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GENDER, COHABITATION AND MARTIAL DISSOLUTION: ARE CHANGES IN IRISH FAMILY COMPOSITION TYPICAL OF EUROPEAN COUNTRIES?

by

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IRISS-C/I

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Gender, Cohabitation and Marital Dissolution:
Are changes in Irish family composition typical of European countries?

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Introduction

During the 20th century, Western Europe and the United States experienced two demographic trends, knows as the demographic transitions. Though initiated in the 19th century, much of the first demographic transition encompassed a movement from high to low mortality and a decline in fertility rates in the early 20th century (Bourgeois-Pichat, 1981). By the 1930s, the average birth rate was 2 children per woman (Coleman, 2000). After a hiatus of rising fertility rates in the post World War II years, known as the 'baby boom', a second demographic transition commenced in the latter 3rd of the century. This was marked by a further decline in fertility rates and the growth in use of contraceptives and abortion, which enabled the birth of only desired children (Bourgeois-Pichat, 1981). The birth rate has been continually falling since the 1970s and is now below replacement level in many western countries (Chesnias, 1996: Courtney, 1986). In Mediterranean countries, such as Spain and Italy, which are usually labelled as traditional family orientated Catholic countries, fertility rates have been approximately 1.2 children per woman since the early 1990s (Chesnais, 1996). The second demographic transition has also been fuelled by changes in relation to the family unit. "Since 1960 we have seen a weakening of the normative imperative to marry, remain married, to have children, to restrict intimate relations to marriage and to maintain separate roles for males and females" (Thornton, 1988:873). Throughout the western societies, there have been augmented rates of divorce, cohabitation and premarital sex. Marital rates have decreased, accompanied by a higher age at first birth and rising rates of non-marital births (Coleman, 2000; Coleman, 1999). Furthermore there has been increased participation of women in the labour force and a subsequent erosion of the traditional mode of the male breadwinner family (Lewis, 2001; Harding, 1984).

The Republic of Ireland had for much of the 20th century been struggling to complete the initial demographic phase with persistently high fertility rates and a continual reliance on emigration, late marriages and sexual morality to control the population. Amongst comparative studies of social patterns in Europe, Ireland has been considered unique on an array of social indicators (Halman, Petterson & Verwelj, 1999; White, 1999). Firstly, the Irish controlled access to fertility whilst the rest of Europe controlled fertility within marriage (Doak, 1998; O'Connor, 1995). In the 1950s, Ireland had the lowest rate of marriage in Europe (Curtin, 1986). However, by the late 1970s, marriage had become more popular and the average age of bride and groom also decreased from 31 for men and 27 for women in 1960 to 27 for men and 24 for women in 1980[1]. Secondly, the Irish were noted for high fertility levels (White, 1999). Despite the overall fall in European fertility rates in late 20th century, Irish crude birth rates remained high in comparison to other countries. For example, in 1995, the Irish crude birth rate per 1000 was 13.5, while the EU average was 10.8 (Department of Health and Children, 1999). However, completed family sizes decreased over the 20th century. By 1971, the family sizes were commonly between 1 and 6 children in contrast to families being commonly between 4 and 9 children in 1911 (Courtney, 1986). Between 1980 and 1990, Ireland had an average family size of 3.7 children while Italy had 3 children and France had an average family size of 2.7 children (Unesco, 2000). Thirdly, the level of religiosity in Ireland has been considered to be higher than other western countries with the exception of USA, Northern Ireland and depending on the source, Italy or Poland (De Graf & Need, 2000; Halman, Petterson & Verwelj, 1999). It has a strong enactment of

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[1] Numbers taken from Department of Health and Children's Reports: (1) *Report from the Department of Health* (1949 – 1969), (2) *Statistical Information Relevant to the Health Services 1982. Prepared by the Planning Unit, Department of Health* (1970 – 1985) and (3) *Health Statistics* (1986 to 1999).

traditional Catholic family values (Halman, Petterson & Verwelj, 1999). Catholic ideology had dominance within Irish nationalism where Roman Catholicism acquired particular authority as a channel for national sentiments (Coleman, 1999). The formation of the state in the 1920s placed the family unit at the core of the Irish social system (Fahey & McLaughlin, 1999). As a result, Ireland continued to outlaw contraceptives, abortion, homosexuality and divorce long after other West European countries had permitted them (Ardagh, 1994).

In the early 1990s, Irish society experienced a watershed in sexual morality. There was an explosion of new legislation allowing the wide availability of contraceptives, the decriminalisation of homosexuality and the right to information about abortion (Hug, 1999). In 1995, divorce was granted on the grounds of four years separation. Previously, broken marriages had been commonplace with 37,200 couples reported as being separated in 1986 (Kilfeather, 1999). After the legalisation of divorce in 1995, this number rose to 87,800 people recorded as being separated in the 1996 census (Hug, 1999; Kilfeather, 1999). The authority of the Catholic Church on issues of family and sexuality diminished rapidly and the economic boom and exposure to the overall trend of sexual permissiveness in western societies heralded a more secularised Irish society. There was a rise in age at first marriage and an increase in the number of births outside marriage. In 1978, only 4.2% of all births were non-marital, but by 1998, 28.3% of all births were outside marriage[2]. Such an increase occurred when the marital rate and the fertility rate fell substantially (See Figure 1). Before it had even finished its first demographic transition, Ireland was experiencing its second and Irish demographic behaviour was argued to be becoming more typical of European patterns (Coleman, 1999; White 1999; O'Connor, 1995).

