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Research Article

**Marital plans and partnership transitions among
German opposite-sex couples: Couple agreement
and gender differences**

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Marital plans and partnership transitions among German opposite-sex couples: Couple agreement and gender differences

Dominika Perdoch Sladká¹

Abstract

BACKGROUND

Research shows that marital plans influence marital behavior. However, romantic partners may differ in their marital plans, and these differences can affect relationship outcomes.

OBJECTIVE

The aim of this study is to investigate the relationship between agreement in short-term marital plans and partnership transitions in German opposite-sex couples and to find whether there is a gender difference in the relationship between marital plans and the risk of marriage or dissolution.

METHOD

The couple-level data from the German Family Panel (pairfam) were analyzed with competing-risks regression. The sample consisted of 1,834 couples.

RESULTS

Marital plans were strongly associated with the subsequent transition to marriage; marital plans were not associated with dissolution when controlling for relationship and partner characteristics. The gender of the partner with marital plans was not associated with the probability of marriage or dissolution.

CONCLUSIONS

Contrary to expectations, there were no gender differences in the relationship between marital plans and partnership transitions. Despite the important role of marriage in Germany, disagreements in marital plans did not increase the risk of dissolution. However, agreement in marital plans plays an important role in subsequent marriage. The transition to marriage is also strongly influenced by relationship characteristics and life course factors.

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CONTRIBUTION

This research emphasizes the importance of using couple data in studying the marital intention–outcome link. Using recent data from a long panel study, the findings contrast with previous research on the gendered effect of marital plans in the United States.

1. Introduction

Marriage is no longer a universal arrangement, nor is it a life goal for many people. With increasing incidence of unmarried cohabitation and other alternative living arrangements, the decision to marry is in the hands of individuals more than ever before. Still, the decision to marry is for two partners to make, and their marital plans may differ.

In Germany, people attribute diverse meanings and different degrees of importance to marriage (Hiekel, Liefbroer, and Poortman 2015). Although unmarried cohabitation is less institutionalized than marriage (Perelli-Harris and Gassen 2012), about half of the cohabiters in Germany see cohabitation as an alternative to marriage (Hiekel, Liefbroer, and Poortman 2015). Another large part of cohabiters is “very much oriented towards marriage” (Hiekel, Liefbroer, and Poortman 2015: 247). In this context, the decision to marry is very complex and may involve two partners with opposing views. Little is known about how marital plans – and possible disagreements in marital plans – affect couples’ partnership transitions.

Many studies that focus on marital plans and their outcomes rely on one partner’s report of marital plans (Liefbroer, Gerritsen, and de Jong Gierveld 1994; Moors and Bernhardt 2009; Parker 2021). Studies that use couple data to study the intention–outcome link are based on a limited sample of cohabiting parents in the United States (Cho, Cui, and Claridge 2018; Waller and McLanahan 2005), with the exception of a study of Swedish couples (Duvander and Kridahl 2020). I revisit the topic by examining the role of partners’ marital plans in partnership transitions in high-quality, couple-level data from the pairfam panel study. On a sample of 1,834 opposite-sex couples from Germany, this study shows how transitions to marriage or to relationship dissolution are associated with partners’ marital plans and their agreement on whether they plan to marry in the next 12 months.

2. Background

2.1 Marital plans, partnership transitions, and gender differences

According to the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen 1991; Testa and Bolano 2021), intentions are formed by three factors: attitudes toward the behavior, subjective norms, and behavioral control. This theory assumes that people do not have complete control over their actions and there may be factors that push them toward or away from a planned behavior. In contexts in which the behavior includes a couple (such as pregnancy or marriage), a disagreement in plans can occur that hinders the fulfilment of the intended behavior (Testa and Bolano 2021).

When partners disagree in their intentions regarding joint decisions, they can agree on a compromise, such as postponing the behavior (Testa and Bolano 2021). However, a couple's decision may be more dependent on one of the partners. There are two views on who has more influence on joint decisions. The first view (the power heuristic) supposes that the partner who has more resources has more influence on a couple's decisions (Testa and Bolano 2021). Based on the social exchange perspective (Levinger 1976), commonly used in studies of relationship stability, the partner with more resources has more power because they have more alternatives to the current relationship (such as being single or another relationship) and fewer barriers prevent them from leaving the relationship (such as financial dependence on the other partner). Due to traditional gender specialization in households (e.g., Becker 1985) and gender inequality in the division of paid and unpaid work (Sullivan, Gershuny, and Robinson 2018), men in heterosexual couples are often in a more advantageous position than women. Based on this perspective, men may have more power to influence relationship decisions. Therefore, they may be more likely to convince their partner to marry, but it is also easier for them to end the relationship if their plans do not correspond to their partner's plans.

The second perspective, the sphere-of-interest principle, states that it is not the resources that influence who has more power over the decision but the sphere in which the decision lies. For instance, women have responsibility for childcare more often than men; therefore, it is likely that their intentions are more powerful when it comes to the decision whether to have a child (Testa and Bolano 2021). Marriage can also be thought of as more the woman's sphere. Women seem to value marriage more than men and they often feel more normative social pressure to marry (Blakemore, Lawton, and Vartanian 2005; Reneflot 2006). Therefore, it is likely that they are more motivated to marry and may leave the relationship if there is disagreement with the partner regarding marital plans.

Several studies investigate the link between marital intentions and partnership transitions. In most studies, the authors rely on one partner's report of marital plans

(Liefbroer, Gerritsen, and de Jong Gierveld 1994; Moors and Bernhardt 2009; Parker 2021). For instance, Parker (2021) finds that having marital plans (formal or informal) is associated with a higher likelihood of marriage, and marital plans also protect against dissolution (more so for men than for women). Moors and Bernhardt (2009) find that short-term intentions to marry (measured by a question regarding whether a person plans to marry within two years) strongly increases the odds of subsequent marriage but not subsequent separation.

While a few previous studies have investigated gender differences in the effect of marital plans on partnership transitions using couple data, they do not provide consistent support for either direction of the gender difference (Duvander and Kridahl 2020; Cho, Cui, and Claridge 2018; Waller and McLanahan 2005). Using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study from the United States on unmarried couples with children, Waller and McLanahan (2005) find that the fathers' marriage expectations (i.e., the perceived chance of marrying their partner in the future) are associated more strongly with subsequent marriage than the mothers' expectations. Utilizing the same data source, Cho, Cui, and Claridge (2018) find that the mothers' marital plans are associated with subsequent marriage, but the fathers' plans are not. The reason for this difference could be that marital plans and marital expectations are different concepts. Moreover, Waller and McLanahan (2005) focus on cohabiting parents as well as parents who are non-cohabiting (but romantically involved with each other), while Cho, Cui, and Claridge (2018) have only cohabiting parents in the sample. In a study of Swedish couples, Duvander and Kridahl (2020) find that overall, neither partner has more say in the decision to marry. However, there are educational differences – women have a stronger say in the decision in highly educated couples, while the men's intentions have a stronger impact on the decision in lower-educated couples (Duvander and Kridahl 2020).

