and 1947. This factor then becomes non-significant for later cohorts.

IV. Discussion and conclusion

Our results show that TSWCP before age 65 has not increased as much as might be suggested by the increasing numbers of lone-parent families, blended families, and people living solo (Arbouville and Bonvalet, 2003; Daguet and Niel, 2010). Whatever the age (before 65 years) at which TSWCP is calculated, the tendency remains the same, with a decrease up to the first baby-boom cohorts followed by a slight upturn.

Beyond age 65, Pennec and Gaymu (2011) showed that TSWCP stabilizes between the 1930 and 1950 cohorts after a period of increase. These results, combined with our own findings that focus on TSWCP before age 65, suggest that from the 1930 cohort until the first baby boomers, total TSWCP and the proportion of the total life course spent in this situation will decrease.

The 1945–1955 cohorts represent a turning point, however, with a progressive increase in TSWCP before age 65. There seems to have been a ‘golden age’ of marriage and couplehood—at least in terms of union duration—among the earliest baby-boom cohorts, for whom early widowhood and permanent singlehood had already reached very low levels, age at first union was earlier, and separations were still infrequent. These cohorts do not represent a norm, but rather an exception. For the following cohorts, the mechanisms that strongly contributed to the decrease in TSWCP were offset by an increase in age at first union and in separations that tend to increase it. This renewed increase has occurred quite slowly, however, as repartnering has become more frequent and more rapid. It is further attenuated if we take account of the alternative forms of non-cohabiting intimate relationships (Régnier-Loilier et al., 2009) that became more frequent from the cohorts born in the mid-1960s (Appendix Figure A.2).

The increasing complexity of partnership trajectories appears to signal a transformation rather than a rejection of conjugal norms. This confirms the conclusions of a recent qualitative study showing that ‘the recent diversification of partnership histories has made singlehood a far more commonplace phenomenon in reality than in representations’ (Bergström et al., 2019, p. 121).

The similarity in TSWCP among the last cohorts of the 20th century to that of the 1930s cohorts shows that French society is still strongly attached to the ideal of couplehood. More 'diffuse' but no less 'effective', the conjugal norm (Bergström et al., 2019) seems to have maintained its influence by adopting alternative forms outside the tradition of marriage. For Vivier and Courtel (2018), it may even have been 'strengthened', given that constant pressure to form a union reported by interviewees often emanates from cohorts who, while questioning the foundations of coupledom (Bonvalet et al., 2011) and experimenting with separation, will ultimately have spent fewer years of their life without a partner than their parents.

Among the various sociodemographic characteristics considered, gender seems to be the most discriminating factor regarding TSWCP. The large decline in prolonged singlehood and early widowhood has benefited women particularly, resulting in a more pronounced decrease in TSWCP for the oldest cohorts. Before the cohorts born in the early 1930s, women spent a much longer TSWCP from age 45 than men did. The gender gap at age 55 then narrowed until the baby-boom cohorts, and TSWCP became significantly lower for women up to age 45.

For the following cohorts, interactions between the components of singlehood are more complex. At age 25, women are already more often in a cohabiting relationship than men, and prolonged singlehood up to age 35, or even 45, becomes rarer for women, while increasing across cohorts for men. Conversely, after the first cohabiting union, periods of solo living are more frequent for women. Whatever their previous partnership trajectory, single women report more often than men that their singlehood is a choice (Bergström et al., 2019). These observations mirror what Rosenfeld (2018) in the United States saw as one of the gendered 'paradoxes' of the life cycle: young women appear to have a stronger and earlier desire to form a union than men, but later report being less satisfied with their conjugal experience. Given that TSWCP increases more quickly for men across cohorts, women's stronger desire to be in a union before age 30, combined with a sharper decline in early widowhood for women, have until now more than made up for their slower repartnering.

The social category of the parental household and individual educational levels also affect TSWCP, with higher education and an advantaged social background correlating with a longer duration.

There are nuances to this overall picture, however. For men, entry into union generally depends on holding a 'stable' job (Galland, 1995), a factor which, according to our results, increases TSWCP for the most highly educated men, but also the least educated. We also observe that men working in agriculture are distinct from the rest of the population. Although the trend weakened throughout the 20th century, farmers' sons who obtain the requisite qualifications often remain in farming, while the least educated tend to follow a different path, closer to that of manual workers (Giraud and Rémy, 2015).

Consequently, a large share of farmers' children are either farmers themselves—known to have high rates of singlehood (Giraud, 2013)—or in the least educated category, also more frequently single.

For women, Bouchet-Valat (2018) found that differences in rates of singlehood by educational level tend to narrow from the 1980s due to an increase in singlehood among the least educated. Models stratified by cohort confirm this shift (Table 2), which seems to have begun with the 1940s cohorts. Compared with earlier cohorts, a larger share of low-educated women may prefer to opt for independence or 'newfound freedom' rather than greater financial security (Bergström et al., 2019).