This paper will attempt to examine Irish family practices since the instigation of the second demographic transition in the early 1990s. The aim is to explore whether the governing theories about changes in the patterns of family formulation in Europe are applicable to Ireland. In particular, the interest is in the factors that predict marital dissolution. It is maintained that divorce or separation strikes the heart of Irish Catholic ideology of the family unit and attempts to measure martial dissolution can shed some light on whether Irish demographic behaviours have become similar to those of its European counterparts. This paper employs data from the European Community Household Panel which enables an exploration of the various family structures that co-exist in the Irish population through both a cross-national and longitudinal perspective from 1994 to 2000. In the first part of the paper, Irish family compositions are described and compared with four other European countries: Belgium, France, Italy and the Netherlands. The focus is on two widely documented changes in family composition: diversification of family types and cohabitation. In the second section, a life event approach is used to clarify what factors affect marital dissolution for women such as generational effects, presence of children and age at first marriage. For assessing marital dissolution, the focus will be on all women who were married by the first wave of the ECHP survey in 1994. This enables a tracking of time to marital dissolution or censoring.

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[2] Numbers taken from Department of Health and Children's Reports: (1) *Report from the Department of Health* (1949 – 1969), (2) *Statistical Information Relevant to the Health Services 1982. Prepared by the Planning Unit, Department of Health* (1970 – 1985) and (3) *Health Statistics* (1986 to 1999).

Figure 1
Graphs showing crude birth rates per 1000 and marital rates per 1000 for Ireland.
Data compiled from the Department of Health and Children's annual statistical reports.

Year

Year

4
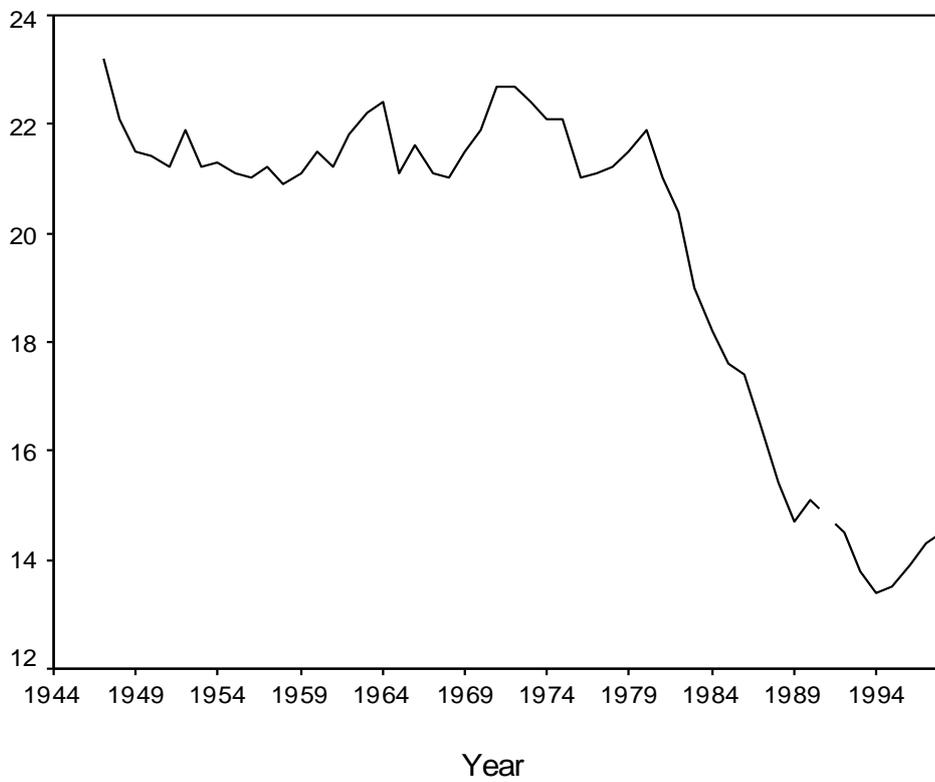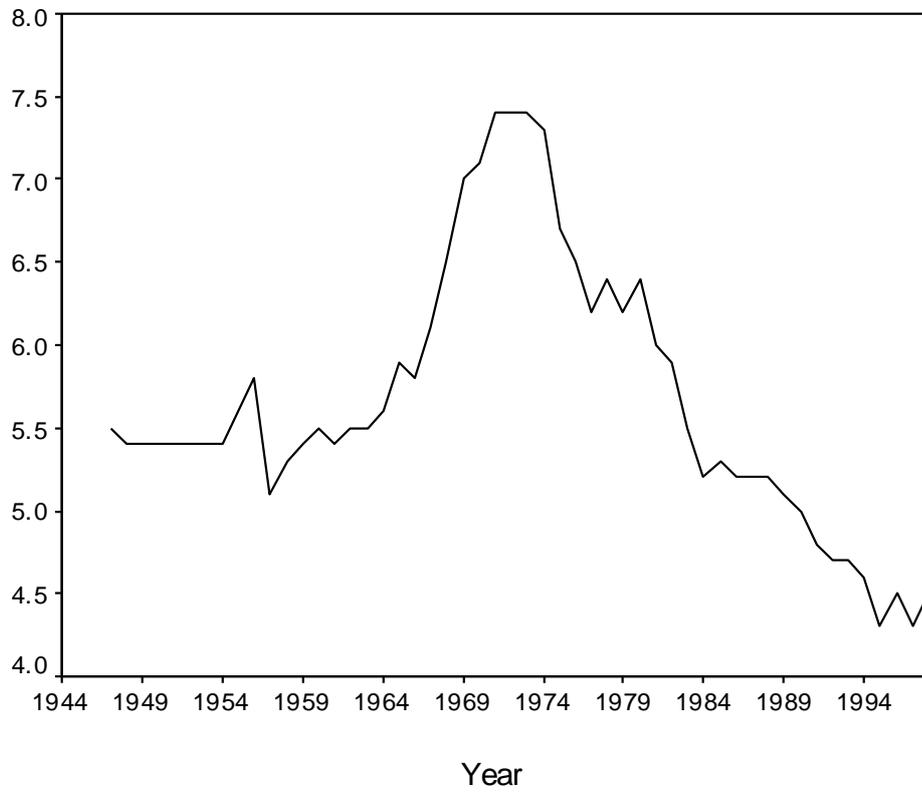
Family and Marital Dissolution

