Descriptive Finding

Changing mind, changing plans? Instability of individual gender attitudes and postponement of marriage in Germany

Daniele Florean

Contents

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Daniele Florean[1]

Abstract

BACKGROUND
Numerous studies address the relationship between gender attitudes and family formation, especially the attitudes–fertility connection. To date, little attention has been paid to the longitudinal dynamics of these attitudes, in particular the stability of attitudes over time, and the impact of their stability on marriage.

OBJECTIVE
To investigate how stable or unstable gender attitudes are related to the timing of first transitions to marriage in Germany.

METHODS
Using event history analysis and data from the PAIRFAM survey, I compare the first transition to marriage in a sample of men and women born between 1981 and 1983 and living in Germany. I generate an index to estimate the stability of gender attitudes over time across a set of four indicators, and use it as the main independent variable to estimate how attitude stability is related to the timing of marriage.

RESULTS
Respondents who report frequent changes in gender attitudes enter marriage systematically later than respondents whose attitudes are stable. However, this relationship is weaker for respondents who express more liberal attitudes.

CONTRIBUTION
The findings highlight the importance of a longitudinal approach to the study of gender attitudes and their relationship to life-course events, showing how the stability of attitudes relates to the timing of family formation.

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1. Introduction

Much of the existing research on the relationship between gender role attitudes and demographic behavior has treated attitudes as stable over time. However, recent literature shows that these attitudes are usually unstable (Kalmijn 2005), especially following major transitions in parental and marital states (Katz-Wise, Priess, and Hyde 2010; Zhou 2017). In this study I take a longitudinal perspective to assess whether the stability of gender attitudes is related to the timing of marriage.

According to the theory of reasoned action, interiorized norms and beliefs regarding the appropriateness of a certain behavior are antecedent to the enactment of that behavior (Ajzen 1991; Budd and Spencer 1985; Madden, Ellen, and Ajzen 1992). Since gender role attitudes (also called gender attitudes or gender ideologies) are interiorized norms and beliefs regarding the expected role of men and women in society (Brinton and Lee 2016; Scarborough, Sin, and Risman 2019), they are likely to influence subsequent family formation behavior.

The majority of the literature on the relationship between attitudes and family formation focuses on childbirth rather than marriage. For example, macro-level research for North American and European countries shows that fertility rates are lower in countries where conservative gender attitudes prevail, especially where women also play an active role in society (Brinton and Lee 2016). Fertility rates are higher in countries with higher egalitarianism (Arpino, Esping-Andersen, and Pessin 2015), but although theory suggests a U-shaped relationship between egalitarianism and fertility (e.g., (Esping-Andersen and Billari 2015), within-country longitudinal evidence is inconclusive in that regard (Kolk 2019).

Focusing on marriage, in an early investigation based on US data, Barber and Axinn report that conservative attitudes toward the role of women in the family are related to earlier marriages (Barber and Axinn 1998). However, Kaufman (2000) finds that liberal gender attitudes in men increase the likelihood of partnering. More recently, Moors (2003) shows that for women, emancipatory attitudes are correlated with cohabitation and conservative attitudes are associated with marriage and parenthood. The picture is further complicated by Pessin (2018), with college-educated women showing a positive association between liberal attitudes and marriage.

The results presented so far are broadly in line with what would be expected according to the framework of the Second Demographic Transition (Lesthaeghe 2010), with egalitarian and individualistic value orientations associated with late marriage, alternative forms of partnership, and delayed, reduced fertility. If gender attitudes are an antecedent of demographic behavior but are not stable over time, actors whose attitudes change can intuitively be expected to either delay family formation while they reassess their interiorized norms, or to rush family formation by making spur-of-the-moment

decisions. However, most of the existing literature on the subject does not take a dynamic life-course-oriented approach (Davis and Greenstein 2009; Liefbroer, Gerritsen, and de Jong Gierveld 1994), and to the best of my knowledge, no individual-level investigation on the relationship between attitude change and demographic behavior has been performed to date.