2.2 Partner and relationship characteristics as predictors of transitions

Apart from the ideational factors (Moors and Bernhardt 2009), such as intentions and attitudes, other influences play a role in union formation and dissolution. The probability and timing of union formation is affected by the life course of an individual and a relationship (Liefbroer, Gerritsen, and de Jong Gierveld 1994). The likelihood that a person starts cohabiting or marries their partner depends on the person's age, the duration of the relationship, and the stage they are at in other areas of life such as employment or education (Liefbroer, Gerritsen, and de Jong Gierveld 1994). In addition, the pathway to marriage can lead through childbearing: although marriage and childbearing are becoming increasingly decoupled in Europe, some women who conceive a child in a cohabiting union still marry before or soon after childbirth (Perelli-Harris et al. 2012).

Not surprisingly, relationship satisfaction increases the probability of marrying and decreases the probability of separation (Moors and Bernhardt 2009).

Previous research has found significant socioeconomic differences in marriage in Europe (Kalmijn 2013) and the United States (Kuo and Raley 2016; Manning, Smock, and Fetto 2019). However, the role of socioeconomic characteristics in union formation differs for men and women. In Europe, better-educated men are generally more likely to be married than lower-educated men (Kalmijn 2013). On the contrary, lower-educated women are more likely to be married than better-educated women in European countries with more traditional gender roles (Kalmijn 2013). Moreover, men facing job insecurity or working in precarious jobs have less desire to marry (Yu and Hara 2020). A theoretical explanation of the relationship between men's economic prospects and marriage can be found in Oppenheimer's (1988) uncertainty hypothesis, which states that the importance of men's socioeconomic position together with the career uncertainty people often experience in young adulthood lead men to postpone marriage until they gain more stability.

2.3 German context

In Germany, marriage has a “privileged position (...), protected in the constitution and enshrined in income tax law” (Perelli-Harris and Gassen 2012: 461). Although living in unmarried cohabitation is not rare, most couples that cohabit get married sooner or later (Heuveline and Timberlake 2004; Hiekel and Fulda 2018). In Germany, even people who reject marriage as an institution or find it irrelevant sometimes do marry, which suggests that social pressures or incentives to legalize their union may play a role in their decision (Hiekel, Liefbroer, and Poortman 2015).

In countries with a low institutionalization of cohabiting unions, cohabiting couples can avoid the responsibilities associated with marriage but also lose the rights and protections that come with marriage (Nazio 2008). The negative consequences of the insufficient institutionalization of unmarried cohabitations tend to fall on the more economically dependent partner, who is more often a woman (Nazio 2008). In Germany, most women in married and unmarried partnerships aged 25–45 years had lower earnings than their partner or spouse in 2007 and 2011 (Klesment and Van Bavel 2017). Almost a third of partnered women contribute less than 11% to the household earnings, and the male partner's education and motherhood are negatively associated with women's contribution to the household income (Klesment and Van Bavel 2017). These findings suggest that women are more often dependent on their partner than the other way around.

Cohabitation has diverse meanings in Germany. Some cohabiters live together without being married because they reject marriage as an institution (33%), another

sizable group of cohabiters are conformist (i.e., they plan to marry even though they feel negative or neutral toward marriage; 25%), and another 17% of cohabiters find marriage irrelevant (Hiekel, Liefbroer, and Poortman 2015).² A minority of cohabiters see cohabitation as a prelude to marriage (14%) or do not feel ready for marriage (11%). The two groups that are the most likely to marry within four years are the conformists and those who cohabit as a prelude to marriage (Hiekel, Liefbroer, and Poortman 2015). Serial cohabitation is not common in Germany (Hiekel and Fulda 2018), unlike in the United States, where cohabitation functions mostly as an alternative to single life, meaning that the cohabiters live together for shorter times without immediate intentions to marry and their cohabitation ends in separation more often than it transitions to marriage (Heuveline and Timberlake 2004).

My first hypothesis refers to the German social and institutional context, where marriage still has a meaning distinct from unmarried cohabitation: Couples in Germany with shared positive marital plans have the highest probability of marriage (Hypothesis 1).

My second hypothesis refers to the relative importance of marriage in Germany: Couples in which only one partner has plans to marry have a higher risk of relationship dissolution than couples in which both partners have positive marital plans (Hypothesis 2).

In Germany, women's marital plans might be more strongly associated with both entry into marriage and relationship dissolution than men's. In a context of persistent gender differences (Klesment and Van Bavel 2017) and low institutionalization of unmarried partnerships (Perelli-Harris and Gassen 2012), marriage may be especially beneficial for women who seek security in a marital relationship. Therefore, women may be more proactive in trying to convince their partner when there is a disagreement in their marital plans. For the same reason, they may be more likely to dissolve a partnership that does not lead to marriage.

On the other hand, the power heuristic view suggests that the partner who has more socioeconomic resources has more power to influence relationship decisions (Testa and Bolano 2021). Moreover, union formation depends strongly on men's socioeconomic characteristics (Kalmijn 2011; Oppenheimer 2003), and the social pressure on men to provide for their families can lead them to postpone marriage if their lives are insufficiently stable. Thus, in a social context where men fulfill the role of breadwinner more often than women, men may have more control over the decision to marry. For the same reason, they may be more likely to leave the partnership when there is disagreement regarding marital plans because they tend to be in a less dependent position than women.

There are some persistent differences in the institutional and cultural contexts of the former East and West Germany. First, eastern Germany is a more atheistic than western

² The analysis by Hiekel, Liefbroer, and Poortman (2015) was based on data from 2008–2012.

Germany. Second, unmarried mothers are entitled to benefits in eastern Germany, unlike in western Germany where the lack of support for unmarried couples increases the incentive to marry (Nazio 2008). Third, eastern Germany has a widespread dual-earner household model and lower inequality in the distribution of paid and unpaid work than western Germany (Hofacker, Stoilova, and Riebling 2013; Nazio 2008). All these differences suggest that marriage should be of greater importance in western Germany than in eastern Germany.

2.4 Present study

The present study analyzes marriage and dissolution as competing risks and uses short-term marital intentions as a predictor of both partnership transitions. Previous studies that use couple-level data focus on the partners' general plans and intentions to marry each other in the future without a specified time frame (Duvander and Kridahl 2020; Cho, Cui, and Claridge 2018) or examine the partners' expectations regarding future marriage (Waller and McLanahan 2005). Studying the effect of short-term marital plans may reveal different patterns because a disagreement in these plans can indicate a stronger mismatch that can have greater consequences (especially in the German context, where marrying still comes with benefits for the partners). Building on previous studies from the United States (Cho, Cui, and Claridge 2018; Waller and McLanahan 2005) and Sweden (Duvander and Kridahl 2020), this study follows 1,834 unmarried couples from Germany.

