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# 1 Introduction

Today, an individual's life course consists of several domains such as education, family, and work. These domains are interlinked dynamically and embedded in a nationally specific institutional and historical context. Important life course decisions are often not taken in isolation, but are part of a more complex interdependence of developments in several life domains (Mayer 1990; Willekens 1999). Status changes in one of these life domains and changes in historical macroprocesses may initiate, delay, enable, accelerate, or even prevent status changes in a life domain of interest. In life course research, these status changes are called events (Mayer/Tuma 1990). Family life events are central to the lives of individuals and, in particular, to the life cycle of women. For example, a family event can be becoming a parent, getting married, or having a divorce. In this study, I focus on East and West German women's family events over the life course depending on their educational participation and labor force experience over longer historical periods before and after German unification.

In recent decades, the dynamics of family life have undergone remarkable changes in modern societies. These changes can be described by demographic transformations such as declining fertility, rising ages at first birth and first marriage, as well as changing divorce rates (Calot 1998; Frejka/Calot 2001a, 2001b). They are closely connected with structural macro-developments such as educational expansion (Blossfeld/Blossfeld/Blossfeld 2016) and the trend toward a service economy (Becker/Blossfeld 2021). Moreover, they are associated with unprecedented shifts in the social norms and values defining the employment and family roles of men and women in advanced industrial societies (Beck/Beck-Gernsheim 1994; Giddens 1997; Grunow/Aisenbrey/Evertsson 2011; Lesthaeghe/Surkyn 1988; Mayer/Huinink 1990). In addition to these more general trends, Germany has experienced a unique development through its separation into a socialist and a capitalist state after World War II and the long-term process of German unification after the fall of the Berlin Wall. These specific historical events have resulted in unusual turbulences and unexpected continuities in the transformation of life courses, particularly in East Germany (Diewald/Goedicke/Mayer 2006a; Mayer 1990).

An important change for family events has been the educational expansion and the attendant lengthening of the time spent in education (Mayer, 1990). Over successive generations, the educational attainment level, particularly of women, has risen significantly (Blossfeld/Blossfeld/Blossfeld 2015; Breen et al. 2009; Breen et al. 2010; Shavit/Blossfeld 1993). In Germany, young women have now even surpassed young men among upper secondary school graduates (*Abitur*) and university freshmen (Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016, 2018). In addition to women's higher educational

investments, there has been a marked trend toward upskilling and tertiarization of the occupational structure (Gallie 1998; Solga/Mayer 2008; Becker/Blossfeld 2021). Taken together, these changes have not only increased female labor force participation but also provided better career opportunities for women across birth cohorts. Thus, younger women have not only higher educational attainment levels and increasing rates of participation in paid work but also higher quality jobs than their mothers and grandmothers (Mayer 1990; Mayer/Huinink 1990).

From a life course perspective, increasing educational attainment across birth cohorts is connected not only with a gradual extension of educational participation for young qualified adults but also with a growing conflict between full-time educational activities and women's family roles. Thus, increasing educational participation is expected to delay women's entry into first marriage and first birth, particularly for highly qualified women. In addition, women's increasing educational investments are assumed to be associated with a higher female labor force participation and, in the German normative and institutional context, with severe problems in balancing family and professional responsibilities (Grunow 2013). Of course, there have been great differences between the lives of East and West German women, because the socialist state in East Germany supported women's full-time employment and provided extensive child care, whereas the West German welfare state privileged the more traditional "male breadwinner marriage" and the marriage of a "male breadwinner with a female secondary earner" through tax incentives and only moderate child care provision (Obertreis 1986; Trappe 1995; Trappe/Rosenfeld 2000). After German unification, the West German institutional structure was introduced in East Germany, but these different female life course models seem to be converging only very slowly (Diewald/Goedicke/Mayer 2006a).

There are many life course studies analyzing these changing relationships between education, labor force participation, and family events from the 1980s to the early 2000s. However, what is clearly missing is an analysis of the most recent developments. Data from the German "National Educational Panel Study" (NEPS) make it possible to analyze not only longer time spans before and after unification in East and West Germany but also the most recent developments in unified Germany.