Since the 1970s, there has been a decline in marriage in Western European countries. Such a decline has been linked to increased popularity of cohabitation and contraception and to changes in gender roles in the family (Oinonen, 2004). A major effect has been the increase in married women's workforce participation, which has been accompanied by delays in timing of marriage and declines in marital stability. Women's workforce participation means increased relative contributions to household income and increased power in the marital relationship (Williams, 2003). Women no longer are as financially or socially as dependent on their husbands (Oinonen, 2004). As women's workforce participation increased, the economic barriers to leaving strained marriages weakened (Williams, 2003). However, entering and exiting martial unions entails a different balance of rewards and costs for women and men (Williams & Umberson, 2004). Men for instance, experience better health benefits from marriage than women and women are affected less by the strains of marital dissolution than men (Williams & Umberson, 2004; Williams, 2003). Despite recent research indicating that childcare has become less gender segregated (Clarke & Joshi, 2002; Sullivan, 2000), women continue to assume the burden of parental and household responsibilities. This results in an unequal division of domestic labour between women and men with women gaining less from marriage than men (Oinonen, 2004).

Employment status has been strongly linked to presence of children in the house (there is more devotion to childcare by mothers who were not working fulltime). Using the ISSP (1988) dataset on family, Harding (1989) reported that only 11% of Irish women worked in a full-time job with school age children and only 14% were employed full time with children under the school age. The percentages were similar for Irish women with part-time jobs. This was in stark contrast to other western countries, such as Germany and the USA (Harding, 1989). Research in the UK has shown that women's paid work is affected by female responsibility for domestic and childcare tasks. Women tend to chose jobs which do not interfere too much with their domestic obligations (Morris, 2004). Part-time and other forms of atypical work are popular with women in EU countries as women seek to balance work and family life. Paid employment raises the pressure on informal care. Children are time intensive to mothers so higher labour supply depresses fertility resulting in smaller family sizes. Additionally, workforce participation delays timing of children (Gershuny & Brice, 1994).

It should be pointed out that women's increased participation in the workforce is not a cause for declining marriage and fertility. Family is not an unchanging institution. Throughout history, it has evolved to meet the requirements of changing social and economic circumstances (Scott, 1990). In many western European countries today, two incomes are necessary to support a family or to set up a household. Oinonen (2004) discovered that in Finland and Spain employment and income were important for both men and women as two incomes ensured a realistic possibility of establishing a common household and a family. Unstable employment prospects and longer time spent in education were seen to have implications for timing of childbirth and family sizes. Job instability resulted in inability to plan for the future and postponement and even rejection of commitments such as marriage and childbearing (Oinonen, 2004).

Numerous studies in the 1970s and 1980s demonstrated that the likelihood of marital disruption is greatest in the first few years of marriage and declines thereafter (Morgan, Lye & Condran, 1988). Coleman (2000) reported that 24% of the marriages that took place in

Britain in 1983 had failed after just 10 years. Explanations have been put forth emphasising the role of the selection process with stronger marriages having longer duration and that the stability of marriage relies on the similarity in reasons from both partners for remaining married. Heaton (1991) demonstrated that there was a declining risk of dissolution after several years of marriage. Couples adapt to one another over time and share a common experience which strengthened the marital bond in later years (Heaton & Call, 1995; Heaton, 1991). The arrival and aging of children also has important implications for marital stability with a positive correlation between number of children and martial duration (Heaton, 1990; Lillard & Waite, 1993; Morgan, Lye & Condran, 1988; Rankin & Manker, 1985). Parenthood is seen to increase the amount of obligations and attachments to the children as well as to each other. This appears to create emotional, legal and financial barriers to divorce (Morgan, Lye & Condran, 1988).