The first research question of this study is: What is the relationship between agreement or disagreement in marital plans and the probability of marriage or dissolution in German opposite-sex couples? I also explore a second research question: Is there a gender difference in the relationship between marital plans and the probability of marriage or dissolution? For exploratory reasons, I also examine which couple and individual factors predict the positive marital intentions of men and women.

3. Method

3.1 Data

The analysis relies on data from the 12 waves of the German Family Panel (pairfam) (Brüderl et al. 2022a).³ The pairfam is an annual panel survey that started in 2008. The first wave consisted of respondents (called ‘anchors’ in the data) from cohorts born 1971–1973, 1981–1983, and 1991–1993, who were selected in a two-stage sampling procedure (Huinink et al. 2011). Notably, the data also include reports from the anchors’ partners, making it possible to work with couple-level data.

I work with the biopart dataset, which contains “retrospective and prospective information regarding anchor’s partnership, cohabitation, and marriage episodes from the age of 14 over all available waves” (Brüderl et al. 2020: 59). This dataset provides comprehensive information on each of the anchor’s relationships, updated with each new wave the anchor participated in. It provides information about when the relationship started and when it ended, and it reports if and when the couple got married (accurate to the month). The dataset contains information on whether a particular partnership existed at the time of the data collection of any of the waves in which the anchor participated. Using this information, I eliminated those partnerships that did not exist during the data collection of any of the waves. For these partnerships, we have only the anchors’ retrospective reports; there are not answers to the questions that the interviewers would have asked the anchors and their partners when the relationship was intact (for example, if they intended to marry). Thus, my analysis only includes couples that existed at the time of data collection of at least one wave.

To give an example, say that the anchor was in a relationship at the time of the data collection of wave 1 and their partner also participated. Thus, in the first wave, both the anchor and the partner answered questions about their relationship. If the anchor participated in another data collection after this wave, they were asked to update the information about this particular relationship, including dates of any events that happened between the waves. This information would then become a part of the biopart dataset. To have all the information about the couple, the anchor, and the partner in one dataset, I have appended the data from the individual waves containing the anchors’ and partners’ data to the biopart dataset containing retrospective and prospective information about their relationship. Using the retrospective reports about the partnerships makes it possible to include temporary dropouts who did not participate in waves of the survey immediately

³ Although pairfam consist of 14 waves, the data collection of waves 12, 13, and 14 was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. This data may be biased due to the switch to CATI and a period effect of COVID-19 (Brüderl et al. 2022b). For these reasons, I do not work with interviews from waves 13 and 14, and I only use data from wave 12 collected before the pandemic (data from this wave are divided into two datasets).

following the initial interview. After the anchor returns to the panel, they are asked to update their event history calendar and report changes since their latest survey participation (Brüderl et al. 2022b; Müller and Castiglioni 2020). The updated information is then used in this analysis. Including participants with gap interviews is recommended and can increase variability of the sample because they report more life course transitions during their absence than continuous respondents (Müller and Castiglioni 2020).

3.2 Sample

The analytical sample consisted of cohabiting and non-cohabiting opposite-sex couples. Before excluding some couples, 2,714 couples completed at least one wave of the survey. Some couples were excluded due to the established criteria: the anchor's or the partner's marital plans were missing or invalid (498), the anchor or the partner was married to someone else or the marital status of either partner was missing (240), at least one of the partners was younger than 17 years or older than 46 (75),⁴ one of the partners died (1), the month the relationship began was missing or invalid (15), the anchor's or the partner's education was missing or incomplete (16), the relationship satisfaction of either partner was missing (35). The other variables used in the analysis had no missing data.

After the reductions, the dataset consisted of 1,834 couples. Table 1 shows the distribution of partner and relationship characteristics in the sample measured at the first interview of the couple (the initial interview of the couple will be called T1 hereafter). A high proportion of men (48.1%) and women (66.4%) in the sample were between 17 and 26 years of age. A majority of men (54.9%) and women (55.6%) had lower than tertiary education. 76.1% of men and 67.6% of women were currently working. Men and women reported similar relationship satisfaction (men: $M = 8.37$, $SD = 1.86$; women: $M = 8.42$, $SD = 1.85$). Around half of the 1,834 couples were unmarried and cohabiting and half were not cohabiting. The largest percentage of couples (44.7%) had become a couple less than a year before T1, 30.5% of the couples had been together for 1–4 years, and 24.8% of couples were formed 5 or more years before T1. 9.6% of the couples already had at least one child together. Almost a quarter of the anchors (24.2%) reported currently living in eastern Germany.

⁴ Although the minimum age of marriage is 18 in Germany (if there are no conditions requiring an exception), people aged 17 who plan to marry after turning 18 may well intend to marry within the next 12 months. Therefore, I included 17-year-old participants in the sample.

Table 1: The distribution of partner and relationship characteristics

Measure	Proportion/M	SD
<i>Man's age</i>		
17–26	48.1%	
27–36	39.5%	
37–46	12.4%	
<i>Man's education</i>		
No tertiary	54.9%	
Tertiary	26.6%	
Currently enrolled	18.5%	
<i>Man's working status</i>		
Not working	23.9%	
Working	76.1%	
<i>Man's marital status</i>		
Never-married/widowed	93.1%	
Divorced	6.9%	
<i>Man's relationship satisfaction (0–10)</i>	8.37	1.86
<i>Woman's age</i>		
17–26	66.4%	
27–36	27.6%	
37–46	6.0%	
<i>Woman's education</i>		
No tertiary	55.6%	
Tertiary	20.8%	
Currently enrolled	23.6%	
<i>Woman's working status</i>		
Not working	32.4%	
Working	67.6%	
<i>Woman's marital status</i>		
Never-married/widowed	94.2%	
Divorced	5.8%	
<i>Woman's relationship satisfaction (0–10)</i>	8.42	1.85
<i>Relationship status</i>		
Non-cohabiting	50.1%	
Cohabitation	49.9%	
<i>Relationship duration</i>		
Less than 1 year	44.7%	
1–4 years	30.5%	
5 or more years	24.8%	
<i>Child with the current partner</i>		
No	90.4%	
Yes	9.6%	
<i>Living in Eastern Germany</i>		
No	75.8%	
Yes	24.2%	
N	1,834	

3.3 Measures

Marital plans were measured by the question: “Are you and your partner planning to get married within the next 12 months?” Possible answers are: yes, definitely; yes, perhaps; no, probably not; no, definitely not; we haven’t discussed it yet; don’t know. I re-coded the marital plans of each partner to the dichotomy of yes (including the answers yes, definitely; yes, perhaps) and no or undecided (including the answers no, probably not; no, definitely not; we haven’t discussed it yet; don’t know). For the key independent variable I used the combination of the man’s and the woman’s marital plans. The constructed variable has four categories: both no or undecided; woman yes, man no or undecided; man yes, woman no or undecided; both yes.

