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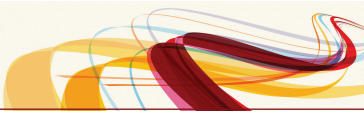
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Different Trends in Marriage and Fertility Behavior for Roman Catholics, German Protestants, and Women without Religious Affiliation in West Germany: An Analysis of Five Birth Cohorts Based on the German General Social Survey

Sonja Schulz¹

Abstract

In this visualization, the author shows that cohort changes in the propensity to get married and bear a child are different for Roman Catholics, German Protestants, and religiously unaffiliated West German women. The data are from the German General Social Survey—Cumulation 1980–2018. Calculations are based on the life-table method (Kaplan-Meier estimates). In general, demographic changes toward a lower tendency to get married and to bear a child start among the religiously unaffiliated and diffuse to the Christian groups over time, with the Catholics being most resistant to change. The different time trends in demographic behavior translate into increasing differences between religious groups across time, which are most pronounced in the cohort born from 1960 to 1969, and tend to decrease again thereafter.

Keywords

marriage, fertility, social demography, religion, trends

Religious groups differ in demographic behavior, such as the propensity to marry and childlessness (McQuillan 2004; Voas 2007; Xu, Hudspeth, and Bartkowski 2005).

However, over the past century there has been a major shift in demographic behavior and a decline of the importance of religion for many people (secularization; see, e.g., Norris and Inglehart 2004). But so far, it has remained largely unexplored whether different religious groups have experienced similar trends in demographic behaviors. Given that churches provide clear proscriptions for family life, I would expect changes in marriage and fertility behavior to be started by the religiously unaffiliated.

The present analyses are based on the German General Social Survey 1980–2018 (GESIS – Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences 2021). The upper panel of Figure 1 shows that across all religious groups, the tendency to marry decreased over time, and marriage age increased. Among Catholics, these differences are least pronounced. The tendency to marry is particularly low among the “nones.” Catholic and Protestant women born between 1933 and 1948

have the highest propensities to marry until age 40, and they married earlier than women born before 1933. With a median marriage age of 22 to 23 years in this cohort, this pattern coincides with the so-called golden age of marriage and the family in the 1950s until the early 1960s in Germany. Thereafter, marriage propensity slowly decreased. However, the religiously unaffiliated show a different time trend: the cohort of women born between 1933 and 1948 did not increase their marriage propensity compared with the cohort born before. Also, the tendency to marry declined more strongly in the birth cohort born from 1949 to 1959.

The bottom panel of Figure 1 shows that the pattern is similar for fertility behavior: the religiously unaffiliated have