The models stratified by cohort also shed light on changes in the link between social background and TSWCP. Having parents in a higher-level occupation reduced TSWCP for women in the 1928–1937 cohorts but increased it for cohorts born in the following decade. The effect then becomes non-significant, which again aligns with Bouchet-Valat (2018), who observed a recent disappearance in the link between female singlehood rates and social background.

We also note that intergenerational transmission of separation, visible for both first (Marteau, 2019) and second cohabiting unions (Costemalle, 2019), does not lengthen TSWCP. Periods of singlehood after separation may simply counterbalance the earlier entry into union of children whose parents have separated (Traag et al., 2000).

Last, being born in a foreign country is associated with a longer TSWCP for women. As this tends to limit the risk of separation (Beaujouan, 2016), a later age at first union (Hamel et al., 2010) may perhaps be the main explanation for this finding.

This study has limits intrinsic to the nature of the data sets upon which it is based. First, as TSWCP is calculated through retrospective observation, with all its inherent limitations, certain unions may be misreported or omitted, to an extent that varies by sex (Beaujouan, 2011). Results are likely also distorted by a selection effect, producing a bias with respect to calculations based on follow-up observation, for widowhood especially (Robert-Bobée and Monteil, 2006). Last, ongoing partnership trajectories are inevitably truncated at the survey date.

Further research is needed to expand upon our exploratory findings. First, the decision to focus on cohabiting unions not only conferred generational depth to the analysis but also enabled us to compare the situation in France with that of other countries, since this type of relationship is still the most widely used in international surveys to trace partnership trajectories.⁽²⁰⁾ The harmonization of questionnaires on non-cohabiting unions is still ongoing (Giraud, 2023).

(20) For example, the Harmonized Histories database of the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research, covering 21 European and North American countries (Perelli-Harris et al., 2015).

For France, however, the EPIC survey could provide an opportunity, from the 1948 cohort, for a more detailed analysis of time spent not in a 'serious' relationship, i.e. without any partner, either cohabiting or otherwise, to whom the individual is or was strongly attached. While the trend across cohorts is very similar to that of TSWCP (Appendix Figures A.1 and A.2), its decomposition would likely bring to light more complex partnership trajectories, as non-cohabiting relationships are experienced differently through the life cycle. For young adults, they may represent a period of 'pre-cohabitation' (Régnier-Loilier, 2016, 2019), signifying a younger actual age at first union than that observed. However, the prolonged singlehood revealed in our study might correspond to a succession of non-cohabiting relationships, some more serious than others, before age 30. 'Living apart together' with a partner may be less temporary after a separation, and differences by cohort and sex may exist.

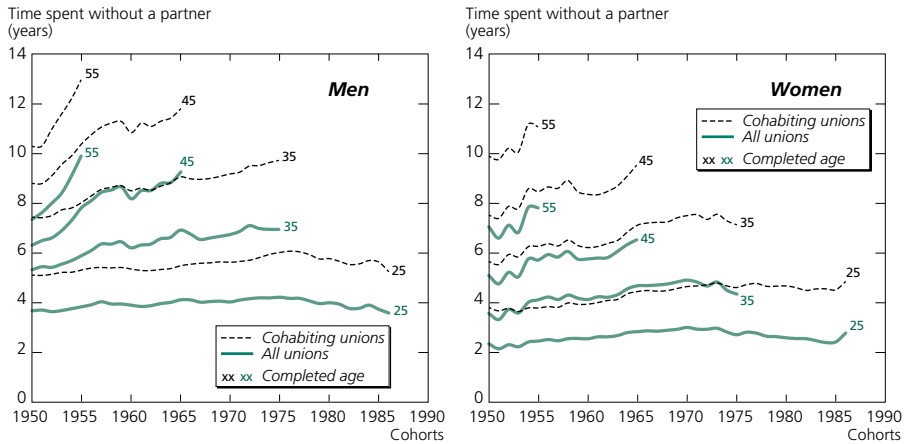
Finally, family formation needs to be included in the analysis. Fertility timing is not independent of the processes of separation and forming a new cohabiting union (Beaujouan, 2016; Costemalle, 2019; Régnier-Loilier, 2019), and its impact on TSWCP is certainly not the same for men and women. This might partly explain the greater heterogeneity of trends in female singlehood.