I seek to fill this research gap in the present study. Using longitudinal data from the German Panel Analysis of Intimate Relationships and Family Dynamics (PAIRFAM) (Brüderl et al. 2019; Huinink et al. 2011), I focus on the correlation between (un)stable attitudes and the timing of marriage in a cohort of German men and women observed in early adulthood. Using event history analysis, I find that highly unstable attitudes delay marriage, especially for conservative-leaning individuals. This finding indicates the need to further investigate the mechanisms underlying the dynamics of gender attitudes and demographic behavior over the life course.

2. Data

I use data from waves 1 to 10 of PAIRFAM. The data offers detailed information on current and past partnerships for a representative sample of men and women living in Germany. I focus on the so-called 'anchor' respondents for the years 2008 to 2018. Of the three birth cohorts in PAIRFAM, I focus on cohort 2 (1981–1983). Sample restriction for cohort 3 (1971–1973) results in a small, highly self-selected set of respondents, whereas the young age of cohort 1 respondents during the observation period yields very low rates of marriage (results for cohort 1 and 3 are nonetheless available upon request).

I restrict the analytic sample to respondents who are not yet married in the first wave of the survey, excluding 990 respondents out of 4,010. Compared to the remaining analytic sample and to cohort 2 as a whole, the already- married subset has a high proportion of women, the foreign-born, and lower-educated individuals, with on average more conservative gender attitudes (Table 2). Considering their early age at marriage (26.3 years on average) compared to the national average during the period considered (30 to 32.1 years old for women, 33 to 34.5 for men) (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe 2021), and the sample sociodemographic composition, the interpretation of the results should consider that this subset of more conservative respondents who self-select into very early marriage was not included in the analysis. The estimates of the association between gender attitudes and partnership transitions are therefore likely to be weaker than in a sample including this group of early spouses. Respondents lacking information on one or more variables used have also been excluded. The final analytic sample comprises 2,639 cases.

The survey investigates gender attitudes in every odd-numbered wave for a total of up to five years. Respondents are asked to rate their agreement or disagreement (on a scale from 1 to 5) with a set of statements (see Table 1). Following recent developments in the field (Grunow, Begall, and Buchler 2018; Knight and Brinton 2017), I take a multidimensional approach to gender attitudes and use four separate statements to infer the respondent's stance toward the roles of women and men in society rather than conflating them into a single index. Agreement with the statements indicates gender attitudes that align with a belief in separate spheres for men and women, innate female caretaking, intensive parenting, and preferring a division of labor between male breadwinner and female homemaker – attitudes that can be deemed 'conservative' for each dimension.

Table 1:   Items used to investigate gender attitudes and questionnaire statements

Item name	Questionnaire statement
Prioritize family	*Women should be more concerned about family than about career.*
Traditional roles	*Men should participate in housework to the same extent as women* (reversed: men should not be required to share equally in housework).
Children suffer, working mother	*A child under 6 will suffer from having a working mother.*
Children suffer, working father	*Children often suffer because fathers spend too much time at work.*

Responses to the second item (traditional family roles) have been reversed for easier and more consistent interpretation of the results. I consider the resulting variable to be an indicator of agreement with a traditional male-breadwinner-oriented division of labor.

Alpha tests (Cronbach's alpha) on the four items yield values in the 0.45–0.55 range across the two samples, confirming my decision to use the four items separately with a multidimensional approach rather than building a single scale.

Before assessing stability of attitudes over time, I recoded the two extreme categories 'strongly agree' and 'strongly disagree' as 'agree' and 'disagree', respectively. I consider 'neither agree nor disagree' as a separate category, since consistency checks show that in this particular case, arbitrarily assigning such a category to either the 'agree' or 'disagree' category would skew the results. The resulting three values for each item are therefore coded as 'conservative', 'neutral', and 'liberal' with respect to the wording of the statements in the questionnaire. In each case, agreement is indicative of more conservative gender attitudes.