Marital stability increases with the wife's age at marriage but husband's age at marriage has been shown to have little influence once the effects of other variables were controlled (Heaton & Call, 1995). It has been argued that age at first marriage is a proxy for a woman's preparedness for marriage. Women who marry early may be less prepared for married life than women who wait to marry (Davis & Greenstein, 2004). They have had a short marital search and they may also be more likely to romanticise marriage. This could lead them to choose the wrong partners. Women who marry at a later age are more realistic about what married life can provide for them and what they want from a marital union (Davis & Greenstein, 2004). Irish women have been surrounded by the Catholic ideology of the traditional breadwinner family and a cultural emphasis on the woman being at the core of the family unit. Irish couples may have traditionally married later in life than in other nations but they typically had long marital durations and large families. Sanctity of marriage was publicly respected and it took two referenda on divorce, with the second only narrowly legalising it as the Family Law (Divorce) 1996 Act. Although it was intertwined with other political issues, there is a contention that marriage is for life, irrespective of marital difficulties. Irish couples can only divorce after 4 years of separation (Coleman, 1999). The emphasis is therefore on the Republic of Ireland and whether the experiences of martial instability are similar for Irish women as for women in other European countries. Given that separation and divorce were only legalised in the mid 1990s, it is an opportune moment to examine this aspect if Irish demographic behaviours is becoming more typical of European patterns.

Data and Methods

The European Community Household Panel (ECHP) is a longitudinal survey which ran from 1994 to 2001. It involved annual interviewing of a representative panel of households and individuals in member states of the European Union. Individual and household level data were collected regarding income, employment, health, education, housing and living conditions. The ECHP offers a number of advantages. Firstly, its standardised methodology yields comparable information across countries which allows for the examination between and within countries. This was appropriate for the descriptions of Irish family types and cohabitation where snapshots of 1994 and 2000 could be compared with other EU countries. Secondly, it is a multi-point prospective panel design. This enables the tracking of changes at both individual and aggregate levels (Menard, 1991). Temporal order of life events can be identified and long and short term outcomes examined (De Vaus, 2001). For example, changes in a martial relationship over time can be pursued such as when a couple first live together, the birth of a child etc. One thing to note is that longitudinal studies suffer from

'dropouts' – i.e. people who leave the study before it is completed. These 'dropouts' may be different from those who remain and this can affect the final sample's external validity (De Vaus, 2001). The ECHP attempts to minimise these effects by constantly renewing the sample through appropriate follow up procedures. For example, people who move or form new households are followed up at their new location and children born to sampled women are included as part of the study population. This enables the sample to reflect demographic changes over time and to remain representative of the population over time.

Since the purpose of this paper is to investigate marital dissolution, the ECHP is conducive to using an event history approach. This approach focuses on the rate at which life events occur, such as marriage, birth of first child and marital separation and timing of events, for example, age at first marriage and duration from marriage to separation (Heaton & Call, 1995). So it can be used to study patterns and correlates of events in a sample of individuals over time (Yamaguchi, 1991). The event history technique of discrete time modelling was deemed suitable for modelling duration dependence as this is an analysis dealing with a small number of intervals and time units of years (Heaton & Call, 1995; Allison, 1984). It is also useful for looking at unrepeated events of a single kind like marital dissolution of first marriage (Yamaguchi, 1991. Discrete time modelling incorporates two important elements: risk set and hazard rate. The risk set consists of the individuals who are at risk of event occurrence at each point in time (Allison, 1984). At the end of each year, the risk set is diminished by the number of those who experienced marital dissolution in that year. The hazard rate is an unobserved variable in discrete time modelling yet it controls both the occurrences and timing of events (Allison, 1984). It is the probability that an event will occur at a particular time to a particular individual given that the individual is at risk at that time. Here the hazard rate is the probability of separation within a particular year for those who have not yet experienced it. According to Allison (1984) there are usually reasons to suspect that the hazard will change autonomously over time. There could be a long-term decline in hazard rate as individuals become more invested in a marriage and hence there are higher costs of leaving marriage.

In discrete time modelling, the observation period is divided into a number of intervals with a separate unit of analysis for each interval (Heaton & Call, 1995). From the 7 waves (1994 to 2000), a data set was constructed up to the 7th wave on wave transition for each respondent. This creates an observation for each year of marriage for each respondent. Thus someone who remained married through the 7 years would contribute 7 observations. A binary marital dissolution variable was created. When marital dissolution occurred in the interval, it was coded 1 and 0 in all other intervals. If the respondent is widowed within the period, the case is treated as censored, i.e. intervals are included up to the censorship. Logistic regression was used to predict likelihood of dissolution:

$$\text{Log } [P(t)/1\text{-}P(t) = a(t) + b_1x_1 + b_2x_2(t)]$$

P(t) = probability that an individual has an event at time t, given that the individual is still at risk of an event at time t.
a(t) = 7 different constants, one for each of the 7 years observed. Constants are estimated by including a set of dummy variables in specified mode.