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APPENDICES

Figure A.1. Mean lengths of time spent without a partner for all unions and for cohabiting unions by cohort, sex, and completed age



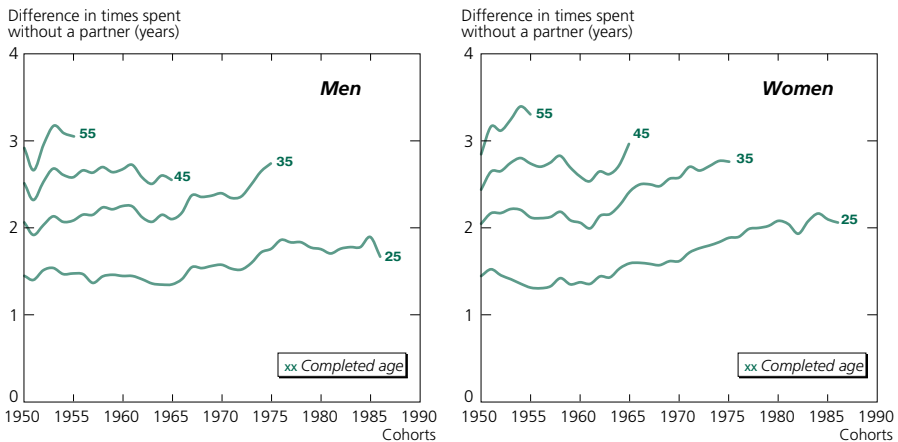
Interpretation: At age 25, men born in 1955 had lived for 5.3 years on average without a cohabiting partner and 3.8 years without any partner since their 18th birthday.

Note: Five-year moving averages.

Coverage: All respondents born between 1948 and 1988.

Source: EPIC (INED-INSEE, 2013–2014); authors' calculations.

Figure A.2. Mean lengths of time spent with a non-cohabiting partner across cohorts, by sex and completed age



Interpretation: At age 25, men born in 1955 had spent 1.5 more years on average without a cohabiting partner than without any partner.

Note: Five-year moving averages.

Coverage: All respondents born between 1948 and 1988.

Source: EPIC (INED-INSEE, 2013–2014); authors' calculations.

Table A.1. Linear regressions of men's time spent without a cohabiting partner by cohort and completed age

	1928–1937					1938–1947				
	25 years	35 years	45 years	55 years	65 years	25 years	35 years	45 years	55 years	
Constant	8.5 ***	11.1 ***	13.4 ***	15.4 ***	17.6 ***	8.4 ***	10.4 ***	11.6 ***	12.0 ***	
Highest qualification (Ref. = None; Primary)										
Lower-secondary vocational	0.0	-0.8	-1.5 *	-2.1 *	-2.6 *	-0.4 *	-0.6	-0.6	-0.5	
Upper secondary	0.5	0.6	0.7	0.7	1.2	0.5	0.2	0.8	1.3	
3+ years tertiary	0.4	0.3	-0.2	-0.8	-1.1	0.7 ***	0.4	0.7	1.2 **	
Social category of parental household (Ref. = Clerical/sales worker)										
Higher-level occupation	0.3	-0.2	-2.0	-3.5	-5.2	0.6	1.2	1.5	2.3	
Intermediate	0.8 *	0.8	-0.1	-0.8	-1.5	0.3	1.9	1.8	1.8	
Self-employed	0.6	0.0	-1.1	-1.5	-2.1	-0.4	-1.0	-1.7	-1.4 *	
Farmer	0.8 *	1.3	0.7	0.5	0.5	0.3	1.0	1.7	3.0 *	
Manual worker	-0.1	-0.9	-2.2	-3.0	-3.7	-0.5	0.3	1.2	2.9	
Other	0.3	0.0	-1.0	-1.6	-2.1	-0.2	-0.3	-0.2	0.6 *	
Don't know	0.1	-1.0	-2.4	-3.4	-3.9	0.1	1.2	1.4	1.7	
Lived with both parents during childhood (Ref. = Yes)										
No	0.2	-0.2	-0.6	-0.9	-1.2	-0.3	-0.7	-0.9	-0.9	
Nationality (Ref. = French)										
Foreign	-0.6	-1.2	-0.7	-0.5	-0.5	0.1	1.5	1.0	0.4	
Numbers	n = 549					n = 688				
	1948–1957				1958–1967			1968–1977		1978–1987
	25 years	35 years	45 years	55 years	25 years	35 years	45 years	25 years	35 years	25 years
Constant	8.1 ***	10.6 ***	12.6 ***	14.9 ***	8.1 ***	11.8 ***	15.1 ***	8.7 ***	12.4 ***	8.2 ***
Highest qualification (Ref. = None; Primary)										
Lower-secondary vocational	-0.1	-0.9	-1.5 *	-2.0 *	-0.1	-0.5	-1.2	-0.1	-0.5	0.0
Upper secondary	-0.2	-1.2 *	-2.1 **	-3.0 **	0.5 *	1.0	0.7	0.3	-0.1	0.1
3+ years tertiary	0.6 **	1.0	1.1	0.8	0.6 **	0.5	-0.5	0.5	-0.3	0.9 **
Social category of parental household (Ref. = Clerical/sales worker)										
Higher-level occupation	0.6	1.4	3.0	2.9	-0.1	-1.3	-2.7 *	0.0	0.9	0.1
Intermediate	0.1	0.2	0.1	-0.4	0.7 **	0.2	-0.4	0.0	0.7	0.0
Self-employed	0.3	0.6	1.1	1.4	0.0	-0.6	-0.9	-0.1	0.1	-0.2
Farmer	0.5	0.8	1.0	0.9	0.3	0.3	0.0	0.1	1.0	-0.1
Manual worker	-0.5	-0.5	-0.4	-0.4	-0.1	-0.7	-0.7	-0.2	-0.4	0.2
Other	0.1	0.3	0.6	1.0	0.3	0.7	0.9	0.0	0.2	-0.3
Don't know	0.0	0.1	-0.2	-0.4	0.2	0.0	-0.3	-0.3	0.9	0.3
Lived with both parents during childhood (Ref. = Yes)										
No	0.1	0.3	0.9	1.5	-0.3	-0.5	0.0	-0.5	-0.6	-0.2
Nationality (Ref. = French)										
Foreign	-0.9	-1.4	-2.3	-3.5	-0.1	-0.2	-1.1	0.5 *	1.6	0.5 *
Numbers	n = 919				n = 934			n = 829		n = 696
Interpretation: A statistically significant positive (negative) coefficient indicates that, for the category concerned, time spent without a cohabiting partner is longer (shorter) than for the reference category.										
Statistical significance: *** $p < .1\%$. ** $p < 1\%$. * $p < 5\%$.										
Coverage: All respondents born between 1926 and 1988.										
Sources: ERFI (INED–INSEE, 2005) and EPIC (INED–INSEE, 2013); authors' calculations.										