Apart from this categorization of marital plans, I used alternative coding with eight categories as a robustness check. The categories are: both yes (N = 290); man yes, woman probably no (N = 71); man yes, woman definitely no (N = 32); woman yes, man probably no (N = 67); woman yes, man definitely no (N = 26); both no/undecided (N = 1,280); man yes, woman undecided (N = 33); woman yes, man undecided (N = 35). This categorization distinguishes couples who strongly disagree over marital plans from those with a weaker disagreement and allows comparison of partners with no marital plans and those who are uncertain about their plans.

Table 2 shows how the combination of the man’s and the woman’s marital plans at T1 was distributed based on the couple’s relationship duration. In most couples (69.8%), the partners agreed that they did not plan to marry or were undecided about marrying in the near future. By contrast, 15.8% of couples agreed that they planned to get married soon. A total of 14.4% of couples disagreed on their marital plans. Agreement on not planning to marry was the highest among the couples who were together for less than a year (80.8%); the share of couples who agreed on not planning to marry decreased with increasing relationship duration. Couples who were together for 5 or more years had the highest agreement on planning to marry soon (24.4%). The proportion of couples with shared marital plans was smaller in couples with shorter relationship duration. The highest proportion of disagreeing couples was among the couples with the longest relationship duration. Among disagreeing couples the men were more often the one planning to marry soon, but the gender difference was very small.

Table 2: Combination of the man’s and the woman’s marital plans in the next 12 months by relationship duration

Relationship duration	Marital plans				Total
	Both no or undecided	Woman yes, man no or undecided	Man yes, woman no or undecided	Both yes	
<i>Less than 1 year</i>	80.8% (662)	4.5% (40)	5.5% (45)	8.8% (72)	100% (819)
<i>1–4 years</i>	65.5% (367)	8.4% (47)	7.0% (39)	19.1% (107)	100% (560)
<i>5 or more years</i>	55.2% (251)	9.0% (41)	11.4% (52)	24.4% (111)	100% (455)
<i>Total</i>	69.8% (1,280)	7.0% (128)	7.4% (136)	15.8% (290)	100% (1,834)

The following variables were used as controls in the analysis: age, education, working status (working or not working), marital status (never-married/widowed or divorced), relationship status (non-cohabiting or cohabiting), relationship duration (less than 1 year, 1–4 years, 5 or more years), relationship satisfaction, having at least one child with the current partner, and a dummy variable indicating that the respondents were currently living in eastern Germany. The relationship duration variable indicates how long the couple were involved romantically for both non-cohabiting and cohabiting couples (regardless of when the couple started living together). Relationship satisfaction was measured on a scale from 0 to 10 (0 = very dissatisfied and 10 = very satisfied). For the analysis I divided the partners’ ages into three categories (17–26 years, 27–36 years, 37–46 years) and education into three categories (no tertiary education, tertiary education, currently enrolled).

Marital plans, as well as all the control variables, were measured in every wave of the survey. In the analysis the values of all independent variables come from the wave in which the relationship occurred for the first time, T1. For example, if the couple already existed in wave 1, the independent variables were measured at wave 1. If a new relationship was reported in wave 4, then the independent variables were measured at wave 4.

3.4 Analytical strategy

The data were analyzed by competing-risks regression using the Fine-Gray proportional sub-hazards model (StataCorp, 2021: 155–180). The models were obtained in Stata software using the *stcrreg* command. In the regression models shown in the Results section I present the exponentiated coefficients called sub-hazard ratios. A sub-hazard ratio higher than 1 indicates that the given category has a higher cumulative incidence function (CIF) than the reference category (StataCorp 2021: 159–160). For simplification, the CIF for a given competing risk is indicated by the words ‘risk’ or ‘probability’ when interpreting the results.

In this analysis the competing risks are entry to marriage and dissolution within 5 years (60 months) from the couple's first interview (T1). Although the marital plans variable measures partners' intentions to marry within 12 months, previous research (Liefbroer, Gerritsen, and de Jong Giervelde 1994) shows that people tend to carry out their intentions later than expected, mainly due to life course factors. Thus, I followed the couples for a longer time, in line with other studies examining short-term marital plans (e.g., Hiekel, Liefbroer, and Poortman 2015; Moors and Bernhard 2009). Couples who did not experience any event were right-censored after 60 months from T1 or at the time the anchor left the study, whichever occurred first. The events are reported accurate to the month in the data.

Because some anchors had more than one relationship during their participation in the pairfam study, not all observations are independent. Thus, I used cluster-robust standard errors in the analysis. There are 1,680 clusters in the analysis, meaning there are 1,680 anchors who reported 1,834 relationships altogether.

4. Results

4.1 The relationship between marital plans and partnership transitions

Within 60 months from T1, 21% of couples married ($N = 389$), 29% separated ($N = 534$), and 50% were censored (meaning that they either did not experience any event or they left the study). If we exclude couples who left the study earlier than after 60 months and who had not experienced any event by the time they left ($N = 615$), then 32% of couples married ($N = 389$), 44% of couples separated ($N = 534$), and 24% did not experience any event within the 60 months from T1 ($N = 296$). Table A-2 in the Appendix shows the distribution of events experienced by couples by the combination of the man's and the woman's marital plans.

Table 3 shows the results from two models of the competing-risks regression with marriage as an outcome. Model 1 includes only the marital plans as an independent variable. Compared to the reference category (both 'no' and 'undecided'), each category of the marital plans was associated with a higher risk of marriage. Couples in which both partners planned to marry were the most likely to marry within 5 years of the interview ($SHR = 6.60, p < .001$). Couples in which only the woman planned to marry ($SHR = 2.56, p < .001$) and couples in which only the man planned to marry ($SHR = 2.70, p < .001$) had a similar probability of marriage. Model 2 includes all control variables in addition to the intentions to marry. When the controls are included the SHR of marital plans are lower. However, couples in which at least one of the partners planned to marry soon still had a higher probability of marriage than couples with no plans to marry. The effect size

of the man having marital plans ($SHR = 1.80, p = .001$) was comparable to the effect size of the man's education (tertiary compared to no tertiary), the man's working status (working compared to not working), or the relationship status (cohabiting compared to non-cohabiting). The effect of only the woman having marital plans ($SHR = 1.52, p = .037$) was lower but still substantial. Regarding the control variables, the following were associated with the risk of marriage: the man's education (the tertiary-educated had a higher probability of marriage than those with lower education and those currently enrolled in education had a lower probability than those with lower than tertiary education), the man's working status (currently working had a higher probability than non-working), relationship status (cohabiting had a higher probability than non-cohabiting), relationship duration (relationships of at least five years had a higher probability than relationships shorter than one year), and living in eastern Germany (a decreased probability of marriage among those living in eastern Germany).