To introduce the topic and research questions of this book, I have structured this chapter as follows. Section 1.1 introduces the aims of the book and section 1.2 gives an outline of its structure. Section 1.3 provides an overview of the life course perspective and its five general principles. Section 1.4 relates long-term historical developments in the roles of women in Germany, their particular changes in the socialist East and the capitalist West, as well as the developments after German unification to the following three family outcomes: first motherhood, first cohabitation and marriage, as well as first divorce. Sections 1.5, 1.6, and 1.7 give an overview of the advantages of the longitudinal

approach that this book adopts, and describe the properties of the data from the NEPS sample in this analysis along with the longitudinal methods applied.

## 1.1 Contributions of the Book

The overall aim of this book is to make significant theoretical and empirical contributions to the growing literature on the field of family sociology more generally and on the interdependence of education, work, and family events in women's life courses in Germany in particular. It makes seven innovative descriptive and analytical contributions.

First, the literature on Germany today reveals no comprehensive long-term historical description of the specificities of family development in Germany over the last two centuries that also embraces the most recent changes after German unification while comparing different family events such as union formation processes, fertility behavior, and divorce in East and West Germany. I therefore describe in detail the long-term developments and the most recent trends in family formation and dissolution processes in East and West Germany.

Second, there is also no long-term descriptive analysis of the sequences of partnership states and their relationship to fertility events over the early life course of women in successive birth cohorts in East and West Germany. Using novel longitudinal data from the NEPS, I therefore follow up women's sequences of different partnership states over the early life course across birth cohorts in not only East and West Germany but also Germany as a whole. I also describe the change in the timing of entry into marriage over the life course for different birth cohorts in both parts of the country. Finally, I focus on women's partnership status at first birth and the proportion of childless women across successive birth cohorts in East and West Germany.

Third, previous research on Germany has focused on women's entry into marriage (Strohmeier 1993; Wagner/Franzmann 2000), and there have been only very few attempts using longitudinal data to analyze competing forms of living arrangements such as first cohabitation and first marriage in East and West Germany (Brüderl 2004; Nazio 2008). As I shall show in section 1.4, both Germanys experienced an increase in the age at first marriage along with a decline in marriage rates. Despite this delay in entry into marriage, young adults have continued to set up households with partners (Konietzka/Kreyenfeld 2005; Nazio 2008). In fact, there has been a rapid rise in cohabitation, especially for young couples. Therefore, I study the impact of place and time, macrostructural insecurity, education, and the birth of children on single women's entry into first cohabitation or first marriage as competing events in East and West Germany.

Fourth, very little is known about the extent to which cohabitations are transformed into marriages in the later life course in East and West Germany. Therefore, I examine differences in the duration of cohabitation and study the effects of various life course constellations on the transition from cohabitation to marriage in East and West Germany. Usually, the literature distinguishes two different meanings of cohabitation (Manting 1996; Mills 2000; Kiernan 2000; Wu 2000): (1) cohabitation as a trial arrangement or a stage in the marriage process, and (2) cohabitation as a more or less permanent alternative to marriage. In East and West Germany, the diffusion of cohabitation has been very similar. Nevertheless, in the literature, the socialist and capitalist German regimes are often supposed to have a different impact on the meaning of cohabitation (Höhn/Memmey/Wendt 1990). In the FRG, cohabitation has always merely been a stage in the marriage process until children are expected, so that the great majority of children are born within a marriage (Nave-Herz 2006; Simm 1991; Tölke 1993; Vaskovics/Rupp 1995). As a result, West Germany is characterized by a high proportion of couples who decide to enter into a marriage during pregnancy (Blossfeld/Mills 2001). In contrast, the GDR offered generous financial and institutional support to single and cohabiting mothers, so that more and more young couples decided to opt for cohabitation rather than marriage (Gysi 1989; Höhn/Memmey/Wendt 1990). As a result, parenting depended less on marriage in the former GDR. Therefore, this book studies how far the meaning of cohabitation did indeed differ in East and West Germany before German unification and how this meaning has changed in both parts of Germany since the fall of the Berlin Wall—particularly in relation to the birth of children.