Discrete time modelling was developed in the computer package of STATA and the logit analysis was carried out in SPSS.

Analysis is based on 30139 women who were married at the time of wave 1 and interviewed at wave 7. The focus is on women who are in their first marriage as they are in the risk set

until the marriage is dissolved either by divorce or separation. All first marriages observed during the panel period are included irrespective of when they began. Models include as covariates the standard predictors of marital dissolution including age at marriage, duration of marriage, employment, education as well as country and cohort. Age at marriage was computed from subtracting the variable for 'birth date' from 'date of last changed marital status'. The countries used for comparison in this study were the Netherlands and the Catholic countries of France, Italy and Belgium. These countries were chosen as they have more established legislation for divorce and separation and offer a good comparison with a country that has only recently legalised divorce. Additionally, in 2000, whilst Ireland and Italy shared the same divorce rate of 0.7 per 1,000, France had 2 per 1,000 and Netherlands 2.3. Belgium had the highest rate in the European Union with 2.9 per 1,000 (Eurostat, 2001). Country was included as an explanatory variable in the logit model rather than conducting separate logit models fore each country for two reasons. Firstly, it was felt that the separate models would yield too small a number per model to significant detect any effects on marital dissolution. Secondly, a country can be seen to be a set of national and cultural characteristics. Since the purpose is to examine Ireland by cross-national comparison, including the variable country would help to detect national differences.

Using birthdates, respondents were grouped according to birth cohort – 1940s, 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. A dummy variable was created for country with France as the base category. A dummy cohort variable was created with those born in 1930s and earlier as base category. Cohort was included to see if there were generational differences in likelihood of marital dissolution. Dummy variables were also made for employment status (base category is unpaid family worker), weekly hours worked in main job (base category is 'less than 20 hours a week') and educational level reached (base category is primary level reached). Marital duration was calculated at wave 1 and incremented by 1 year in each subsequent interval until dissolution or censorship. This gives us the effects of marital duration at a given point in the marriage on the likelihood of dissolution in the following year. Income and wages were not included in the models as they were not standardised across countries.

Effects of children on marital separation were measured by number of children in the household under the age of 16 and number of weekly hours spent in child care. The former variable was formed by merging information from the household and personal files on births per year, number of people in household, existence of children aged less than 12 in household and existence of children aged 12 to 15 years. Number of children was treated as being cumulative, with each birth following wave 1 being added to the total number of children at wave 1. This covariate was made binary (no child/1+children) rather than treating it as a time dependent variable. This is due to the covariate being highly likely to have a negative coefficient i.e. indicating that those who have a child in marriage are less likely to become divorced. Instead, it is the dependent variable that affects the covariate as the longer the duration of marriage, the longer the risk period for having a child in marriage (Yamaguchi, 1991). A dummy variable was then created for this binary variable with the base category being 1 or more children under 16 living in the household. Time spent caring for children was also recoded as a dummy variable, allowing comparisons with the base category of spending more than 28 hours per week in childcare. Number of births in household per year was recoded as a binary variable with 1 if it happened in a year and 0 if it did not. This however, did not have an effect on events.

Changes in Family Composition

Family Types

A household refers to the composition and identity of household members and is considered to be a site for the provision of social integration and social support for the household members (Buck & Scott, 1994). Families and households are not the same. Households may contain people who are not in family relationships and families can extend beyond a single household (Buck & Scott, 1994). However, the majority of households are family households, i.e. a household with children and their custodian or custodians. This invests household relations with the norms, histories and emotions that characterise family relationships (Hughes & Waite, 2002). Household interactions are structured by household-based social roles, such as child, spouse or parent. Expectations and obligations are relatively well-defined and they shift over the life course – e.g.: role of parent to a child is different to that to a teenager and later an adult. The household can also be viewed as an economy, comprising of market work, home production and consumption, with household members contributing to these in varying degrees (Hughes & Waite, 2002). As a result the household is a major site for observing changes in family.

Over the past 3 decades, family life has changed dramatically. There is a greater diversity of family types. There are more households headed by cohabiting couples and an increasing number of children are living outside the conventional two parent nuclear family: with a lone parent or in a step-family or with same-sex parents. Another major trend in the late 20th century has been the rise of births outside marriage (Coleman, 2000). Because of the later age at first marriage, a higher rate of divorce and lower rates of remarriage, women spend a greater percentage of their reproductive years outside marriage. This increases the probability of non-marital birth. In 1996, more than one child in three was born outside a marital union in England and Wales (Coleman, 2000). Contrary to popular belief, the majority of non marital births do not occur to teenagers. In the US, non-marital births mostly occur to women in their 20s, with teen births only accounting for 30% (Driscoll et al, 1999). Increases in family break-up and transition from one family type to another have also been identified. Children may experience a number of different family types before reaching adulthood. For example, a child may be born to a cohabiting couple, spend time in a household headed by a lone parent before the parents either reconcile or form other cohabiting or marital unions. Recent research has implied that there are implications of family transitions for health, education attainment and behaviour of the children and risks of social disadvantage (Clarke & Joshi, 2002; Driscoll et al, 1999; Jonsson & Gahler, 1997; Morgan, Lye & Condran, 1988).