Table 4 presents two models with dissolution as an outcome. Again, Model 3 contains only the marital plans and Model 4 adds the control variables. Here the direction between the independent variable and the outcome is the opposite of that for marriage. Compared to couples in which neither partner planned to marry, all other categories of couples had a lower risk of dissolution. Couples in which both partners planned to marry soon had the lowest risk of dissolution. However, after adding the control variables the relationship between marital plans and dissolution becomes non-existent; the confidence intervals of marital plans now cover 1. Therefore, the relationship found in Model 3 can be completely explained by some of the control variables that are associated with both marital plans and dissolution. The following variables were associated with the risk of dissolution: the man's education (the tertiary-educated had a lower probability than those with lower education), the woman's education (currently enrolled in education had a higher probability than those without tertiary education), the man's relationship satisfaction (negative association), the woman's relationship satisfaction (negative association), having a child with the partner (negative association), relationship status (cohabiting had a higher probability than non-cohabiting), and relationship duration (relationships 5 years or longer had a lower probability than relationships shorter than 1 year).

Table 3: Sub-hazard ratios (and 95% confidence intervals) from the competing-risks regression models predicting marriage entry within 5 years of interview. N = 1,834

Variable (reference category)	Outcome: Marriage					
	Model 1			Model 2		
	SHR	SE	<i>p</i>	SHR	SE	<i>p</i>
<i>Marital plans (both no or undecided)</i>						
Woman yes, man no or undecided	2.56 (1.80 – 3.65)	.46	<.001	1.52 (1.02 – 2.26)	.31	.037
Man yes, woman no or undecided	2.70 (1.96 – 3.71)	.44	<.001	1.80 (1.29 – 2.51)	.31	.001
Both yes	6.60 (5.22 – 8.36)	.79	<.001	4.00 (3.07 – 5.21)	.54	<.001
<i>Man's age (17–26)</i>						
27–36				1.09 (0.84 – 1.41)	.14	.534
37–46				1.04 (0.68 – 1.58)	.22	.872
<i>Woman's age (17–26)</i>						
27–36				1.08 (0.82 – 1.41)	.15	.599
37–46				0.58 (0.32 – 1.06)	.18	.078
<i>Man's education (no tertiary)</i>						
Tertiary				1.77 (1.38 – 2.27)	.22	<.001
Currently enrolled				0.47 (0.28 – 0.81)	.13	.006
<i>Woman's education (no tertiary)</i>						
Tertiary				0.86 (0.65 – 1.13)	.12	.272
Currently enrolled				0.71 (0.49 – 1.03)	.14	.072
<i>Man's working status (not working)</i>						
Working				1.71 (1.23 – 2.38)	.29	.001
<i>Woman's working status (not working)</i>						
Working				0.87 (0.69 – 1.11)	.11	.269
<i>Man's marital status (never-married/widowed)</i>						
Divorced				0.83 (0.53 – 1.30)	.19	.418
<i>Woman's marital status (never-married/widowed)</i>						
Divorced				1.16 (0.72 – 1.87)	.28	.533
Man's relationship satisfaction				1.14 (1.04 – 1.24)	.05	.003
Woman's relationship satisfaction				1.13 (1.04 – 1.23)	.05	.005
<i>Child with the current partner (no)</i>						
Yes				0.93 (0.65 – 1.34)	.17	.715
<i>Relationship status (non-cohabiting)</i>						
Cohabiting				1.75 (1.34 – 2.28)	.24	<.001
<i>Relationship duration (less than 1 year)</i>						
1–4 years				1.16 (0.87 – 1.53)	.16	.308
5 or more years				1.42 (1.04 – 1.93)	.22	.027
Living in Eastern Germany				0.61 (0.46 – 0.79)	.08	<.001
N	1,834			1,834		

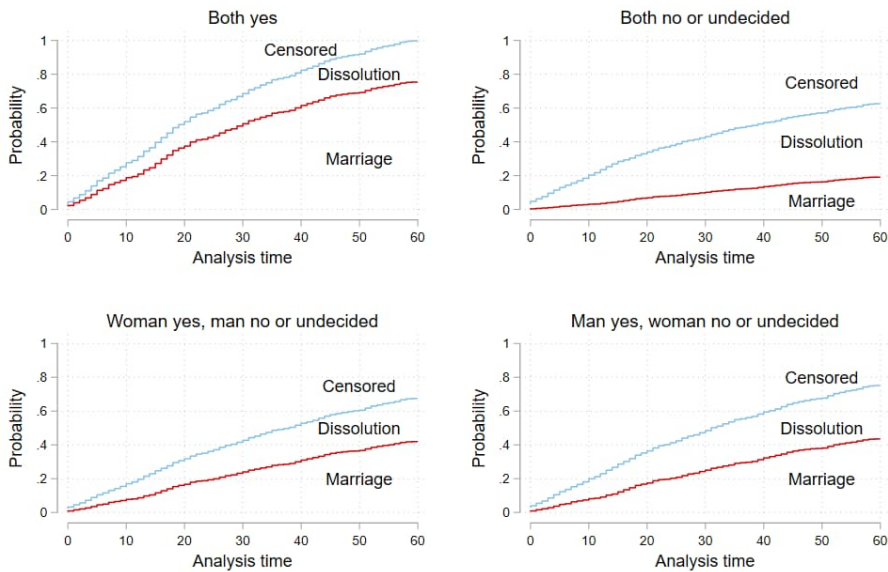
Table 4: Sub-hazard ratios (and 95% confidence intervals) from the competing-risks regression models predicting the couples' dissolution within 5 years of interview. N = 1,834

