Cohabitational trajectories and the family life cycle

Eric D. Widmer & Jacques-Antoine Gauthier

DRAFT – Please do not quote, nor disseminate

Is the family life cycle model still any good?

The family developmental perspective, although rarely brought together with life-course analysis, is one of the rare conceptual models explicitly focused on the temporal unfolding of social processes used in sociology, social psychology or demography. This is reason enough to start from here in our attempt at empirically addressing peoples' cohabitational trajectories. According to this perspective, all families go through a finite set of distinct stages that are ordered, associated with the chronological age of family members, functionally specialized and distinct from each other, mainly with respect to the composition of the household. Most research dealing with the family developmental perspective is based on the *a priori* constitution of family phases, using criteria such as changes in family composition, the age of the oldest child and the retirement status of the husband (Aldous, 1996). The use of such criteria raises a number of empirical and analytical difficulties.

Indeed, there has been for years a debate concerning the empirical and theoretical status of the family life cycle model (Kapinus & Johnson, 1996; Klein & Aldous, 1979; Nock, 1979; Spanier et al., 1979). Should researchers drop it once and for all and with it the ambition of designing a predictive model on how families evolve through their career? Or should they rather seek alternative approaches that keep up this ambition

while acknowledging the diversity of pathways through which family interdependencies change over individual life courses? This chapter reconsiders the developmental perspective on the family in the light of family trajectories as they unfold empirically. It hypothesizes that despite the rise of individualization of family forms since the nineteen sixties, family trajectories still follow a finite set of developmental models. We begin with a review of the literature on the family life cycle (FLC) and of the debates it has stirred. Using optimal matching analysis (OMA) on a representative sample of adults living in Switzerland, we test the hypothesis that family trajectories remain overall developmental. Finally, we discuss the significance of our results for the family life cycle model in the light of the life course paradigm.

The limitations of the developmental perspective on the family

The underlying conceptual rationale for the importance of the developmental perspective is that the family, much like an individual, goes through a developmental process with inherent changes or adaptation required after each of the stages (Duvall, 1977, Spanier et al. 1979). According to the family developmental perspective, families go through a finite set of distinct family stages which are ordered, associated with the chronological age of their members, functionally specialized and distinct in the composition of the household unit. In order to define the relevant stages of this process, Duvall & Hill (1948) originally focused on the birth and departure of the children, as well as the retirement status of the male breadwinner. They later added other dimensions, such as the age and the school level of the elder child. That enabled them to define the so-called "nine stages family life cycle" (Duvall, 1957). Scholars usually distinguish establishment, preschool, school age, adolescence, launching of young adults, post-parental, and retirement years as stages of the family life cycle (Hill & Rodgers, 1964). Because of a focus on socialization as the first functional imperative of the family (Parsons & Bales, 1955), this and similar distinctions are based on three main criteria: the change of

household composition, the age of the oldest child and the employment status of the husband/father (Aldous, 1996).

Originally, the strength of such a model was to bring change down to the level of family units and replace the view of families as static entities, while establishing a timetable for transitions in trajectories (Aldous, 1990). Interestingly, between 1965 and 2009, the "Sociological abstract" database reveals that more than 1'000 publications refer explicitly to the family developmental perspective in their abstracts, with a clear peak around 1980. This underlines the massive success encountered by this model and its potentially lasting influence in the field of family issues, despite the increasing changes occurring in family structures in the second half of the 20th century. The sharp decline of publications with this reference starting in the nineteen eighties however shows that an increasing number of scholars has felt at odds with some of the model's main features.

Indeed, a weakness of the first Duvall-and-Hill model is that it focused on intact two-parents-and-one-earner-families, that might have been representative of the nineteen sixties, but no longer thereafter (Aldous, 1990). Since then, numerous attempts have been made to differentiate and refine this developmental perspective by increasing the number and characteristics of the stages and creating variants for monoparental and recomposed families (Duvall & Miller, 1985; Mattesich & Hill, 1987; Mederer & Hill, 1983). Their aim was to better accommodate the changes in family forms due to declining fertility and marriage rates, the increasing divorce rates occurring from the nineteen seventies onwards. However, these attempts were criticized for their assumption of universality and their lack of intergenerational perspective, a view that impedes the inclusion of relational realities stemming from alternate family forms, i.e., cohabitation outside wedlock, childlessness, divorce, remarriage, etc. (Laszloffy, 2002).

XXX The universality of family stages, their ordering as well as their link with chronological age have indeed been seriously questioned, as well as the idea that most families follow a regular and ordered life cycle (Furstenberg & Spanier, 1987). The unpredictability of family ties in late modernity has been stressed (Beck, 2001).

Various demographic changes that have occurred since the nineteen sixties cast doubt on the universal ordering and sequencing of family transitions. The tight set of transitions prevalent then, from leaving the parental home and becoming financially autonomous to marrying and becoming a parent (Modell et al. 1976), was progressively replaced by a set of less chronologised and less sequenced life changes. Young adults in most Western countries have postponed leaving their parental home, marriage, and parenthood (Lesthaeghe, 1995; Shanahan, 2000), with various complex living arrangements characterizing this prolonged transitional stage in younger cohorts. Rising rates of divorce have also triggered a large pluralisation of the second part of adult life. In their forties, many individuals enter for a second time an establishment phase when they remarry, or a preschool stage if they have a child from a second partnership. Single-parent families are on the rise, one-breadwinner families decline. Accordingly, the variance of age at key transitions of family life has increased. In summary, family trajectories have become more complex and diverse since the nineteen sixties (Aldous, 1996; Mattesich & Hill, 1987). However, the empirical evidence supporting a fully individualized family life course is not convincing. On the one hand, there is currently clearly more variability concerning for instance marriage or marital cohabitation, divorce and fertility in Western countries compared to the seventies, but on the other hand, living in some form of union and becoming parents still correspond to typical family configurations (Fux, 2005; Widmer, Kellerhals & Levy, 2004). Overall, the empirical evidence currently at hand supports the doubts raised by the capability of the FLC model to account for a large majority of family trajectories, while also supporting a conscious attitude towards the pervasiveness of the individualization and destandardisation trends postulated by individualization theory.

The increasing complexity of family trajectories leads to a series of empirical difficulties in research that merit to be spelled out. First, the number of household structures that one should take into account when dealing with the family life cycle is potentially large, even when researchers consider only a small number of criteria, such as the sex of the custodian parent and the presence of a stepparent and of half- or stepsiblings in the household (Pasley, 1987). Second, the ordering of stages is not

self-evident, as individuals may enter the establishment phase a second time when they remarry, or re-enter a preschool stage if they have a child born from a second union. In such cases, a peculiar and complex situation is reduced to a single, catch-all stage of the classical FLC model. The configurational and functional differences between a real preschooler family and the case we just sketched remain invisible. Therefore, the FLC model triggers a loss of complexity in the empirical analysis of family trajectories that is not trivial. Indeed, it may act as a self-fulfilling prophecy for research and risks to serve normative rather than analytical purposes. Third, the link between stages and the chronological age of both parents and children has been loosened as the variance of these ages increases at each transition, making the fit to the developmental model poorer.

Stages conceptually defined *a priori* may therefore not account for a large share of variance of marital adjustment compared to age or duration of marriage. The FLC model assumes that families abide by normative constraints and therefore do not follow alternative family pathways (Nock, 1979). Referring to such a model forces researchers to disregard widowed, divorced or separated individuals, or non-normative social configurations (homoparentality, singlehood), as they simply do not fit within its formulation. Promoting a narrow concept about the way in which families evolve over time risks generating a biased analysis of the social reality that will, in turn, support inadequate family policies (Levin, 1993). Individuals as well as the non-standard configurations in which they live are at risk of being discriminated against, economically, politically and morally (Smith, 1993). Moral considerations therefore play an important role in building and justifying this model (Rice, 1994; Coontz, 1992).