Fifth, previous research has analyzed women's educational assortative mating mainly with regard to entry into marriage (Blossfeld 2009; Blossfeld/Timm 2003; Schwartz/Mare 2005; Wirth 2000; Teckenberg 2000; Klein 1996; Teckenberg 1991; Wirth 1996). An analysis of women's educational assortative mating with regard to entry into cohabitation is lacking. Furthermore, there has been no research on the effects of mothers' role models on daughters' union formation processes. Because mothers might act as role models for their daughters, this will increase the likelihood that their daughters will also adopt a similar role as their mothers within their own partnership (Rosenthal 1985; Beaman et al. 2012). Farré and Vella (2013) have found that mothers with less traditional views on the role of women in society are more likely to have daughters without these traditional views. In other words, if mothers live less traditionally, their daughters are also very likely to do the same. In this book, I therefore examine the impact of the mother's role model on the daughter's educational assortative mating. I distinguish three educational matches for the partnerships of the two generations: (1) the female has a higher education than the male partner, (2) the female has the same education as the male partner, and (3) the female has a lower education than the male partner.



Sixth, through the process of educational expansion, a rising number of young women are participating increasingly longer in the educational system across cohorts (Huinink/Wagner 1995; Blossfeld/Blossfeld/Blossfeld 2020). Life course studies indicate that normative sequences exist with regard to various life course transitions such as women should first finish school before starting their own family. In order to satisfy this sequencing norm, young women will therefore postpone their entry into motherhood until they have completed their education (Hogan 1978; Marini 1984; Settersten Jr./Mayer 1997). However, if young women postpone motherhood because they are still enrolled in education, they might come under pressure, because there also exist normative expectations regarding the timing of motherhood (Hogan 1978; Yamaguchi 1991). Some female students may consider the violation of the sequencing norm as less undesirable than the violation of the age norm, and therefore have their first child while still participating in full-time education. The decision to have a first child while in education depends primarily on the degree to which motherhood disrupts educational success. In the mid-1970s, the GDR introduced significant pronatalist family measures to reduce the conflict between full-time education and motherhood and increase the fertility level. For example, mothers in education had privileged housing access, were offered daylong free child care, and received additional financial benefits. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, these kinds of pronatalist policies were abolished abruptly. In the Eastern part of Germany, this suddenly increased the conflict between educational participation and motherhood for young women. In this book, I conduct a difference-in-differences analysis of the effects of changing state support for mothers in education before and after unification in East Germany and compare these changes with developments in West Germany. The aim of this analysis is to study whether pronatalist policies can indeed increase the fertility of women who are in full-time education. I also conduct a more specific longitudinal analysis to determine whether the outcome of the difference-in-differences analysis represents the consequence of a specific policy change in the transition from the GDR to the united Germany for woman enrolled in education and not the more general changes in society as a whole connected with German unification.

Seventh, with increasing educational investments in the course of the educational expansion, women's labor force participation over the life course has risen strongly, and women in East and West Germany are also increasingly able to turn their educational investments into career gains. Because women in Germany, and particularly in West Germany, are normatively expected to first finish school before starting a family, they often postpone entry into motherhood until they have finished their education. East and West Germany are still characterized by a gender-specific division of work in the family. Within couples, it is therefore typically the mother's time that forms the major part of the total cost of child care and rearing. Hence, women who are employed face a