Table 2:   Sample composition and descriptive statistics, birth cohort 1981–1983

Descriptive		Regression sample				Excluded sample		
	N	Mean/ proportion	sd	Range	N	Mean / proportion	sd	Range
Sample size	2,639				990			
Failures (= event happening)	585							
Place of birth								
West Germany	1,739	65.90			508	51.31		
East Germany	627	23.76			146	14.75		
Abroad	272	10.35			336	33.94		
Education								
Still enrolled	10	0.38			4	0.40		
Lower education	435	16.48			314	31.72		
Intermediate, Realschule	889	33.69			371	37.47		
Higher level education	1305	49.45			301	30.40		
Age at first interview		26.2	0.891	[24, 28]		26.3	0.866	[24,28]
Last wave with attitude information								
1	1,012	38.35						
3	353	13.38						
5	210	7.96						
7	161	6.10						
9	903	34.22						
Respondent sex								
Male	1,433	54.30			319	32.22		
Female	1,206	45.70			671	67.78		
Initial attitude								
Prioritize family								
liberal	1,155	43.77			265	26.77		
neutral	967	36.64			345	34.85		
conservative	517	19.59			377	38.08		
Traditional roles								
liberal	2,193	83.10			756	76.36		
neutral	332	12.58			163	16.46		
conservative	114	4.32			69	6.97		
Children suffer / working mother								
liberal	1,120	42.44			357	36.06		
neutral	740	28.04			246	24.85		
conservative	779	29.52			376	37.98		
Children suffer / working father								
liberal	546	20.69			176	17.78		
neutral	867	32.85			286	28.89		
conservative	1,226	46.46			515	52.02		
Modal attitude								
Prioritize family								
liberal	1,208	45.77						
neutral	1,024	38.80						
conservative	407	15.42						
Traditional roles								
liberal	2,265	85.83						
neutral	306	11.60						
conservative	68	2.58						
Children suffer / working mother								
liberal	1,302	49.34						
neutral	719	27.25						
conservative	618	23.42						
Children suffer / working father								
liberal	612	23.19						
neutral	960	36.38						
conservative	1,067	40.43						
Index								
prioritize family		0.132	0.203	[0, 0.8]				
traditional roles		0.067	0.156	[0, 0.8]				
children suffer / working mother		0.133	0.206	[0, 0.8]				
children suffer / working father		0.146	0.215	[0, 0.8]				

To assess instability of attitudes, I built a simple index dividing the number of transitions to a different attitude by the number of waves in which the respondent was interviewed about their attitudes before experiencing the event of interest:

$$I = \frac{N_{Transitions}}{N_{Waves}}$$

Transitions are counted whenever a move between the three recoded categories occurs. Consistency checks ran calculating transitions between the original 5-point scale categories yield very similar results. The final index ranges from 0 to 0.8, where 0 means complete stability, offering a meaningful intercept for the regression equation, and 0.8 (4/5) means maximum instability of attitudes over time.

3. Methods

I use event history analysis to investigate how the respondent's disposition toward gender roles correlates with the timing and likelihood of marriage and parenthood. As a dependent variable, I use the number of months between the respondent's 18th birthday (legal age for marriage) and their first marriage. The main independent variable is the instability index described above. To assess whether differences are present across attitudes – especially when the respective attitudes are stable – I add the modal answer for each respondent to the regression, generating an interaction term with the instability index. This allows me to investigate the effect of respondents' attitudes when stable over time, and to assess potential differences in the effect of instability according to the prevalent attitude expressed.

The control variables are education level, initial gender attitude when entering the PAIRFAM sample, place of birth (West Germany, East Germany, or abroad), sex of the respondent, and last wave at which the respondent was interviewed.

As for the model specification, generalized gamma accelerated failure time (AFT) models offer the best fit in the most consistent manner, evaluated with pseudo-residuals and Akaike Information Criterion.