Another strong criticism against the FLC model concerns its inability to take into account the ways in which social contexts and social positions shape family trajectories and family transitions (Rice, 1994). For example, it minimizes the fact that social class delimits access to economic resources and affects the ability to marry, to become parents or to experience divorce and family recomposition (Rice, 1994). By suggesting the existence of an immutable, class-neutral process driven by an

idealized internal logic, the FLC model denies the influence of contextual factors.

To summarize, the FLC model has to face serious criticisms. The universality and ordering that are some of its central features cannot be taken for granted without further empirical verification. These features serve social and institutional functions that rise suspicion about the scientific validity of the model. Indeed, the model may work as an epistemological blinder and keep a large number of family situations that do not correspond to the nuclear family model out of sight because they are not given proper space. Thus, because of its simplifying nature, the model may not account for a large share of the variance of actual family arrangements through time. Finally, the FLC model makes the understanding of the social embeddedness of families uneasy, as it presupposes a universal order that makes social class, gender or ethnic differences of secondary importance compared with the age-graded development of the family unit.

Empirical family trajectories and narrative positivism

Including empirical trajectories in the family development perspective has proved to be a difficult task in the face of the complexity of family trajectories created by divorce and repartnering. Considering the ways in which individuals experience family events over time may, in turn, provide new empirical insights concerning the relevance of the family developmental model to the understanding of contemporary families.

The fact that an increasing and potentially important number of individuals does not fit into the boxes proposed by the FLC model is an obvious problem for the family developmental perspective. Analysing empirical sequences of biographical events - in the sense of Abbott's (2001) narrative positivism - rather than testing the fit of theoretical models of family development against empirical reality, we first uncover how factual cohabitational trajectories unfold. Subsequently, we relate them to criteria of the FLC model such as the ordering of stages and their link with the chronological ages of

family members. This implies a change of focus from the family unit, considered as a well-defined social system, to individuals as centres of a rather large set of individualized family ties (Widmer, 2010). Indeed, each member of a household experiences a distinct family trajectory from the other. This trajectory may, but need not be developmental, i.e., composed by functionally related, chronologised and ordered stages. In other words, referring to individuals and their family arrangements rather than to a family as a developing unit, may, but need not support developmental models concerning family relationships of individuals, even in historical situations with a high degree of complexity in family forms. We expect a small number of family trajectory types to account for much of the variability of individual cases, rather than a large number of over-complex and individualized trajectories. We also hypothesize that family trajectories are sensitive to social change. New models may have emerged in recent cohorts due to the decrease of marriage and fertility, as well as to the increase of divorce. We expect those changes to be captured by the emergence of new stages, still ordered and chronologised, but different in their duration and other features.

Data and measures

For this empirical test, the sample of the Swiss Household Panel (SHP, see Preface) is restricted to individuals aged at least 35 years. In its retrospective module, the SHP asked respondents to provide information on the type of tie they had with the persons they lived with, from their birth to the present. Each piece of information is associated with a starting year and an ending year. This information is recoded into ten categories of cohabitational status: 1. living with biological father and mother; 2. living with one biological parent only (either mother or father); 3. living with one biological parent and her or his partner; 4. living alone; 5. living with a partner; 6. living with a partner and one's biological child; 7. living with partner and non-biological child; 8. living with biological child without partner; 9. living with friends; 10. other or undefined situations. Given that a 10-item coding scale on 35

distinct years is used, there are 1035 logical possibilities for coding a particular cohabiting trajectory. This approach is open for a great variety of living arrangements, compared with the usual operationalisations of the family life cycle.

Our computations are made using the R statistical environment (R Development Core Team, 2009). Optimal matching analyses are produced with the R-package TraMineR (Gabadinho et al., 2008). The data-based costs of substitution are determined empirically by means of the SALTT[1] open source software (Notredame, Bucher, Gauthier & Widmer, 2005).

Results

The distribution of the cohabitation statuses between birth and age 35 is presented in Figure 1. A large majority of individuals spend their first 20 years of life with their two biological parents and then enter parenthood after some time spent solo and/or as cohabiting partners.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Global family trajectories of the total sample (100%)

Six types of trajectories were found by optimal matching and cluster analysis; they are characterized by the time spent in each status, the age at key transitions and by the social statuses of the individuals (Table 1). We first describe each of these types, using the OMA results and the time- and age-related dimensions presented above. As a last step, we show how cohabitational trajectories relate to socio-demographic statuses such as educational level, birth cohort, social class and gender.

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Individual family trajectories: duration of cohabitation statuses

[1] Search Algorithm for Life Trajectories and Transitions

Parental trajectories (Figure 2) include about half of the respondents (54%). They are characterized by two stages, linked by a short transition carried out in about two years. The first stage is characterized by co-residence with the two biological parents. It is followed by a short transition of singlehood and childless partnership. After that, co-residence with partners and biological children starts up at age 35. The average age at which individuals live by themselves is 25 for men and 23 for women. Men start living with a partner at age 26.7 and women at age 24.8. Men and women have children in their household at 28.4 and 26.6. The average duration of residence alone is 0.6, with a partner 2.2, whereas residence with a partner and at least one biological child is 6.9.

[FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Parental trajectories (54 %)

In the Parental type, transitions unfold quickly and regularly: only three years on average separate leaving the parental home and the birth of the first child. Marriage is almost simultaneous to cohabitation, but occurs clearly before the first birth. This type corresponds to the developmental model of the family cycle: all family transitions occur in the predicted order, i.e., leaving one's parents, entering conjugality and becoming parents. These transitions are strongly associated with chronological age and show a limited variability. No non-normative phases occur.

The Parental type of family trajectories is complemented by several alternative types that include smaller percentages of trajectories. Conjugal trajectories (Figure 3) incorporate about 12% of the sample. Up to age 24–25, this type of trajectory is similar to the previous one. But past this point, the transition from the parental home to one's own partner and children, that lasts less than three years in the Parental type, becomes a permanent state, lasting more than ten years. Conjugal life without children dominates these trajectories up to the age of 35 years. That type is characterized by a much longer intermediary state between the beginning of

cohabitation and the first child. For individuals in this trajectory, cohabiting is no longer a transition but a real life stage where many non-family projects and activities are formulated and enacted. As the child does not seem to be a short-term objective for people following such trajectories, marriage takes place on average one and a half year later than in Parental trajectories. Only 17% of men and 13% of women following this type of trajectory have ever had a child, while marriage is almost systematic.

[FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]

Conjugal trajectories (12 %)

Solo trajectories (Figure 4) represent 18% of respondents and mainly focus on singlehood after individuals leave the parental homeFigure 4. Respondents in this trajectory typically live alone for a longer time, while short cohabiting episodes are not excluded. The coming of the first child occurs about two years earlier than in the Conjugal type, but the average duration of cohabitation without children is about five times shorter (2.2 versus 11 years). In this case, it is the conjugal life that is postponed, allowing possibly more individualistic behaviour and versatile functioning. The rates of cohabitation, marriage and childbirth are lower than in the other trajectories.

[FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE]

Solo trajectories (18 %)

Trajectories of type 4 (Figure 5) and 5 (Figure 6) concern respondents who have

experienced the separation of their own parents in their childhood or adolescence. The Step-family-in-childhood type (4.6%) corresponds to cases in which parental separation happened on average when respondents were about eight years old. The corresponding standard deviation is, however, high, indicating an important variability of the age at that transition. The custodian parent re-entered a conjugal life in a fair majority of cases shortly after separation from the non-custodian parent. On average, respondents spend less than one year in a single-parent household and 13.5 years in a blended family household. Interestingly, the second part of the trajectories belonging to this type is quite similar to that of the Parental type, with a swift change from the parental home to an intimate partnership and parenthood and a corresponding long period of life with partner and children.

[FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE]

Step-family in childhood trajectory (6 %)

Another type, Single-parent family in childhood, is characterized by a divorce or separation of parents that is not followed by a repartnering of the custodian parent (eight percent of respondents). People following this type of trajectory (Figure 6) experience their parents' separation at about the same age on average than those in the previous type. Most of the time, however, they live with a single parent without a parent's partner. With a longer period of singlehood and of cohabitation with a partner, and a shorter time living with a partner and children, this type is less similar to the Parental type than the previous one. This corresponds fairly well to the divorce cycle (Wolfinger, 2005) by which people facing parental separation in their youth – in particular when the custodian parent does not repartner - are more likely to separate from their partner once they are adults.

[FIGURE 6 ABOUT HERE]

Single-parent family in childhood trajectories (7.8 %)

About three percent of respondents (Figure 7) develop trajectories that are grouped in the residual status category “Other”. This situation corresponds largely to life spent in institutional settings such as boarding schools, hospitals or jails. On average these individuals leave their parental home early, at about ten, and spend a limited time in solo living, with a partner and/or with child(ren). We call this type Erratic trajectories. The small number of cases in this group as well as the lack of information due to the high frequency of the "other" category in this "type" call for cautious interpretation; it might be no more than a residual category of very diverse trajectories.

[FIGURE 7 ABOUT HERE]

Erratic trajectories *(3 %)*

Overall, cohabitation trajectories are characterized by one dominant model that implies a swift change from the status of co-resident child to the status of co-resident parent (54% of the sample). The five alternative models account together for the remaining 46%, in which singlehood, cohabiting with a partner without children, experiencing divorce of parents and family recomposition represent types of trajectories of decreasing frequencies.

Explanatory factors

Do family trajectories depend on social statuses such as social class, educational level, or birth cohort? The issue at hand concerns the extent to which family trajectories are sensitive to contextual factors. In order to address it, we run a series of logistic regressions using each trajectory type as response variable and four socio-

demographic dimensions as "predictor" variables: sex, level of education (three levels), birth cohort (five levels) and the socio-economic status (SES) of the father (Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992). Each type, considered in turn as the category of reference, is compared to the whole sample. Note that these regression analyses are used to contextualize rather than to predict the types of trajectories that individuals develop. Independent variables were chosen because they are antecedent to the main course of trajectories.

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Logistic regressions (odds ratios) of six types of cohabitation trajectories

Birth cohorts, as well as level of education and social class of the father, have a significant effect on the probability of belonging to one of the trajectory types (Table 2). Younger cohorts have greater odds of having Solo trajectories and are less likely to follow Parental trajectories, whereas older cohorts have a higher probability to experience a Parental type of trajectory and a lower one to belong to the Conjugal type. Similar results are found concerning levels of education. A higher level of education is associated with greater odds of experiencing Solo and Erratic trajectories and with smaller odds of experiencing Parental trajectories. Lower levels of education are negatively associated with Solo trajectories and present a greater likelihood of Parental trajectories. The experience of parental separation during childhood is equally frequent among the different types of family trajectories concerning sex, level of education and birth cohort. However, it is significantly less frequent among individuals whose fathers were white collars or independent.

Discussion

The family developmental perspective has been severely criticized and somewhat set aside by sociology because of its inability to address the issues raised by the pluralisation of family situations. In this contribution, we focused on empirical

family trajectories of individuals rather than on theoretical criteria stating the stages of development by which every family as a cohesive unit should go. This approach shows that family trajectories have remained patterned and ordered, even though new types of trajectories have emerged in younger cohorts. Indeed, the empirical data do not confirm the extreme pluralisation predicted by individualization theory. In the face of these results, the FLC model should be revised rather than abandoned. Indeed, Parental trajectories that fully match its expectations account for half of all trajectories. Solo and Conjugal trajectories have emerged in recent cohorts but they do not cast in doubt the chronologisation and the ordering postulated by the family development perspective. Single-parent and Recomposed family trajectories also remain highly patterned.

Pluralisation trends are visible from differences between cohorts. Increasing proportions of Solo and Conjugal trajectories show that family development is truncated for a growing number of individuals, for whom partnership without children has become a permanent state. Changes are also visible in the percentage of individuals with divorced or separated parents in the first half of life. In younger cohorts born after 1967, this percentage increases up to 17%, in comparison with three to six percent in older cohorts.

In sum, a large majority of family trajectories remains chronologised and ordered even in younger cohorts. Therefore, late modernity can not be considered as characterized by an extensive pluralisation and individualization of family life but by a new but limited set of trajectory types. A finite number of quite well-defined models of family development structures characterizes this representative sample of individuals from various cohorts. Most of them start their life living with their two biological parents. Then, during childhood or adolescence, parents may divorce, which creates the precondition for either living with a single parent or living with a parent and his or her new partner. Family development may be conceived as an induction tree in which a limited set of turning points (divorce and remarriage of parents, leaving home, moving to live with a partner, becoming a parents, etc.) provide several, but not innumerable branchings. What is realized in actual

cohabitation trajectories is much more standardized than what is made logically possible by the branchings. Pluralisation of life courses has not meant the destructuration of the family life cycle, but rather the partial replacement of a highly predominant model by a larger set of models, with the principal model still dominating.

As we stressed elsewhere (Widmer, 2010), the fact that life trajectories have become more heterogeneous during the last forty years means that a greater variety of family configurations has emerged, with interdependencies existing among a larger and more diversified set of family members. Therefore, changes in the family life cycle have had consequences for the ways in which actual family interactions are shaped up. Family configurations stem from the conjunction of personal trajectories that occurred to a large number of interconnected family members. Therefore, to better understand cohabitational trajectories is important not merely in order to understand the unfolding of family structures through individual lives, but also because these trajectories constitute one major explanatory variable of the ways in which configurations of family interdependencies shape up.

References

Abbott, Andrew (2001). *Time matters. On Theory and Methods.* University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London.

Aisenbrey, S., & Fasang, A. (in press). New life for old ideas: The 'Second Wave' of Sequence Analysis Bringing the 'Course' Back into the Life Course. *Sociological Methods and Research*.

Aldous J. (1996). *Family Careers. Rethinking hte developmental Perspective.* Thousands oaks. Sage.

Aldous, J. (1990). Family development and the life course: two perspectives on family change. *Journal and marriage and the family*, 54, p. 571-583.

Beck, Ulrich (1986), *Risikogesellschaft. Auf dem Weg in eine andere Moderne,* Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/Main.

Cherlin, A. J., & Furstenberg, F. F. (1994). Stepfamilies in the US: a reconsideration. *Annual Review of Sociology*, p. 359-381.

Coontz, S. (1992). *The way we never were: American families and the nostalgia trap*. New York: Basic Books.

Crawford, D. W., & Fischer, J. (1993). Family developmental trajectories: family timing and parent-child relations in young adulthood. *Home economics research journal*, 21, 4, p. 339-357.

Dudek, A. (2007). Cluster quality index for symbolic classification – an examination. In: R. Decker and H. J. Lenz (Eds). *Advances in data analysis*. Berlin: Springer.

Duvall E. (1957) *Family Development*, Philadelphia, Lippincott.

Duvall, E. (1977). *Marriage and family development (5th edition)*. Philadelphia, Lippincott.