Figure 2 shows the average household sizes for each country for 1994 and 2000. For both years the average Irish household size is slightly larger than for the other countries: 3.6 people in 1994 and 3.2 people in 2000 compared to approximately 2.6 for Belgium, 2.5 people for France and Netherlands and 3 people for Italy. In terms of proportions, 60.2% of Dutch households in 1994 had 2 people or fewer per household whilst Belgium and France had 53.8% and 57% respectively. In 2000, these remained more or less stable: 61% in Netherlands, 57.5% in Belgium and 58.9% for France. This is in contrast with 34.7% of Irish households in 1994 and 42.1% in 2000 having 2 or fewer people. Irish households also demonstrate the largest range of numbers per households with households up to 13 people (0.1% for both years). Italy had a small proportion of households with 2 or less people with 36.1% in 1994, though this also increased to 40.7% in 2000. As previously mentioned, households may not be synonymous with family units. Indeed, in Ireland, it is common for students or other young adults to rent houses in groups rather than solely occupy small apartments. This helps to augment household sizes. For all countries, a couple with children

formulates the largest percentage of households for both years. However, for both Italy and Ireland, the proportion is greatest relative to the other types of households (about 57% in 1994, although for Ireland, this had fallen to just under 50% in 2000). France, Netherlands and Belgium had 90% or less for both time frames. These 3 countries show a more even spread throughout the different types of households, such as single occupants under 65 years old, couples without children, lone parents, elderly couples and single occupant over 65 years of age. Percentages of household types that consisted of couples cohabiting or married without children and single people under 65 years living alone were higher in these 3 countries than in Ireland and Italy. This indicates that perhaps in the Catholic countries of Ireland and Italy, households are more family oriented.

Figure 2
Average household size in each country for 1994 and 2000 (data from ECHP)
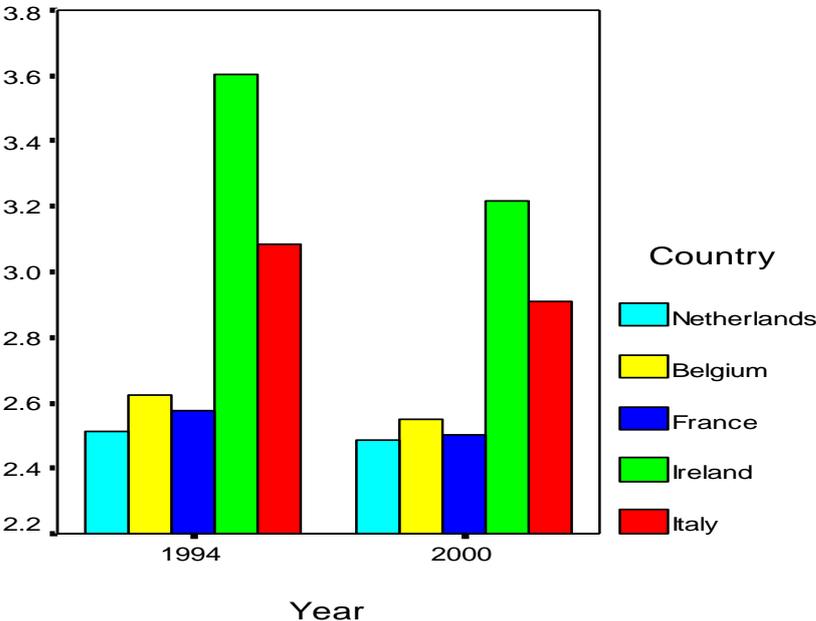
Incidence of lone parents was small with only 9.2% of Dutch family units, 12% Belgian, 12.7% French, 5.1% Italian and 10.4% Irish families (not households) reporting having at least one dependent child in 2000. Table 1 illustrates the proportions of lone parents and couples who have children living with them (i.e. children aged 12 and younger). Overall 28% of those who headed a household as a lone parent reported having 1 or more children under the age of 12 living with them. Though this varied between countries from 13.3% in Italy to 37.6% in Netherlands, this was much lower than expected. Couples (either cohabiting or married) reported a much higher percentage of having young children living with them. Overall, 53.6% of households headed by a couple had children aged 12 and younger living with them. This coincides with other research that most non-marital births are to cohabiting unions rather than lone mothers. Coleman (2000) reports 78.1% of all non-births in England and Wales in 1996 had joint registration by the parents. It appears that the presentation of a lone parent headed household may occur at a later stage of childhood, i.e. after age 12. Perhaps when a cohabiting couple spilt or couples divorce. Wall (1997) found that the incidence of lone parenthood increased rapidly during early adulthood and began to decline when women reached their late 40s and men their fifties, i.e. when children begin to leave their parental home. Rates of lone parenthood rise again for men and women when aged 70

and older. These cases are usually widowed with an unmarried child. However, this accounts for no more than 1 in 20 for men and 1 in 10 for women (Wall, 1997).