double burden and have difficulties in reconciling family and work demands. If women raise the value of their time through greater educational investments and increased career resources, this leads to higher income opportunities and increases the relative cost of children. They will therefore tend to postpone their entry into motherhood or decide to remain childless. Nevertheless, there might be differences in women's decision to enter into motherhood with regard to their employment form (part-time vs. full-time) and their type of labor contract (temporary vs. permanent). However, not all women are able to turn their human capital investments into career resources, because they do not work or do not find a job and might therefore enter into motherhood more often than employed women. Women's decision to have a first child also depends on the degree to which women can reconcile their family demands and job careers. In the socialist GDR, women were completely integrated into the labor market based on secure, permanent, full-time work. At the same time, pronatalist family measures in the GDR supported mothers in terms of extensive parental leave, daylong child care, and financial benefits (Trappe 1995, 1996; Huinink/Wagner 1995). This eased the conflict between family and work demands. In contrast to the GDR, the FRG always considered child care to be predominantly a private matter, based on the traditional model of the male breadwinner and the female homemaker. Many West German women therefore did not work at all, and if they did, they were employed mainly part-time. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, East German women faced a sudden high level of uncertainty, and family policies were reduced abruptly. This immediately increased the conflict between labor market participation and motherhood. In the sociological literature, little attention has been paid to the impact of educational enrolment, educational attainment level, labor force participation, and career advancement on women's decision to have a first child in East and West Germany either before or especially after German unification. Therefore, I examine in detail the impact of educational enrolment, educational attainment level, labor force participation, and career advancement on women's decision to have a first child in East and West Germany before and after unification. In particular, I want to clarify how far the patterns to be found in the younger generations of women today are still similar to the patterns of women found in earlier life course studies. Finally, I am interested in the consequences of the changing (institutional) contexts before and after unification in East Germany, and I compare these developments with trends in West Germany.

Finally, the literature focusing on the effect of women's education on divorce is voluminous. Yet, most empirical studies have concentrated their analyses only on the correlation between women's educational attainment level and divorce risk (after controlling for important other influences). In addition, few studies have estimated the effects of the educational level of both spouses on the divorce rate. However, these studies have provided conflicting empirical evidence. Bumpass and Sweet (1972) were the first among the very few to

study the marital stability of homogamous and heterogamous marriages, taking into account not only the educational levels of spouses but also the similarities and differences within couples. The problem with this research is that the interpretation of the effect of educational gaps within heterogamous couples is complicated by different social meanings of education. Education is not only an indicator of the individual's human capital and market opportunities but also reflects an individual's cultural, symbolic, and social resources as well as varying socialization experiences. In particular, the economic theory of the family predicts that there is a high probability that couples in which women marry a partner with a lower educational attainment will turn the traditional gender-specific specialization around. This should lead to a reversal of the effects of education on the divorce rate for husbands and wives. If this is the case, empirical studies that aggregate the effects of each spouse's education across heterogamous matches will mix up positive and negative effects of educational attainment on the divorce rate and thereby produce inconclusive results. Therefore, I attempt to find answers to some of the discrepancies in earlier divorce studies. In particular, I develop a new theoretical approach and disaggregate the marriages of women into upward, downward, and homogamous marriages in order to estimate the specific meanings of spouses' education on divorce in these different educational matches.

## **1.2 Outline of the Book**

This book consists of seven independent but interrelated empirical articles that are presented as chapters 2 to 8. The first introductory chapter puts the seven research papers into a long-term historical context and it describes the principles of my life course approach, the longitudinal dataset I utilized, and the methods of event history analysis I applied. The concluding chapter 9 summarizes the main findings of the seven empirical articles and their theoretical and political contributions. It also discusses the limitations of the analyses and makes suggestions for future research. Each of the seven empirical chapters examines a particular demographic question and studies the family or fertility events as a product of historical periods, cohort-specific experiences, and events in other life course domains. With regard to the life course domains, I focus on the effects of women's social origin, educational participation, changing educational attainment levels, labor force participation, employment contracts, and the education of their partner. A topic-specific literature review, selected theories, and an overview of the state of the empirical research are presented in each empirical chapter, and this is followed in each case by a discussion of specific research questions and the formulation of testable hypotheses. I focus particularly on the impact of historical periods before and after German

unification in East and West Germany. In all empirical chapters, I use data from the adult cohort (Starting cohort 6) of the German National Educational Panel Study (NEPS) and apply advanced discrete-time event history methods (Blossfeld 2022). Because data were prepared differently for each of the chapters depending on the demographic outcome in question, I describe the dependent variables and the covariates separately in each chapter.