Variable (reference category)	Outcome: Dissolution					
	Model 3			Model 4		
	SHR	SE	p	SHR	SE	p
<i>Marital plans (both no or undecided)</i>						
Woman yes, man no or undecided	0.52 (0.34 – 0.78)	.11	.002	0.78 (0.52 – 1.19)	.17	.248
Man yes, woman no or undecided	0.67 (0.46 – 0.96)	.12	.029	1.05 (0.72 – 1.55)	.21	.787
Both yes	0.49 (0.37 – 0.66)	.07	< .001	0.91 (0.66 – 1.25)	.15	.559
<i>Man's age (17–26)</i>						
27–36				0.86 (0.69 – 1.07)	.10	.182
37–46				0.91 (0.60 – 1.38)	.19	.665
<i>Woman's age (17–26)</i>						
27–36				0.78 (0.59 – 1.03)	.11	.080
37–46				0.71 (0.41 – 1.21)	.19	.209
<i>Man's education (no tertiary)</i>						
Tertiary				0.69 (0.54 – 0.89)	.09	.004
Currently enrolled				0.90 (0.71 – 1.14)	.11	.371
<i>Woman's education (no tertiary)</i>						
Tertiary				1.02 (0.77 – 1.34)	.14	.913
Currently enrolled				1.27 (1.01 – 1.58)	.14	.037
<i>Man's working status (not working)</i>						
Working				0.90 (0.74 – 1.11)	.10	.343
<i>Woman's working status (not working)</i>						
Working				1.00 (0.82 – 1.22)	.10	.991
<i>Man's marital status (never-married/widowed)</i>						
Divorced				0.75 (0.47 – 1.18)	.17	.207
<i>Woman's marital status (never-married/widowed)</i>						
Divorced				1.23 (0.80 – 1.91)	.28	.344
Man's relationship satisfaction				0.89 (0.86 – 0.93)	.02	< .001
Woman's relationship satisfaction				0.90 (0.86 – 0.93)	.02	< .001
<i>Child with the current partner (no)</i>						
Yes				0.53 (0.32 – 0.88)	.14	.014
<i>Relationship status (non-cohabiting)</i>						
Cohabiting				0.64 (0.51 – 0.80)	.07	< .001
<i>Relationship duration (less than 1 year)</i>						
1–4 years				0.86 (0.70 – 1.06)	.09	.143
5 or more years				0.60 (0.43 – 0.82)	.10	.002
Living in Eastern Germany				1.06 (0.86 – 1.31)	.11	.583
N	1,834			1,834		

Figure 1 shows the stacked cumulative incidence of marriage and dissolution by couples' marital plans. Couples who had shared positive marital plans had the highest

probability of marriage (almost 0.8) within the 60 months from T1 and a much lower probability of dissolution (around 0.2). Couples in which at least one partner intended to marry were about half as likely to marry as those with shared positive marital plans. As the two bottom graphs show, although the probability of dissolution was slightly higher when only the man intended to marry compared to when only the woman intended to marry, the difference is only marginal. The same applies to the probability of marriage, which was almost the same for these two categories of couples.

Figure 1: Stacked cumulative incidence of marriage and dissolution by couples' combination of marital plans



4.2 Robustness checks and additional analyses

I ran two robustness checks in addition to the main analysis. The first analysis uses an alternative coding of the combined marital plans of both partners. This version of the variable consists of eight categories: both yes; man yes, woman probably no; man yes, woman definitely no; woman yes, man probably no; woman yes, man definitely no; both no/undecided; man yes, woman undecided; woman yes, man undecided. The results are

presented in Figure 2 and Figure 3 in the form of a cumulative incidence of marriage and dissolution for each of the eight categories. The graphs for both outcomes are divided into two subgraphs to distinguish couples in which both partners had a positive intention to marry or the disagreement in marital plans was weak (one partner planned to marry and the other said ‘probably not’ or was undecided) from couples in which neither partner planned to marry or there was a strong disagreement in plans (one partner planned to marry and the other said ‘definitely not’).

In Figure 2, the top graph includes couples with shared marital plans and couples with only a weak disagreement. The bottom graph includes couples in which neither partner planned to marry within the next 12 months and couples with a strong disagreement in marital plans. The graphs clearly show that the probability of marriage was highest (almost 0.8) if both partners agreed that they wanted to marry. Couples who disagreed weakly had almost twice as low an incidence of marriage (around 0.4), and it did not matter whether the man or the woman intended to marry. Couples who strongly disagreed had a lower probability of marriage than those who disagreed weakly, but again, the gender of the partners did not matter.

Figure 2: Cumulative incidence of marriage by couples’ combination of marital plans (eight categories)

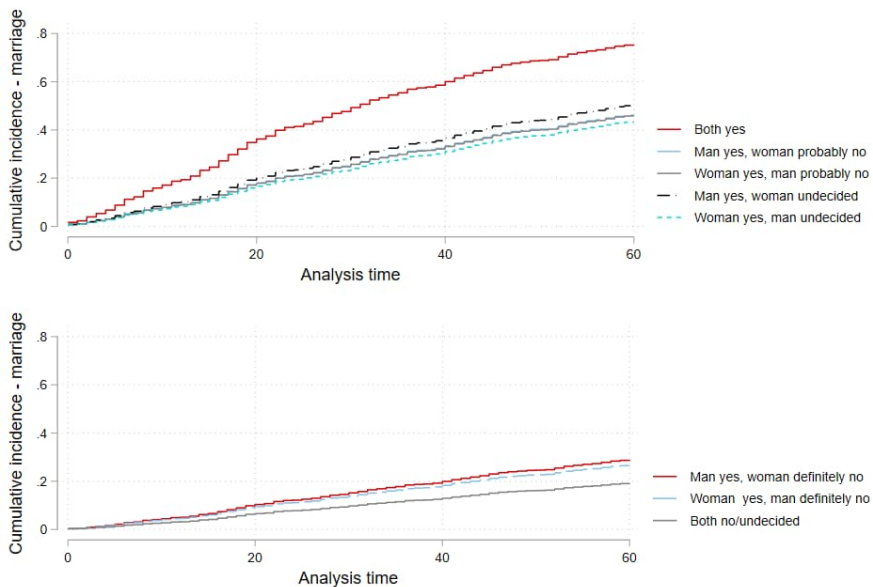
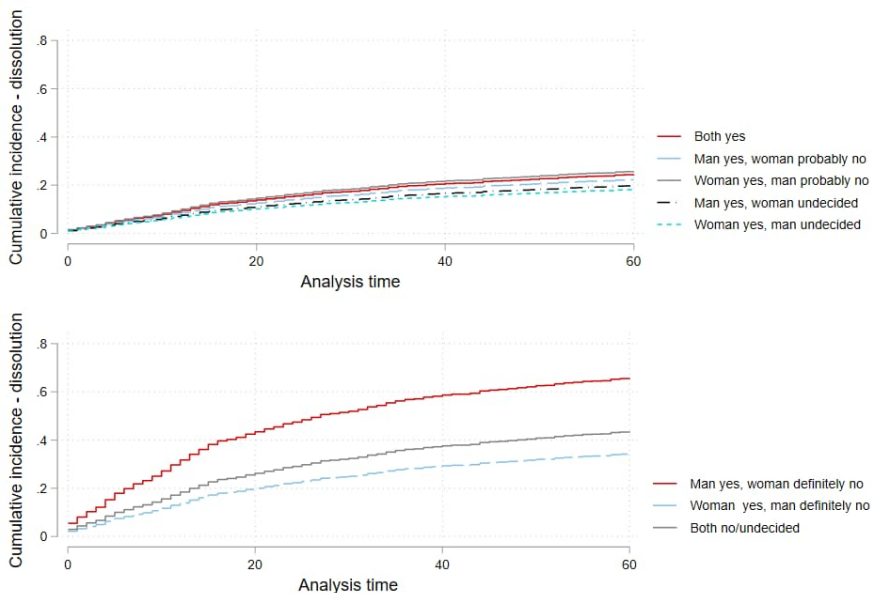


Figure 3 shows that couples with shared marital plans and those with a weak disagreement had a relatively low probability of dissolution (around 0.2). Similar to the case of marriage, there was no gender difference in the effect on relationship dissolution. There was a gender difference in the effect of marital plans for couples who strongly disagreed. If the man had marital plans and the woman answered ‘definitely not,’ the probability of dissolution was higher than for the opposite scenario. However, the results from this analysis have to be viewed with caution due to the low sample size in some categories (especially those with strong disagreement).