Table 1
Proportions of households headed by lone parents and couples who have children less than 12 years old

Country	Lone Parent 1+ children < 12	Lone Parent No children < 12	Couple 1+ children < 12	Couple No children < 12
Netherlands	37.6% (83)	62.4% (138)	59.8% (1004)	40.2% (674)
Belgium	31.2% (63)	68.8% (139)	59.2% (570)	40.8% (393)
France	36.5% (144)	63.5% (250)	62.3% (1207)	37.7% (731)
Ireland	29.3% (56)	70.7% (135)	48.8% (452)	51.2% (475)
Italy	13.3% (58)	86.7% (377)	44.4% (1358)	55.6% (1700)
Total	28% (404 households)	72% (1039 households)	53.6% (4591 households)	46.4% (3973 households)

Cohabitation

It can be difficult to assess levels of cohabitation in Europe. Often it is included with marriage in the measurement of marital status in surveys – "Married or living as married". Marriage and heterosexual cohabitation are different institutions with different expectations attached to them by participants and others, with different behaviour dynamics. Cohabitation can lead to marriage and from the point of view of household structures, can have similar functions to marriage, particularly where children are concerned.   Recent surveys like the ECHP have included separate measures for cohabitation. Table 2 illustrates the proportion of women who are cohabiting with a partner by marital status for each country in 2000. Again, there is a marked difference between Ireland and Italy and the other three countries. For both Italy and Ireland, 96.7% and 96.6% of couples living together were married. This contrasts with 83.6% Dutch couples, 86.7% Belgian and 84.3% French.   In Spain and Italy, the majority of women aged 25 to 29 were more likely to commence their first partnership at marriage (Kiernan, 2001).   Younger cohorts of Spaniards are increasing delaying residential independence, with a majority remaining with their families of origin until their thirties (Tobio, 2001). For the rest of Europe, only about 20% of women between 25 and 29 marry directly (Kiernan, 2001). Coleman (2000) and Buck & Scott (1994) found that in Britain during the 1980s and 1990s, cohabitation delayed marriage rather than replacing it as a stated expectation of most young people. Furthermore, cohabitation has been shown to be viewed by many people as an alternative to single life rather than as a substitute for marriage (Rindfuss & Vanden Heuvel, 1990).

Table 2

Percentage of cohabiting women by marital status in 2000 by country

Country	Never married	Separated	Divorced	Widowed	Married
Netherlands	13% (441)	0	2.7% (92)	0.7% (23)	83.6% (2831)
Belgium	8.9% (145)	0.4% (7)	3.3% (53)	0.7% (11)	86.7% (1409)
France	12.8% (445)	0	2.2% (77)	0.6% (22)	84.3% (2923)
Ireland	2.8% (36)	0.5% (6)	0.1% (1)	0.1% (1)	96.6% (1264)
Italy	2.1% (99)	0.5% (21)	0.4% (17)	0.4% (19)	96.7% (4503)

The prevalence of cohabitation has grown steadily over the last 25 years of the 20th century throughout western countries (Haskey, 2001; Gershuny & Brice, 1994). In the USA, between 1970 and 1993, the number of households with cohabiting heterosexual couples grew from 523 thousand to 3.5 million (Kalish, 1994). It was estimated that 60% of unions formed in early 1990s would be cohabitations (Teachman, 2003). There is a variation in levels of cohabitation across Europe. Cohabitation is widespread in Scandinavian countries, while it was still a rare phenomenon in the Southern European countries of Spain and Italy (Oinonen, 2004; Kiernan, 2001). According to the 1996 Irish census, 3.9% of Irish family units consisted of cohabiting couples (Coleman, 1999). Using the ECHP dataset, 5% of Irish women who have never married reported cohabiting with a partner in 2000, though this had increased from 2.9% in 1994. Italy also had a low level of 5.2% in 2000. France by contrast, had 25.8% women who had never married reporting that they were cohabiting with a partner in 1994. This had increased to 34.3% in 2000. Netherlands and Belgium had 39.4% and 26.7% of never married women cohabiting in the same year. All countries showed an increase in prevalence between the two time periods and it is probable that with younger cohorts forming unions and the increasing acceptance of cohabitation in western societies that these levels will continue to rise. Furthermore, these two time periods are relatively close to the 'watershed' moment of sexual politics in Ireland in the 1990s. It would be interesting to look at Ireland again in ten years time to see how it would compare to other countries and whether it would be similar to its Northern European neighbours.