Duvall, E., & Miller, B. C. (1985). *Marriage and family development*. New York: Harper & Row

Eklund, S. J. (1980). Life span development and families. Dimensions, 9, 16-19.

Erikson, R., &Goldthorpe, J.H. (1992). *The constant flux: a study of class mobility in industrial societies*. Oxford: Clarendon.

Falicov, C. J. (1988). Family sociology and family therapy contributions to the family development framework: a comparative analysis and thoughts on future trends. In: Celia Jaes Falicov (Ed.). New York London: The Guilford Press. *Family transitions, continuity & change over the life cycle*.

Furstenberg, F. F., Spanier G. (1987). Recycling the Family: Remarriage After Divorce (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage Publications.

Gabadinho, A., Ritschard, G., Studer, M., & Müller, N.S. (2008). *Mining sequence data in R with the TraMineR package: A user's guide* University of Geneva. (http://mephisto.unige.ch/traminer)

Glick, P. C. (1947). The family cycle. *American Sociological Review, 12*(2), 164-174.

Hill, R., & Rodgers, R. (1964). The developmental approach. In H. Christensen (Ed.), *Handbook of marriage and the family* (p. 171.211). Chicago Rand Mc Nally.

Hubert, L.J. and Levine J.R. (1976). Evaluating object set partitions: free sort analysis and some generalizations. *Journal of verbal learning and verbal behaviour*, 15, 549-570.

Kapinus, C. A., & Johnson, M. P. (2003). The utility of family life cycle as a theoretical and empirical tool. *Journal of family issues*, 24, 2, p. 155-184.

Kaufman, L., & Rousseeuw, P. (1990). *Finding Groups in Data* . Wiley-Interscience

Publication, New York.

Kellerhals J. et al. (1981). *Mariages au quotidien*. Lausanne, Favre.

Klein, D. M., & Aldous, J. (1979). Three blind mice: misleading criticisms of the "family life cycle. *Journal of marriage and the family*, vol. 41, 4, p. 689-692.

Krzanowski, W.J., Lai, Y.T. (1988), *A criterion for determining the number of groups in a data set using sum of squares clustering*, "Biometrics", 44, 23-34.

Levin, I. (1993). Families as mapped realities. *Journal of family issues*, 14, 1, p. 82-91.

Lewis, R. A. (1973). A Longitudinal Test of A Developmental Framework for Premarital Dyadic Formation. *Journal of Marriage & the Family, 35*(1), 16-25.

Mattesisch, P., & Hill, R. (1987). Life cycle and family development. In M. B. Sussman & S. K. Steinmetz (Eds.), *Handbook of marriage and the family*, (p. 437-469). New York Plenum.

McPerson, M., Smith-Lovin, L., & Cook, J. M. (2001). Birds of a feather: homophily in social networks. *Annual review of sociology*, 27, p. 415-444.

Mederer, H., & Hill, R. (1983). Critical transition over the family life span: theory and research. *Marriage and family review*, 6, 39-60.

Neugarten, B. L., Moore, J. W., & Lowe, J. C. (1965). Age Norms, Age Constraints, and Adult Socialization. *American Journal of Sociology, 70*(6), 710-717.

Notredame, C., Bucher, P., Gauthier, J.-A., Widmer, E. (2005). *T-COFFEE/SALTT: User Guide and Reference manual*. Software and documentation available at: http://www.tcoffee.org/saltt .

O'Brian, M. (2005). Studying individual and family development: linking theory and research. *Journal of marriage and the family*, 67, p. 880-890.

Parke, R. (1988). Families in life span perspective: a multilevel developmental approach. In E. M. Hetherington, R. Lerner, & M. Perlmutter (Eds.). *Child development in life-span perspective* (p. 159-190). Hillsdalle, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Parsons T. et Bales R.F. (1955) *Family : Socialization and Interaction Process*, New York, The Free Press.

Pasley, K. (1987). Family boundary ambiguity: Perceptions of adult stepfamily family members, In: K. Pasley, M. Ihinger-Tallman. *Remarriage and Stepparenting: Current Research and Theory*, pp. 206-225. New York: Guilford.

R Development Core Team (2009). *R: A Language and Environment for Statistical Computing*. R Foundation for Statistical Computing. URL: http://www.R-project.org.

Reiss, I. L. (1960). Toward a sociology of the heterosexual love relationship. *Marriage and Family Living, 22*(2), 139-145.

Reynolds, P. D. (1971). *A primer in theory construction*. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company.

Rice, J. K. (1994). Reconsidering Research on Divorce, Family Life Cycle, and the Meaning of Family. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 18*(4), 559-584.

Rodgers, R. H., & White, J. M. (1993). Family development theory. In P. G. Boss, W. J. Doherty, R. LaRossa, W. R. Schumm, & S. K. Steinmetz (Eds.), *Sourcebook of family theories and methods: A contextual approach* (pp. 225-254). New York: Plenum Press.

Settersten, R. A., Hagestad, G. O. (1996a). What's the latest? Cultural age deadlines for family transitions. *The Gerontologist*, 36(2), 178-188.

Settersten, R. A. (1999). *Lives in Time and Place - The Problems and Promises of Developmental Science*. Amityville, New York: Baywood Publishing Company, Inc.

Shanahan, Michael J. (2000), Pathways to Adulthood in Changing Societies: Variability and Mechanisms in Life Course Perspective. Annual Review of Sociology, 26, 667-692.

Spanier, G. B., Sauer, W., & Larzelere, R. (1979). An Empirical Evaluation of the Family Life Cycle. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 41*(1), 27-38.

Thomas, W.I., & Thomas, D. S. (1928). *The Child in America: Behavior Problems and Programs.* Knopf.

Widmer E. D. (1999). Family contexts as cognitive networks : A structural approach of family relationships. *Personal Relationships.* Special Issue on Methodological and Data Analytic Advances in the Study of Interpersonal Relationships, 6, 487-503.

Widmer E. D., & La Farga L.-A. (2000). Family Networks: A Sociometric Method to Study Relationships in Families. *Field Methods,* 12, 2, 108-128.

Widmer E. D. (2010). *Family configurations. A structural approach of family diversity.* London, Ashgate Publishing.

Figure 1:Family trajectories of the total sample (100%)