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Résumé

Nicolas REBIÈRE, Nicolas CAUCHI-DUVAL, Lyem BRITAH, Zoé DELOEIL, Inès MUNOZ-BERTRAND, Axel REDONNET, Margaux TOCQUEVILLE • **LE TEMPS PASSÉ SANS VIVRE EN COUPLE : UNE ANALYSE AU FIL DES GÉNÉRATIONS EN FRANCE**

En France, la part des personnes vivant sans conjoint chez les moins de 65 ans progresse depuis la fin des années 1960. Pourtant, aucune analyse permettant d'évaluer l'importance que revêtent les séquences de vie solitaire dans les parcours de vie individuels n'a encore été menée. Cet article présente la durée de vie hors couple cohabitant cumulée au fil des âges pour les générations 1926 à 1988 à partir des enquêtes Érfi (2005) et Épic (2013-2014), et identifie les facteurs de son évolution à partir de régressions linéaires. Ces durées ont évolué différemment selon le sexe et sont devenues plus faibles chez les femmes, qui ont notamment plus bénéficié que les hommes du recul du célibat prolongé et celui du veuvage précoce. Les effets de l'origine sociale et du niveau de diplôme ont longtemps structuré la durée de vie hors couple, mais diminuent progressivement. Les premières générations de baby-boomers (1945-1955) font figure d'exception en ayant connu les plus faibles durées de vie hors couple, de telle sorte que la complexification des trajectoires conjugales vécues par les générations suivantes s'apparente plus à une transformation des normes de conjugalité qu'à leur rejet.

Resumen

Nicolas REBIÈRE, Nicolas CAUCHI-DUVAL, Lyem BRITAH, Zoé DELOEIL, Inès MUNOZ-BERTRAND, Axel REDONNET, Margaux TOCQUEVILLE • **EL TIEMPO PASADO SIN VIVIR EN PAREJA: UN ANÁLISIS INTERGENERACIONAL EN FRANCIA**

En Francia, la proporción de personas menores de 65 años que viven sin pareja no ha dejado de aumentar desde finales de los años sesenta. Sin embargo, aún no se ha llevado a cabo ningún análisis para evaluar la importancia de las secuencias de vida solitaria en los cursos vitales individuales. Este artículo presenta la duración acumulada de la vida sin pareja cohabitante a lo largo del tiempo para las generaciones 1926 a 1988 a partir de las encuestas Érfi (2005) y Épic (2013-2014), e identifica los factores que explican su evolución mediante regresiones lineales. Estas duraciones han evolucionado de forma diferente según el sexo, y se han acortado para las mujeres, que se han beneficiado más que los hombres de la reducción de la soltería prolongada y de la viudez precoz. Durante mucho tiempo, los efectos del origen social y el nivel de educación han determinado la duración de la vida sin pareja, pero poco a poco van disminuyendo. Las primeras generaciones de baby-boomers (1945-1955) fueron la excepción, ya que tuvieron las vidas no conyugales más cortas, por lo que la complejización de las trayectorias conyugales experimentadas por las generaciones posteriores se asemeja más a una transformación de las normas de conjugalidad que a su rechazo.