Figure 3: Cumulative incidence of dissolution by couples’ combination of marital plans (eight categories)



For exploratory reasons, in the Appendix (Table A-1) I also present a set of logistic regression models with the men’s marital plans and the women’s marital plans as outcome variables. In the variables men’s marital plans and women’s marital plans, answers ‘yes, definitely’ and ‘yes, perhaps’ are coded as 1; other answers are coded as 0. The following indicators were strongly associated with men’s marital plans: the man or the woman being currently enrolled in education (negative association), the man’s relationship satisfaction (positive association), the woman’s relationship satisfaction

(positive association), having a child with the partner (positive association), cohabiting with the partner (positive association), and living in eastern Germany (negative association). The following indicators were strongly associated with women's marital plans: the man or the woman being currently enrolled in education (negative association), the woman's relationship satisfaction (positive association), and cohabiting with the partner (positive association).

5. Discussion and conclusion

Marital intentions predict marital behavior (Liefbroer, Gerritsen, and de Jong Gierveld 1994; Moors and Bernhardt 2009). However, two people are involved in the decision to marry. Their marital plans may not be the same, especially in the 21st century when in many countries, marriage is no longer a necessity (Cherlin 2020). In this study I examined the relationship between couples' agreement or disagreement on marital plans and subsequent partnership transitions. I also investigated the gender difference in the association between marital plans and partnership transitions.

5.1 Marriage

In most couples, the partners agreed on their short-term marital plans. Only 14.4% of couples disagreed on their intentions. The proportion of couples in which only the woman planned to marry and the proportion of couples in which only the man wanted to marry were almost equal. Therefore, there was no gender difference in reported marital plans. Disagreement was the most common in couples who were together for five or more years.

Couples who agreed that they planned to marry had the highest probability of marriage and those who agreed that they did not plan to marry had the lowest probability of marriage (see Figure 1). This finding is in line with Hypothesis 1. Partners who disagreed about marrying soon were less likely to marry in the following five years than partners who agreed on planning to marry. Interestingly, the outcome of the disagreement was not dependent on the gender of the partner with marital plans. This finding is in line with the study by Duvander and Kridahl (2020), who also find no gender difference in the effect of partners' marital intentions in a full sample of Swedish couples. By contrast, the results on gender difference contradict those of Cho, Cui, and Claridge (2018) and Waller and McLanahan (2005), who analyze partnership transitions among unmarried parents in the United States.

Even in the analysis with more detailed coding of the intentions to marry (see Figure 2), there was no gender difference in the association between intention and

marriage. This analysis also showed that the size of the disagreement matters. The couples that disagreed weakly on their marital plans were more likely to marry than the couples that strongly disagreed. Moreover, if one partner wanted to marry and the other was undecided, the probability of marriage was still lower than in couples in which both partners had plans to marry.

5.2 Dissolution

This study shows that the relationship between short-term marital intentions and relationship dissolution does not exist if the other partner and relationship characteristics are taken into account. Couples with shared positive marital intentions had a similar risk of dissolution as those in which only one partner planned to marry soon (see Figure 1). Although couples in which neither partner wanted to marry had the highest risk of dissolution, the association with the risk of dissolution disappeared once the control variables entered the model. Since some of the relationship and partners characteristics (relationship satisfaction, having a child together, cohabitation) were negatively associated with dissolution and positively associated with the likelihood of having plans to marry, it is likely that these characteristics were protective against dissolution rather than the marital plans themselves. Therefore, the results on relationship dissolution did not support Hypothesis 2.

This finding supports the study based in Sweden, by Moors and Bernhardt (2009), who found that cohabitators who planned to marry their partner within two years were not less likely to break up. However, they did not use couple data, and therefore did not examine the effect of disagreement on dissolution. The present study shows that disagreement in short-term marital plans was not associated with a higher risk of dissolution among German opposite-sex couples. Although marriage in Germany is more institutionalized and provides more security to couples than unmarried cohabitation, the findings suggest that disagreements about marrying in the short term are not detrimental to the relationship.

5.3 Additional findings

Apart from the main findings, this study provides evidence that the transition to marriage still depends very strongly on the male partner's socioeconomic characteristics. The couples were more likely to marry if the man was tertiary-educated and less likely to marry if the man was currently enrolled in education (compared to men with lower than tertiary education). Marriage was also more likely in couples in which the man was

currently working. By contrast, the woman's education and working status was not associated with entry into marriage. The additional analysis of predictors of marital plans revealed that socioeconomic characteristics were not strong predictors of marital plans for either men or women. Only if one of the partners was still enrolled in education were both men and women less likely to have plans to marry soon. Having a child together was protective against dissolution and was also associated with the odds of having plans to marry, but only among men. A possible explanation for this gender difference could be the lower institutionalization of unmarried relationships in Germany (Perelli-Harris and Gassen 2012). In this context, marriage can provide more security for fathers' relationship with their children. For instance, establishing paternity or attaining joint custody of children is not as automatic for unmarried fathers as it is for married fathers (Perelli-Harris and Gassen 2012).

5.4 Limitations

The study has some limitations. First, data on the formal engagement of couples are unfortunately not available. Thus, it is not possible to distinguish couples who have already made formal plans regarding marriage from those who only agreed that they intended to marry soon without having any formal plans. As Parker (2021) found, being engaged is a stronger predictor of marriage than informal marital plans.

Second, while studying the effects of agreement and disagreement in marital plans on relationship dissolution, the analysis does not distinguish who initiated the dissolution. Future research could focus on uncovering the relationship between marital plans and initiating dissolution to more deeply explore the relationship stability of couples who disagree on their marital plans.

Third, this study examined the effect of marital plans and other covariates at T1 and did not consider the effect of time-varying covariates, which limits the interpretation of the findings. For instance, within 60 months of T1 there could have been life course transitions that increase or decrease the likelihood of marriage or dissolution, such as changes in working status or childbearing. In the analysis I combined data on marital plans and other covariates from the interview with the anchor and partner at T1 with information about the relationship progression from the anchor's partnership histories. This allowed for including temporary dropouts as well as the respondents who participated in each consecutive wave after T1. If the sample was limited only to couples in which the anchor and the partner were interviewed at T1 and each consecutive wave up to 60 months from T1, the sample size would be smaller and less diverse in terms of response patterns. For this reason, I chose to draw the data on the couples' relationship

progression from partnership histories instead of the individual interviews following T1 and decided not to include time-varying covariates.