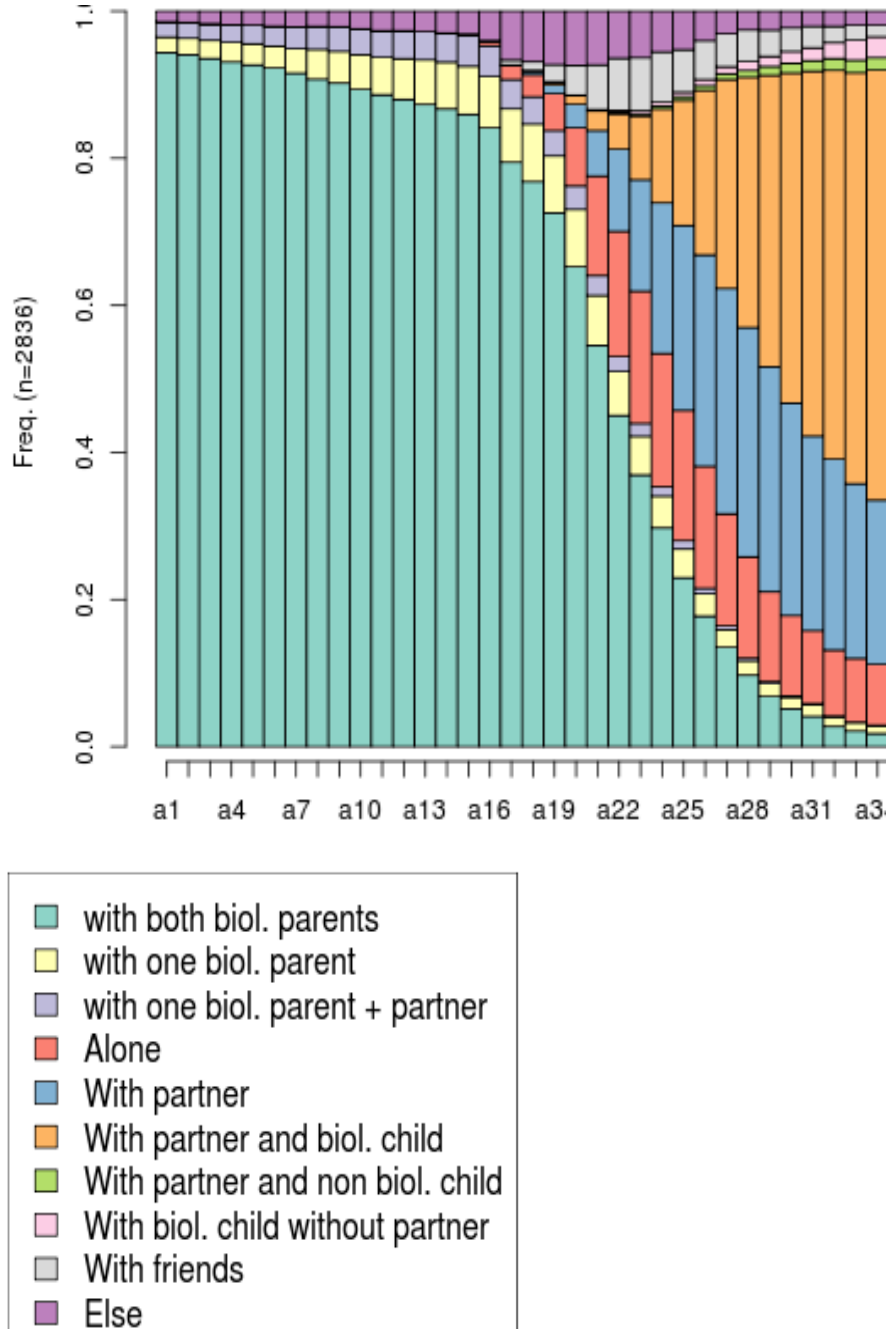

Table 1: One-dimensional types of family trajectories at individual level: Cumulated and total duration of cohabitation statuses

Trajectory type	with both biol. parents	with one biol. parent	with one biol. parent + partner	Al o	With partner	With partner and biol. child	With partner and non-biol. child	With biol. child without partner	With friends	Other	Tot

Trajectory type	with both biol. parents	with one biol. parent	with one biol. parent + partner	Al o	With partner	With partner and biol. child	With partner and non-biol. child	With biol. child without partner	With friends	Other	Tot

Trajectory type	with both biol. parents	with one biol. parent	with one biol. parent + partner	Al o	With partner	With partner and biol. child	With partner and non-biol. child	With biol. child without partner	With friends	Other	Tot

Trajectory type	with both biol. parents	with one biol. parent	with one biol. parent + partner	Al o	With partner	With partner and biol. child	With partner and non-biol. child	With biol. child without partner	With friends	Other	Tot

Trajectory type	with both biol. parents	with one biol. parent	with one biol. parent + partner	Al o	With partner	With partner and biol. child	With partner and non-biol. child	With biol. child without partner	With friends	Other	Tot

Trajectory type	with both biol. parents	with one biol. parent	with one biol. parent + partner	Al o	With partner	With partner and biol. child	With partner and non-biol. child	With biol. child without partner	With friends	Other	Tot

Trajectory type	with both biol. parents	with one biol. parent	with one biol. parent + partner	Al o	With partner	With partner and biol. child	With partner and non-biol. child	With biol. child without partner	With friends	Other	Tot

Trajectory type	with both biol. parents	with one biol. parent	with one biol. parent + partner	Al o	With partner	With partner and biol. child	With partner and non-biol. child	With biol. child without partner	With friends	Other	Tot

Trajectory type	with both biol. parents	with one biol. parent	with one biol. parent + partner	Al o	With partner	With partner and biol. child	With partner and non-biol. child	With biol. child without partner	With friends	Other	Tot

Trajectory type	with both biol. parents	with one biol. parent	with one biol. parent + partner	Al o	With partner	With partner and biol. child	With partner and non-biol. child	With biol. child without partner	With friends	Other	Tot

Trajectory type	with both biol. parents	with one biol. parent	with one biol. parent + partner	Al o	With partner	With partner and biol. child	With partner and non-biol. child	With biol. child without partner	With friends	Other	Tot

Trajectory type	with both biol. parents	with one biol. parent	with one biol. parent + partner	Al o	With partner	With partner and biol. child	With partner and non-biol. child	With biol. child without partner	With friends	Other	Tot

Figure 2: Parental trajectories (54%)