4. Results

I calculated a total of sixteen regression models, four for each attitudinal item (prioritize family, traditional role, negative effect of working mothers and fathers), including the variables of interest and the interaction term in a stepwise process. In each model, a higher

instability of attitudes is generally correlated with postponement of marriage once educational level, gender, cohort, and birthplace are controlled for.

The regression coefficient tables (Tables 3 and 4) shows exponentiated coefficients for the AFT models. Coefficients greater than 1 indicate delayed events (with respect to the reference category/zero), whereas coefficients lower than 1 indicate accelerated failures, i.e., earlier marriages. In line with the literature and previous research, women marry at an earlier age than men on average. East-German-born respondents slightly delay their marriages compared to West German respondents. Foreign-born respondents experience earlier marriages. And finally, being enrolled in education delays the event. Note that the coefficients cannot clearly distinguish between timing and level effects, and, for example, the delay effects for East German respondents also reflect their overall lower likelihood of ever getting married.
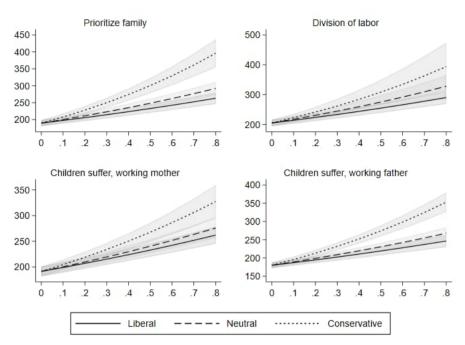
Unsurprisingly, when the modal attitude is added to the model, respondents who express conservative and neutral attitudes tend to enter marriage at earlier ages than respondent who most frequently express liberal attitudes.

In all four models, when the attitude-instability index is added to the regression it is positively and strongly associated with a delay in marriage, both by itself and when interacted with the most frequently expressed attitude.

The graph that follows shows the predicted time between reaching the 18th birthday or legal age for marriage and first marriage, by attitude expressed over the four items considered, and attitude instability (see Figure 1).

Across the four items considered, conservative respondents show the strongest relationship between attitude instability and delays in marriage. This relationship is weaker for neutral respondents, and even weaker for liberal respondents. The association across the three respondent categories is nonetheless meaningful and significant, although neutral respondents tend to align with liberal respondents – with considerable confidence intervals overlap in some cases.

Figure 1: Predicted time lapse between 18th birthday (y) and first marriage, in months, by attitude-instability-index value (x) and modal attitude

Note: Predicted time of first marriage according to the attitude-instability index (x) and median attitude expressed for each gender attitude item, birth cohort 1981–1983. Confidence intervals at 95%.
Source: Author's own elaboration, PAIRFAM v. 9.1.

Table 3: **Exponentiated regression coefficients for the estimated AFT models. P-value in parentheses**