This book consists of nine chapters in total. The seven empirical chapters are embedded in the life course approach and are therefore ordered according to the timeline of family events in a woman's life course. Nevertheless, these transitions in the life course do not have to happen in this specific order for all respondents.

Chapter 1 introduces the life course perspective with its five principles (the principles of life-span development, linked lives, human agency, timing of events, and transitions as well as historical time and space) that are important for this book (see Elder Jr./Kirkpatrick Johnson/Crosnoe 2003). Furthermore, it gives an overview of the long-term developments and recent trends in family formation and dissolution processes in Germany. Because Germany experienced a historical period of about 45 years of division between 1945 and 1990, interpreting the results requires an introduction to the long-term commonality of German history before the division, the differences during the German separation into capitalist and socialist regimes, and the possible consequences of these differences for the thirty years after German unification.

Chapter 2 is a descriptive article and focuses on the sequences of partnership states, the proportion of ever-married and childless women, as well as women's partnership status at first birth for different birth cohorts in East and West Germany.

Chapter 3, the second empirical article, analyzes single women's entry into first cohabitation or first marriage in East and West Germany as competing risks. I observe women from age 16 onward until they enter into their first union—be it cohabitation or marriage. I censor the data on the right if women were interviewed before entering their first cohabitation or first marriage.

Chapter 4, the third empirical article, studies possible differences in the structure of cohabitation in East and West Germany before and after German unification. Therefore, I analyze women's transition from first cohabitation to first marriage and the dissolution of a first cohabitation as competing events. I follow up women from the beginning of their first cohabitation until they enter into marriage or separate. Cohabiting women are right-censored when they have not had a transition into marriage or the dissolution of their first cohabiting union until the time of the retrospective interview.

Chapter 5, the fourth empirical article, explores single women's transition into first union with different educational partner matches as competing events in Germany. I follow up single women from age 16 until they make the transition to first (downward, homophilous, or upward) cohabitation or first

(downward, homogamous, or upward) marriage. Single women are right-censored when they have not had a first (marital or nonmarital) union until the time of the retrospective interview.

Chapter 6, the fifth empirical article, focuses on the transition into first motherhood of women enrolled in full-time education in East and West Germany. I observe women from age 16 onward on a monthly basis as long as they are enrolled in full-time education and until they conceive their first child during full-time educational enrolment. I censor the data on the right if women have left full-time education without conceiving a child or if they were interviewed before they have finished their education. Therefore, fertility histories of women are combined with their educational trajectories.

Chapter 7, the sixth empirical article, studies the impact of educational enrolment, educational attainment level, labor force participation, and career advancement on women's entry into first motherhood in East and West Germany. I follow up women from age 16 onward on a monthly basis until the conception of a first child. Right-censoring takes place in the analysis if women have not entered motherhood until the age of 45 or until the time of the last interview.

Chapter 8, the seventh empirical article, explores the effect of educational assortative mating among spouses on the risk of divorce. The women under study are at risk of experiencing a divorce as soon as they enter into their first marriage, and I follow them up until the event of a divorce. Women who are married for the first time and do not experience a divorce until the time of the last interview are right-censored.

The findings from each of the seven empirical chapters and how they relate to each other are summarized in chapter 9. In particular, I discuss the effect of education and work on family events in women's life courses in East and West Germany. This chapter concludes with the contributions of this research for policymakers as well as a discussion of the limitations of the study and challenges for future research.

### **1.3 The Life Course Perspective**

The predominant theoretical approach in this book is the life course orientation. It links changes in one domain of life to changes in other life domains (Elder Jr. 1974; Hogan 1981; Mayer 1990; Shanahan/Mortimer/Kirkpatrick Johnson 2016). Hence, it regards the life course as the result of events in parallel and interdependent processes resulting in an individual's life course. Elder, Johnson, and Giele (2003) have summarized the following five conceptual dimensions of life course research: (1) the principle of life-span development, (2) the principle of linked lives, (3) the principle of agency, (4) the principle of timing of events and transitions, and (5) the principle of time and space.