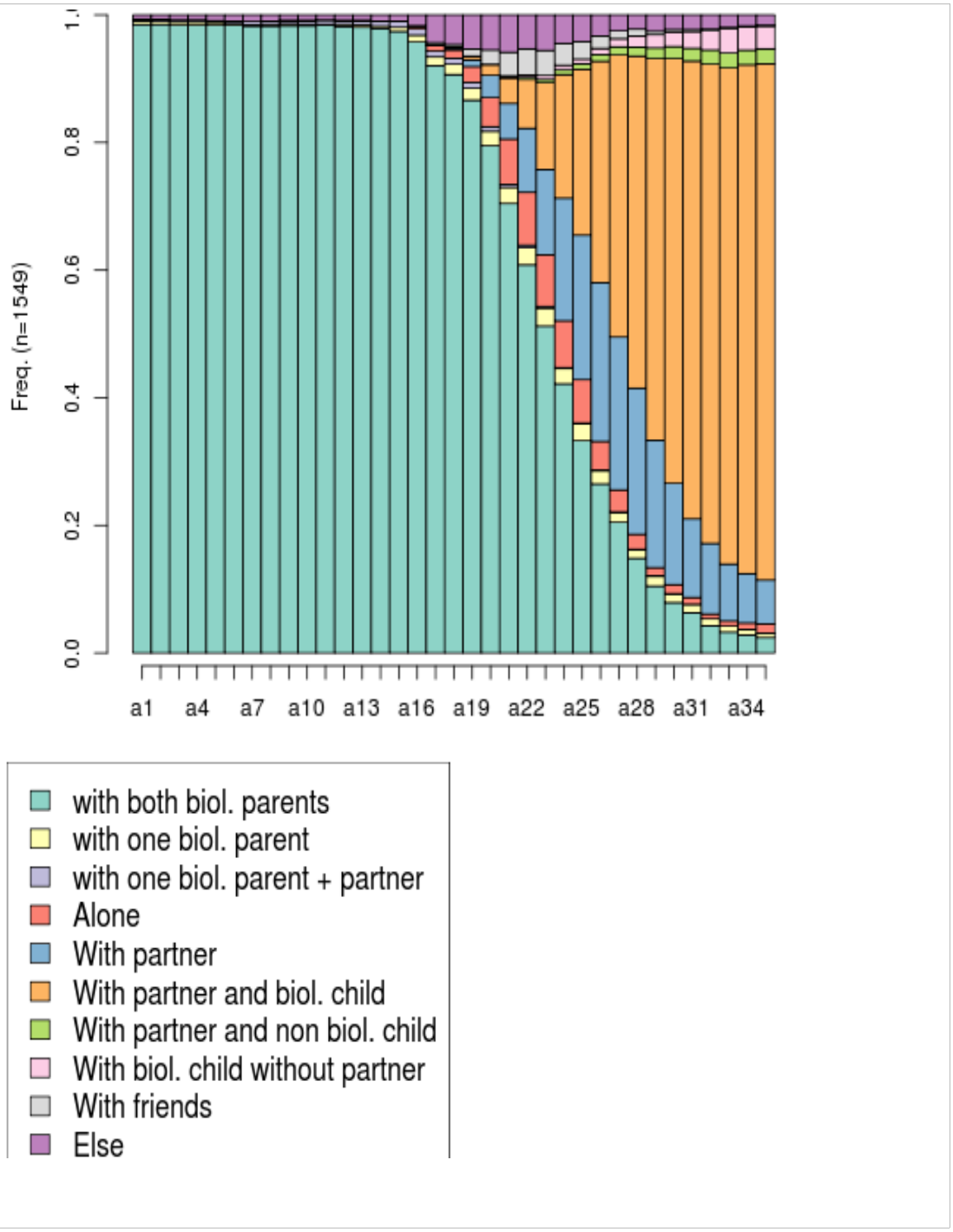

Figure 3: Conjugal trajectories (12 %)

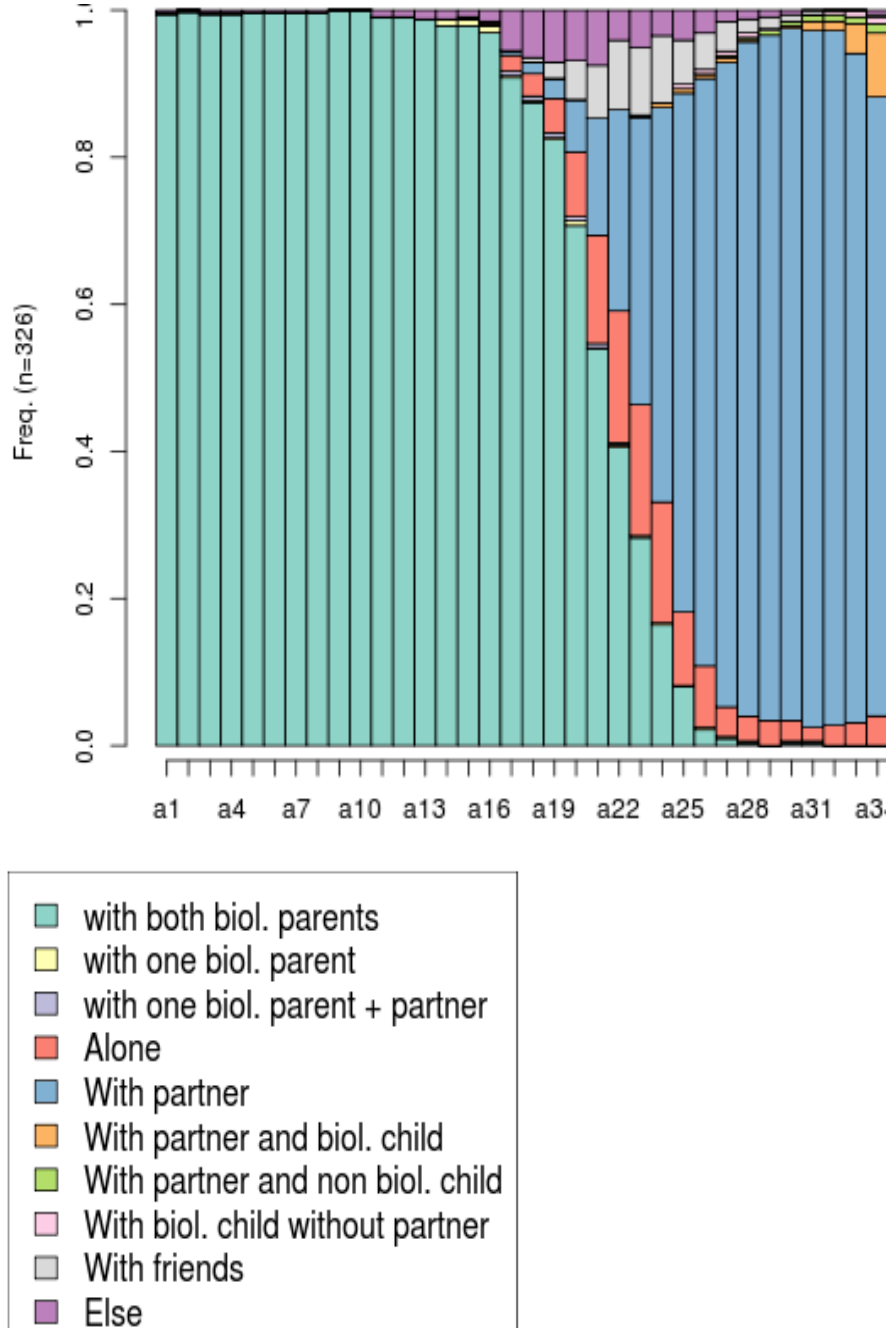

Figure 4: Solo trajectories (18 %)

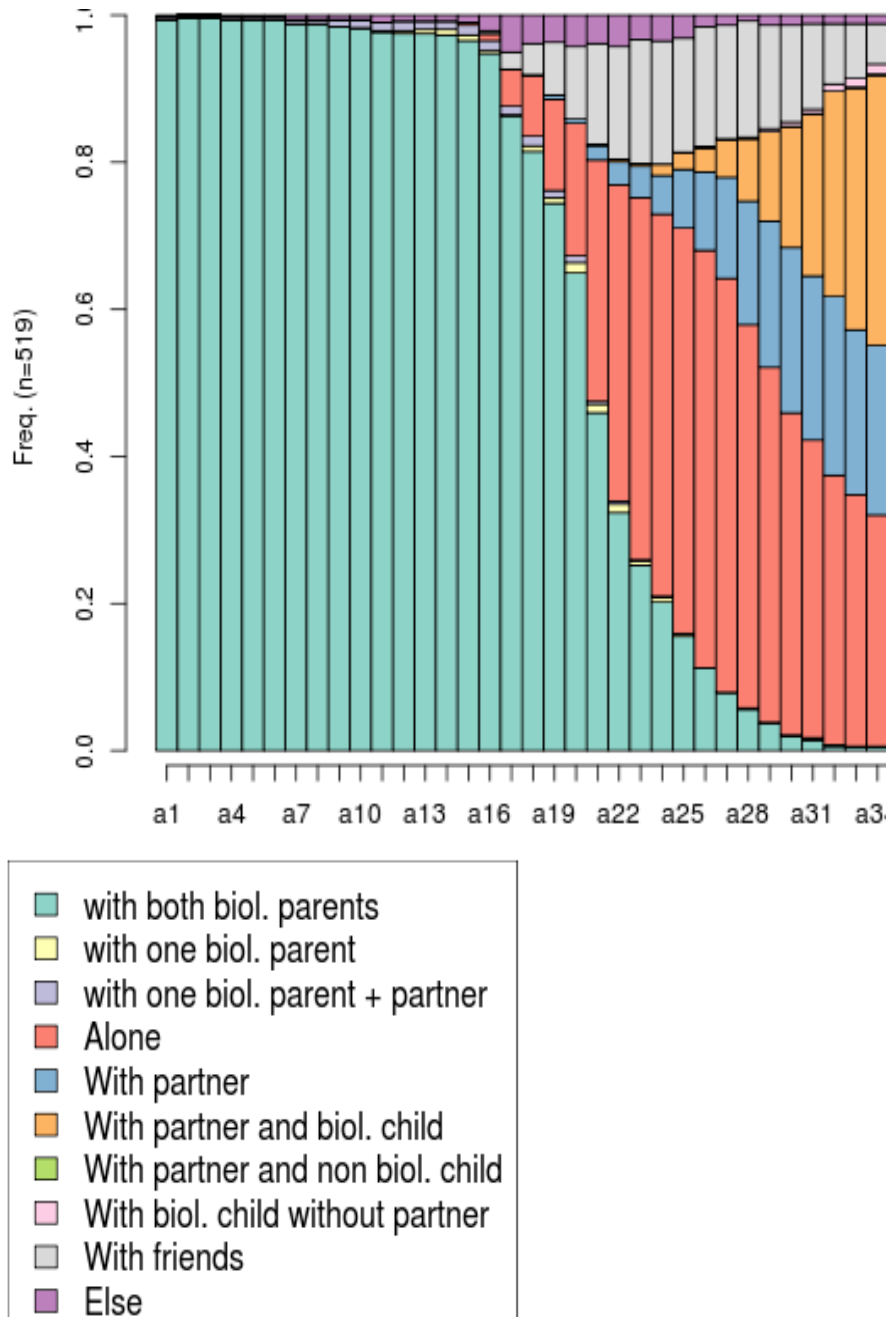
Freq. (n=519)
0.0
0.2
0.4
0.6
0.8
a1
a4
a7
a10
a13
a16
a19
a22
a25
a28
a31
with both biol. parents
with one biol. parent
with one biol. parent + partner
Alone
With partner
With partner and biol. child
With partner and non biol. child
With biol. child without partner
With friends
Else