	Prioritize family				Division of labor			
	Model 0	(modal attitude)	(index)	(interaction)	Model 0	(modal attitude)	(index)	(interaction)
Initial Attitude (ref. Lib)								
neutral	0.98 (0.128)	0.99 (0.791)	0.94 (0.028)	0.97 (0.030)	1.00 (0.980)	1.00 (0.994)	1.04 (0.448)	1.04 (0.238)
Conservative	0.97 (0.067)	1.12 (0.005)	0.89 (0.000)	0.94 (0.000)	1.05 (0.092)	0.90 (0.017)	1.12 (0.006)	1.10 (0.001)
Sex (ref. Male)								
Female	0.94 (0.000)	0.94 (0.000)	0.96 (0.000)	0.95 (0.000)	0.93 (0.000)	0.93 (0.000)	0.94 (0.000)	0.94 (0.000)
Birthplace (ref. W Germany)								
East Germany	1.04 (0.011)	1.04 (0.011)	1.04 (0.002)	1.04 (0.002)	1.03 (0.048)	1.03 (0.045)	1.02 (0.165)	1.02 (0.115)
Abroad	0.96 (0.073)	0.97 (0.119)	0.99 (0.619)	0.99 (0.483)	0.96 (0.098)	0.97 (0.152)	0.98 (0.197)	0.98 (0.189)
Education achieved (ref. Enrolled)								
Lower education	0.72 (0.107)	0.73 (0.097)	0.67 (0.010)	0.69 (0.017)	0.72 (0.106)	0.73 (0.113)	0.80 (0.207)	0.79 (0.176)
Intermediate, Realschule	0.70 (0.080)	0.71 (0.078)	0.65 (0.005)	0.67 (0.009)	0.70 (0.078)	0.71 (0.082)	0.77 (0.147)	0.76 (0.124)
Higher level education	0.72 (0.113)	0.73 (0.107)	0.67 (0.010)	0.69 (0.017)	0.73 (0.117)	0.74 (0.126)	0.80 (0.213)	0.79 (0.186)
Age at first interview	1.09 (0.000)	1.09 (0.000)	1.10 (0.000)	1.09 (0.000)	1.09 (0.000)	1.09 (0.000)	1.09 (0.000)	1.09 (0.000)
Last wave interviewed	0.91 (0.000)	0.91 (0.000)	0.90 (0.000)	0.91 (0.000)	0.91 (0.000)	0.91 (0.000)	0.91 (0.000)	0.91 (0.000)
Modal Attitude (ref. Lib)								
Neutral		0.99 (0.816)	1.06 (0.036)			0.85 (0.007)	1.02 (0.592)	
Conservative		0.85 (0.000)	1.12 (0.001)			0.82 (0.000)	1.04 (0.499)	
Index			1.65 (0.000)				1.58 (0.000)	
Mode: Liberal # index				1.50 (0.000)				1.53 (0.000)
Mode: Neutral # index				1.71 (0.000)				1.81 (0.000)
Mode: Conserv. # index				2.50 (0.000)				2.24 (0.000)
Constant	24.38	21.50	19.17	21.52	24.02	25.57	16.44	17.28
lnsigma	0.29 (0.000)	0.27 (0.000)	0.22 (0.000)	0.22 (0.000)	0.28 (0.000)	0.27 (0.000)	0.25 (0.000)	0.24 (0.000)
kappa	0.04 (0.000)	0.03 (0.000)	0.02 (0.000)	0.03 (0.000)	0.04 (0.000)	0.03 (0.000)	0.03 (0.000)	0.03 (0.000)

Table 4:   Exponentiated regression coefficients for the estimated AFT models. P-value in parentheses