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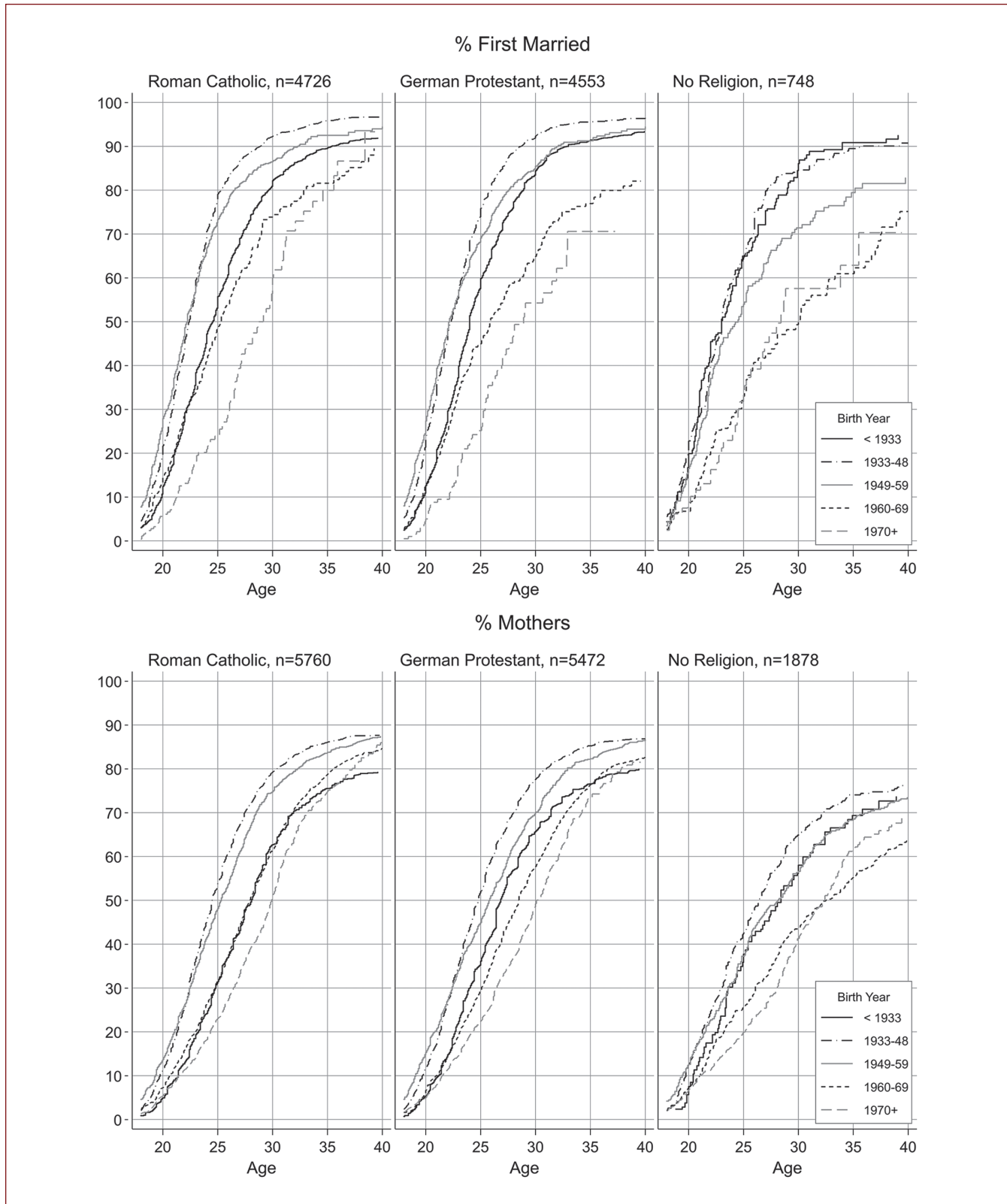


Figure I. Cumulative proportion of ever married West German women (upper panel) and of West German mothers (lower panel) by age and five birth cohorts for Roman Catholics, German Protestants, and the religiously unaffiliated, estimated using the life-table method (Kaplan-Meier estimates).

Source: German General Social Survey 1980–2018 (GESIS – Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences 2021), author's calculations.

Note: Analyses use design weights that take into account the different sampling methods and allow for person-representative calculations. Birth years range from 1892 to 1999. Information to replicate this figure using Stata is available in the Supplemental Material.

the highest propensity to remain childless. The median age at first birth increased across the four youngest birth cohorts for all religious groups. Catholic and Protestant women born between 1933 and 1959 are more inclined to become mothers compared with the oldest cohort. However, among the “nones,” only women born from 1933 to 1948 slightly increase their propensity to become mothers. Also, religiously unaffiliated women born from 1960 to 1969 are most inclined to remain completely childless, while unaffiliated women born thereafter are more likely to postpone first childbirth to higher ages.

The different religious groups were similar regarding the propensity to marry and bear a child for the cohort of women born before 1933. For them, religious commitment, fertility, and marriage were probably so normative that religious affiliation could hardly unfold discriminatory power. Demographic changes toward a lower marriage propensity and greater childlessness tend to start among the “nones” and diffuse to the Christian groups over time. The different trends in demographic behavior translate to increasing differences among religious groups, being most pronounced in the cohort born from 1960 to 1969. The propensity to marry and bear a child converges again in the youngest cohort. It is possible that for this cohort, norms and values of one’s religious group are less important for biographical decisions, which would correspond to the societal trend toward secularization.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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Author Biography

Sonja Schulz is a senior researcher in the Department Survey Data Curation at GESIS Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences. Her current research focuses on family research and social inequality, with a special focus on trends in family formation and marriage dissolution. Recent articles were published in *Criminal Justice Review*, *European Journal of Criminology*, and *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*.