Figure 5: Step-family in childhood (5 %)

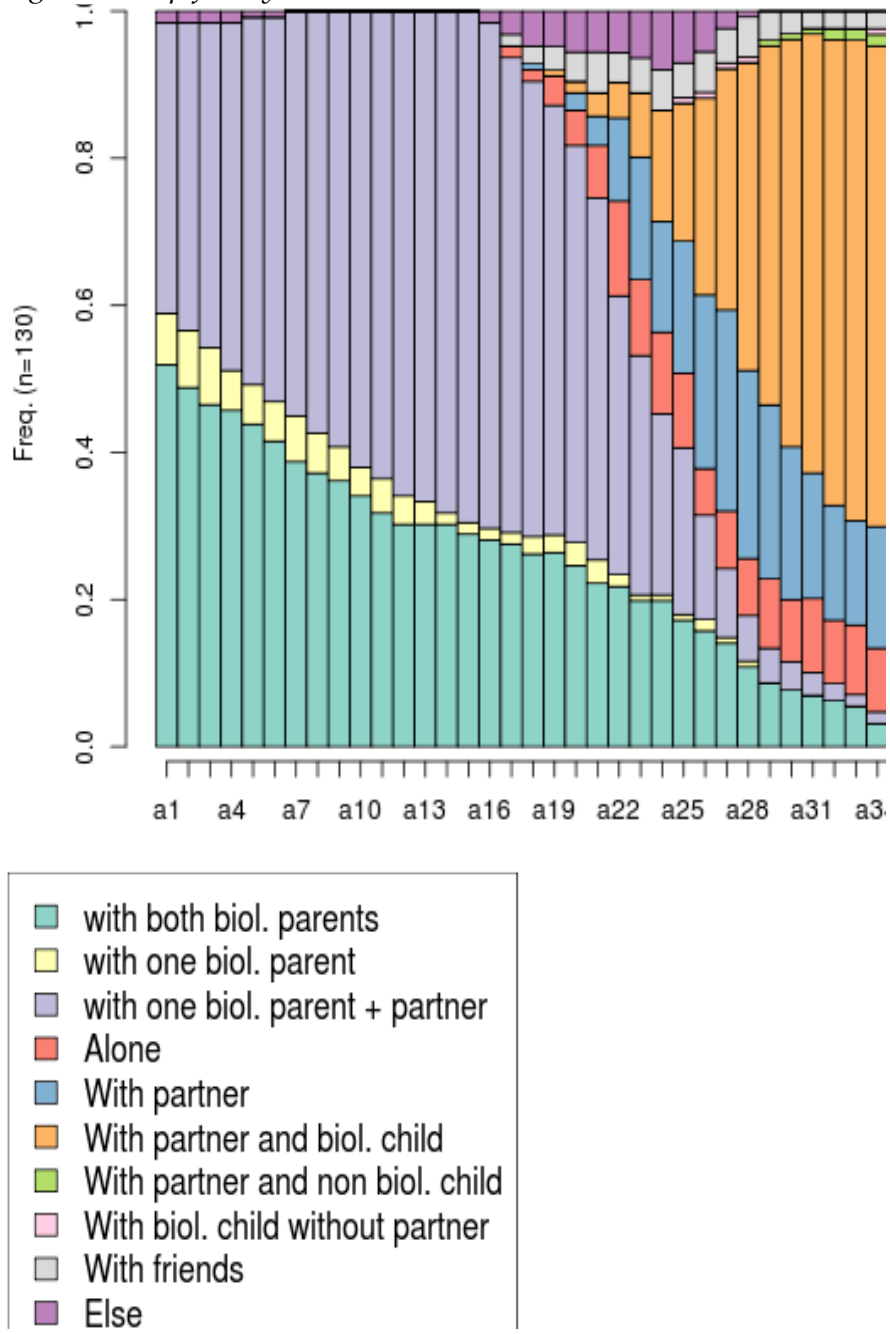

Figure 6: Single-parent family in childhood(8 %)