Another limitation connected to the study design is that the data is left-truncated, which means the analyzed couples were already at risk of an event before their first appearance in the study. Therefore, the data is “length biased” (Rabe-Hesketh and Skrondal 2012: 772) and couples that were at risk of an event for a shorter time are not represented in the analysis.

Moreover, like most panel surveys, pairfam suffers from data attrition.⁵ However, based on the respondents’ partnership dynamics, this panel attrition does not seem to be selective (Müller and Castiglioni 2015). One of the unique aspects of the survey is its non-monotonic design, which allows re-contacting participants who could not be contacted or refused to participate in the previous wave. There is some evidence suggesting that this design provides more sample variability because temporary dropouts differ from continuous participants in the rate of some life course transitions, such as separation or relocation (Müller and Castiglioni 2015, 2020). Last, this study only includes opposite-sex couples because same-sex marriage was not legalized in Germany until 2017 and the analysis covers the period 2008–2020. Future research could study the patterns of entry to marriage among same-sex couples.

5.5 Conclusion

Despite its limitations, the present study enhances our understanding of the factors that influence couples’ partnership transitions. The results reveal that marital plans are associated with the risk of marriage but not with the risk of dissolution (when controlling for other partner and relationship characteristics). Couples that disagreed in their short-term marital plans were less likely to marry in the next five years than couples in which both partners planned to marry, and more likely to marry than couples without marital plans. Nevertheless, the degree of disagreement in partners’ intentions matters. Therefore, it seems crucial to consider both partners’ perspectives on the relationship when examining partnership transitions. The study also shows that the male partners’ education and working status are strong predictors of entry to marriage, even if marital plans and relationship satisfaction are included in the analysis. While the study does not support the thesis that men’s marital plans are more important than women’s plans in the decision to marry, it shows that marriage still depends on the man’s socioeconomic position more than on the woman’s position.

⁵ In wave 1, 12,402 anchors were interviewed (the overall response rate was 37%). In wave 2, 71.4% of this sample was interviewed. The sample stabilized after the second wave and the decreases in the sample size were not as significant from the third wave on (Brüderl et al. 2023).

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Appendix

Table A-1: Odds ratios (and 95% confidence intervals) from logistic regression models of the man's and woman's marital plans

Variable (reference category)	Outcome: Man's marital plans			Outcome: Woman's marital plans		
	Model 1			Model 2		
	OR	SE	<i>p</i>	OR	SE	<i>p</i>
<i>Man's age (17–26)</i>						
27–36	1.25 (0.93 – 1.67)	.19	.135	1.19 (0.89 – 1.60)	.18	.247
37–46	0.86 (0.54 – 1.37)	.20	.521	1.18 (0.75 – 1.86)	.27	.481
<i>Woman's age (17–26)</i>						
27–36	1.26 (0.93 – 1.70)	.19	.133	1.35 (0.99 – 1.83)	.21	.060
37–46	0.98 (0.56 – 1.73)	.28	.951	0.93 (0.51 – 1.69)	.28	.805
<i>Man's education (no tertiary)</i>						
Tertiary	0.86 (0.65 – 1.14)	.12	.293	1.02 (0.76 – 1.36)	.15	.901
Currently enrolled	0.29 (0.16 – 0.51)	.08	< .001	0.39 (0.22 – 0.68)	.11	.001
<i>Woman's education (no tertiary)</i>						
Tertiary	0.91 (0.66 – 1.25)	.15	.572	0.90 (0.66 – 1.24)	.15	.535
Currently enrolled	0.51 (0.33 – 0.80)	.12	.003	0.57 (0.37 – 0.88)	.13	.012
<i>Man's working status (not working)</i>						
Working	0.92 (0.67 – 1.27)	.15	.612	1.14 (0.81 – 1.59)	.20	.446
<i>Woman's working status (not working)</i>						
Working	0.88 (0.65 – 1.18)	.13	.401	1.08 (0.81 – 1.45)	.16	.598
<i>Man's marital status (never-married/widowed)</i>						
Divorced	1.03 (0.64 – 1.68)	.26	.890	1.24 (0.76 – 2.03)	.31	.381
<i>Woman's marital status (never-married/widowed)</i>						
Divorced	1.35 (0.81 – 2.24)	.35	.253	1.14 (0.67 – 1.93)	.31	.635
<i>Man's relationship satisfaction</i>						
Man's relationship satisfaction	1.17 (1.07 – 1.28)	.05	< .001	1.02 (0.95 – 1.10)	.04	.589
<i>Woman's relationship satisfaction</i>						
Woman's relationship satisfaction	1.10 (1.02 – 1.19)	.04	.011	1.24 (1.12 – 1.38)	.07	< .001
<i>Child with the current partner (no)</i>						
Yes	1.78 (1.19 – 2.65)	.36	.005	1.45 (0.98 – 2.15)	.29	.064
<i>Relationship status (non-cohabiting)</i>						
Cohabiting	3.26 (2.39 – 4.43)	.51	< .001	4.50 (3.31 – 6.11)	.70	< .001
<i>Relationship duration (less than 1 year)</i>						
1–4 years	1.10 (0.80 – 1.51)	.18	.571	1.15 (0.84 – 1.57)	.18	.400
5 or more years	1.16 (0.81 – 1.65)	.21	.419	0.97 (0.68 – 1.37)	.17	.854
<i>Living in Eastern Germany</i>						
Living in Eastern Germany	0.72 (0.54 – 0.97)	.11	.030	0.77 (0.57 – 1.04)	.12	.088
Constant	0.02 (0.01 – 0.05)	.01	< .001	0.01 (0.00 – 0.04)	.01	< .001
N	1,834			1,834		

Table A-2: Events experienced by couples within 60 months of T1 by the combination of couples' marital plans

Marital plans	Total sample				Excl. couples who left earlier without experiencing event			
	Event				Event			
	Marriage	Dissolution	Censored	Total	Marriage	Dissolution	Censored	Total
Both no or undecided	13.5% (173)	33.4% (428)	53.1% (679)	100% (1,280)	20.4% (173)	50.4% (428)	29.3% (249)	100% (850)
Woman yes, man no or undecided	28.1% (36)	18.8% (24)	53.1% (68)	100% (128)	45.6% (36)	30.4% (24)	24.1% (19)	100% (79)
Man yes, woman no or undecided	30.9% (42)	23.5% (32)	45.6% (62)	100% (136)	47.2% (42)	36.0% (32)	16.9% (15)	100% (89)
Both yes	47.6% (138)	17.2% (50)	35.2% (102)	100% (290)	68.7% (138)	24.9% (50)	6.5% (13)	100% (201)
N	21.2% (389)	29.1% (534)	49.7% (911)	100% (1,834)	31.9% (389)	43.8% (534)	24.3% (296)	100% (1,219)