	Children suffer: working mother				Children suffer: working father			
	Model 0	(modal attitude)	(index)	(interaction)	Model 0	(modal attitude)	(index)	(interaction)
Initial attitude (ref. Lib)								
neutral	1.03 (0.044)	1.16 (0.000)	0.99 (0.697)	1.02 (0.221)	1.00 (0.998)	1.03 (0.412)	1.03 (0.072)	1.01 (0.692)
Conservative	1.01 (0.670)	1.24 (0.000)	0.91 (0.001)	0.98 (0.099)	1.02 (0.160)	1.21 (0.000)	1.04 (0.002)	1.01 (0.437)
Sex (ref. Male)								
Female	0.94 (0.000)	0.94 (0.000)	0.96 (0.000)	0.95 (0.000)	0.94 (0.000)	0.95 (0.000)	0.97 (0.009)	0.97 (0.008)
Birthplace (ref. W Germany)								
East Germany	1.05 (0.005)	1.04 (0.008)	1.04 (0.000)	1.04 (0.003)	1.04 (0.010)	1.03 (0.014)	1.03 (0.008)	1.05 (0.001)
Abroad	0.96 (0.067)	0.97 (0.119)	0.97 (0.102)	0.95 (0.010)	0.96 (0.093)	0.98 (0.238)	0.99 (0.528)	0.98 (0.351)
Education achieved (ref. Enrolled)								
Lower education	0.71 (0.091)	0.69 (0.028)	0.66 (0.004)	0.67 (0.013)	0.70 (0.069)	0.67 (0.020)	0.89 (0.418)	0.92 (0.545)
Intermediate, Realschule	0.70 (0.071)	0.67 (0.020)	0.64 (0.002)	0.65 (0.008)	0.68 (0.051)	0.66 (0.012)	0.86 (0.291)	0.88 (0.378)
Higher level education	0.72 (0.109)	0.69 (0.033)	0.67 (0.005)	0.68 (0.017)	0.71 (0.081)	0.68 (0.021)	0.89 (0.417)	0.91 (0.527)
age at first interview	1.09 (0.000)	1.09 (0.000)	1.10 (0.000)	1.09 (0.000)	1.09 (0.000)	1.10 (0.000)	1.10 (0.000)	1.09 (0.000)
last wave interviewed	0.91 (0.000)	0.91 (0.000)	0.90 (0.000)	0.91 (0.000)	0.91 (0.000)	0.90 (0.000)	0.90 (0.000)	0.90 (0.000)
Modal attitude (ref. Lib)								
Neutral		0.88 (0.000)				0.97 (0.466)		
Conservative		0.80 (0.000)				0.85 (0.000)		
Index			1.61 (0.000)				1.59 (0.000)	
Mode: Liberal # index				1.50 (0.000)				1.49 (0.000)
Mode: Neutral # index				1.55 (0.000)				1.65 (0.000)
Mode: Conserv. # index				1.89 (0.000)				2.30 (0.000)
Constant	21.70	20.06	17.27	22.23	21.80	16.80	14.20	15.86
lnsigma	0.28 (0.000)	0.24 (0.000)	0.20 (0.000)	0.23 (0.000)	0.28 (0.000)	0.24 (0.000)	0.22 (0.000)	0.24 (0.000)
kappa	0.03 (0.000)	0.02 (0.000)	0.01 (0.000)	0.03 (0.000)	0.03 (0.000)	0.01 (0.000)	0.03 (0.000)	0.06 (0.000)

5. Conclusion

Gender role attitudes are important predictors of family behavior. To date we know little about how their stability over time affects family formation. This paper shows for the first time that instability of gender role attitudes in young adulthood is associated with delayed entry into marriage. This is consistent with the hypothesis that young adults with unstable preferences put family formation on hold.

The results of this investigation show a strong association between the stability of attitudes, that is, their internal coherence over time, and the timing of marriage in a broad sample of the German population. Individuals whose self-reported gender attitudes – evaluated using a battery of four questions – change greatly from wave to wave experience marriage at systematically later times than individuals who report stable attitudes over time.

By interacting the stability of attitudes with the most frequently declared attitude, I find different intensities of the relationship between attitude and the timing of marriage for conservative, neutral, and liberal individuals. Conservative individuals show a stronger relationship between unstable attitudes and older ages at the transition to marriage. The relationship appears to be weaker for liberal and neutral individuals, but nonetheless the trend is also confirmed among these categories.

These results should be interpreted with some caution: Since life histories of the sample are not complete at the moment of the last interview, it is not possible to disentangle quantum and tempo effects in the regression coefficients. Moreover, as the analysis sample excludes a set of respondents self-selecting into early marriage the findings represent conservative estimates, and the relationship between attitude stability and marriage delay might be stronger in the population than in the analysis sample. Including this set of more conservative respondents with early marriages in the analysis would in all likelihood strengthen the association shown. Still, this paper offers an informative snapshot of the relationship between gender attitude stability and the timing of marriage during early adulthood.

Although the results point toward a meaningful relationship between attitude stability and the age of the respondent at major demographic events, the present research is agnostic with respect to the origin of attitude stability. Research in this direction points toward intersecting effects of changes in partnership-related experiences and attitudes (Vespa 2009) and of broader partner convergence effects (Kalmijn 2005) over the life course. Moreover, the results I present cannot identify a causal direction in the relationship at hand. Further research is needed to isolate potential endogenous and partner effects and to identify the mechanisms that associate unstable gender attitudes over early adult life courses with later entry into marriage.

6. Acknowledgements

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