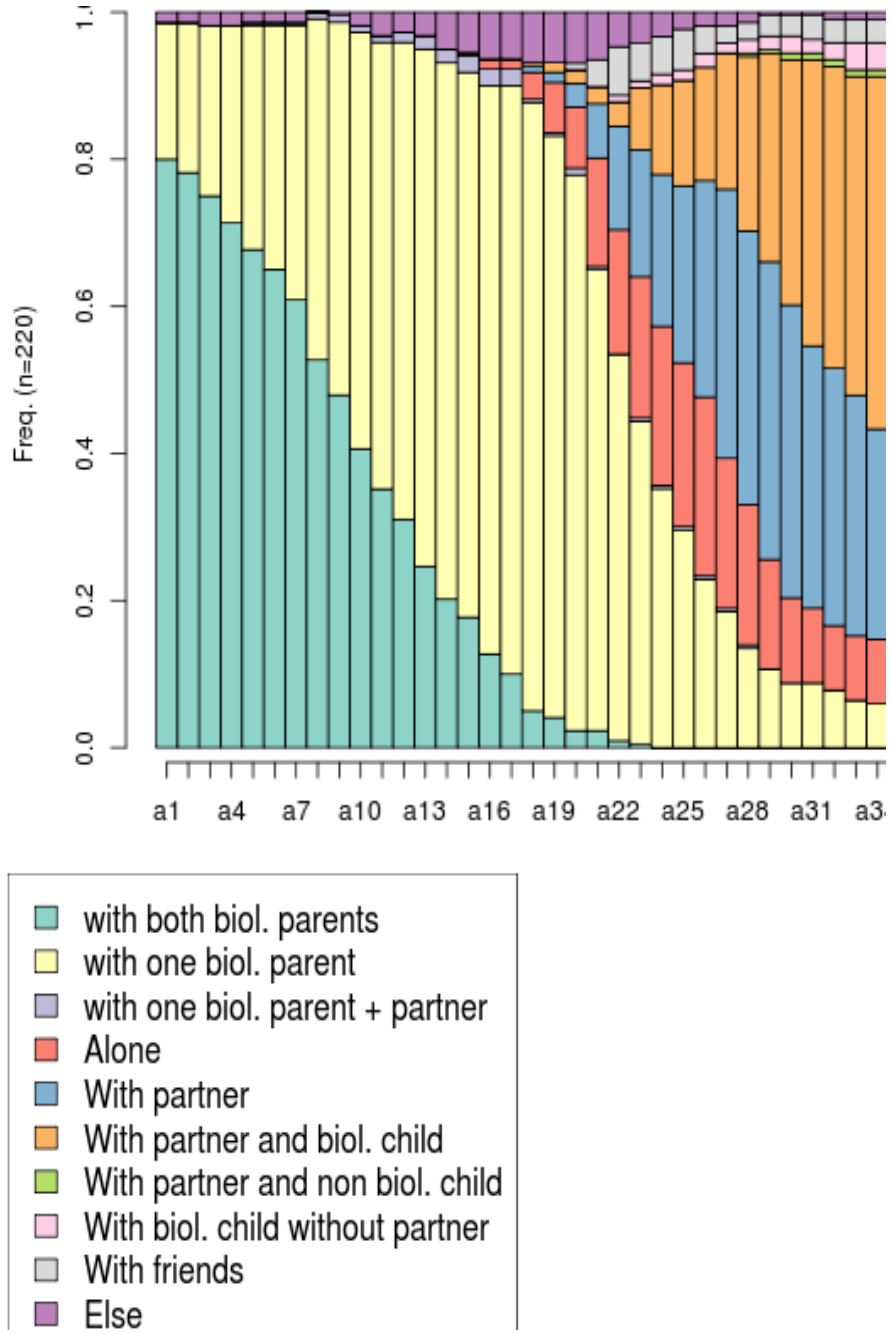

Figure 7: Erratic trajectories (3 %)

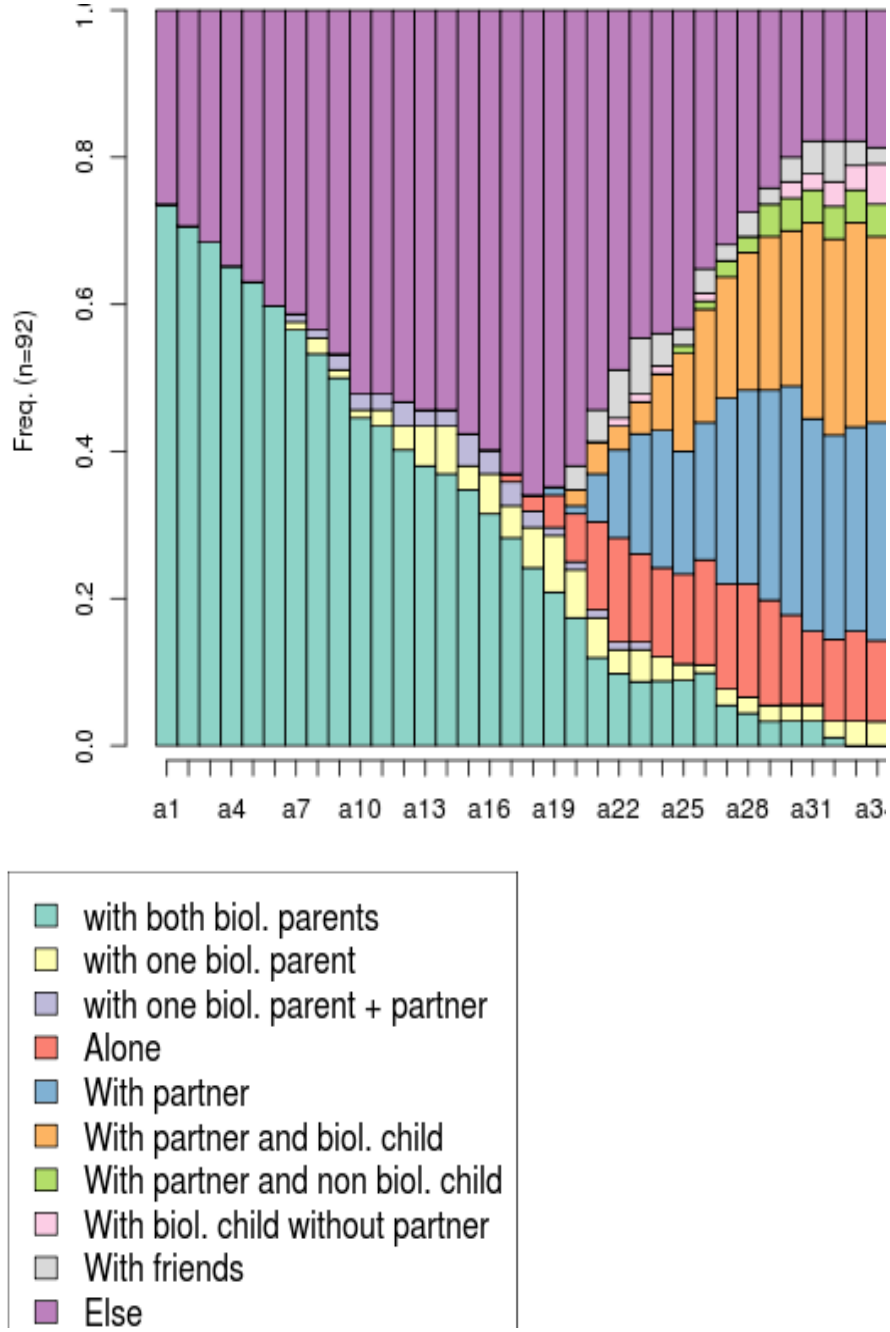

Table 2: Logistic regressions (odds ratios) of six types of cohabitation trajectories on the selected socio-demographic variables

Types of trajectories Explanenda	Parental	Sig.	Erratic	Sig.	Conjugal	Sig.	Solo	Sig.	Step-family in childhood	Sig.	Single parent family in childhood	Sig.
(Intercept)	1.05		0.03	***	0.1	***	0.18	***	0.06	***	0.21	***
SEX (women)	0.98		1.25		1.37	*	0.9		0.84		0.85	
Education 1 (low)	1.25	.	1.5		0.93		0.5	***	1.24		1.12	
Education 2 (middle)	-		-		-		-		-		-	
Education 3	0	***	1.	*	1		1	*	0.94		1.04	

(high)	.72		82	.26		.27				
Cohort 1 (1959-1967)	0.82	*	0.75	1.13		1.36	*	1.18		0.81
Cohort 2 (1950 – 1958)	0.95		1.01	1.04		0.94		1.29		1.08
Cohort 3 (1941 – 1949)	-		-	-		-		-		-
Cohort 4 (1932 – 1940)	1.34	*	0.74	0.65	.	0.87		0.97		0.95
Cohort 5 (1931 and before)	1.38	.	1.52	0.28	**	0.76		1.24		1.12

SES 1 (white collar)	1.39	**	0.67		1.06		1.45	**	0.61	*	0.29	
SES 2 (independent)	1.11		0.78		1.24		1.27		1.16		0.46	**
SES 3 (qualified worker)	-		-		-		-		-		-	
SES 4 (unqualified worker)	1.32	*	0.76		1.46	*	1.14		0.95		0.24	
SES 5 (farmer)	1.53	**	1.21		0.73		1.65	**	0.75		0.09	

***: p<.001; **: p<.01; *: p<.05; . : p< 0.1

SES: Socio-economic status of the respondent's father according to Erickson and Golthorpe (1992) five classes schema.