Cohabitation has been linked to an increased risk of marital dissolution. Marriages proceeded by a spell of cohabitation are approximately twice more likely to end in divorce at any marital duration than marriages not proceeded by cohabitation (Teachman, 2003; Coleman, 2000; Booth & Johnson, 1988; Axinn & Thornton, 1992). Cohabitation may be considered as a viable test of whether a couple are well-suited but it appears that this is not the case in reality (Buck & Scott, 1994). The mechanisms for this are unclear but two explanations have been suggested. One factor involved is selectivity, i.e. people who cohabit before marriage possess different characteristics than those who do not and these characteristics are linked positively to the risk of divorce (less commitment to marriage as a permanent institution, emphasis on individualism and acceptance of divorce as an appropriate means to end a poor relationship). Experience of parental divorce or separation is another characteristic (Kiernan, 2001). It is possible that this leads to reluctance to make a permanent commitment. Another explanation is that cohabitation allows individuals to learn about intimate living outside of marriage,

provides information about alternative to marriage and acts to erode their belief in the permanence of marriage (Teachman, 2003). However, the role of cohabitation plays in marital dissolution may be changing. Cohabitation itself has changed over time. Prior to the 1970s, cohabitation existed in small sub-groups of European populations, such as those whose marriages had dissolved, those who could not afford weddings, certain groups of rural dwellers and those who were ideologically opposed to marriage (Kiernan, 2001). Since the 1970s, cohabitation has moved from being to an alternative to marriage practised by a few to a common practice. Not all couples cohabiting are replacing marriage with another form of consensual union. Indeed there are many different forms of cohabitation including first-time cohabitation, pre-marital cohabitation, post-martial cohabitation and subsequent cohabitation (two or more cohabitations in sequence) (Haskey, 2001). Early cohabiters may have been more willing to break social norms and less committed to marriage but as cohabitation has become more acceptable, premarital cohabitation is less likely to provide experiences to weaken subsequent marriage (Teachman, 2003). The effects of cohabitation on marital disruption are not explored here, mainly due to the small numbers produced in the crosstabulations so it was felt that the effect was not big enough to examine in the logit model. Instead, the focus is on those factors which have been established as having an impact on marital dissolution in order to determine whether the conditions are similar for Irish women as for other nations with more established divorce legalisation.

Predictors of Martial Dissolution

Results of the analysis are shown in Table 3. The dependent variable is the log odds of martial separation or dissolution. Covariates are to be interpreted as the effect of the given variable on the log odds of the event. For dummy variables, negative coefficients suggest that respondents in that particular category have a hazard rate of marital dissolution that is lower than the base category. Positive coefficients indicate that the respondents in that category have a hazard rate that is higher than the base category. The exponent of the coefficient (exp b) represents the effect on the hazard rate, such as in Model 1, the log odds of 0.94 for paid employment can be said to increase the baseline hazard rate of the risk of marital dissolution by 2.559 times.

The first model includes the main effects of country, marital duration, age at marriage and educational level achieved, type of employment and number of hours worked a week. It is clear that there are no significant variations between the countries in terms of risk of martial dissolution when controlling for the other covariates. This means that the risk of marital break up may not be different for women living in Irish, Italian, Belgian and Dutch societies in martial break up compared to France. Though the log-odds remain negative for Ireland throughout the models (and also for the other Catholic country of Italy), they do not reach significance when controlling for the standard predictors of martial duration, age at marriage, employment and childcare, thereby suggesting that Irish women share similar factors in marital break ups as for other EU countries. In other words, there does not appear to be any inherently Irish national culture that may protect Irish women from likelihood of marital dissolution when compared to its European neighbour, France.

Similar to previous research there is a decline in the risk of dissolution over the duration of the marriage. Throughout the models, martial duration has a negative coefficient significant at the $p<0.005$ level. Even when controlling for age at marriage, national differences, educational level reached, employment, work hours and childcare in the second model, each year of marriage reduces the log odds of marital dissolution by 0.38. In other words, the

odds of marital separation are decreased by 5% as length of a marriage increases by one year. The longer a woman spends with her husband, the less likely she is to endure divorce or separation. The endurance of this covariate across the models suggests that women may not be romanticising marriage and may enter a marital union with the idea of continuing a relationship as long as the companionship works. As Heaton & Call (1995) have pointed out, couples adapt to each other over time. The day to day experiences and life events that couples share strengthen their marital bond.

In relation to educational level, it had been maintained that the more educated a woman, the more financial independent she would be and the higher the odds to leave a marital union if unhappy. Women who completed secondary school or the equivalent were significantly more likely to separate than women who only completed primary level (higher log odds of 0.529). However, women who achieved a third level qualification were not significantly more likely to separate compared to the baseline category. Perhaps this effect is partially explained by age at marriage as women who attend universities are likely to marry at an older age. Female students are likely to wait until they have the financial resources to marry or may delay marriage while they experience paid employment and the social life it affords. The significant effect of secondary level may be a generational effect with later cohorts of women being more likely to complete secondary education.

There is some evidence to suggest that children have an effect on marital dissolution, particularly in terms of hours spent in childcare. Women who did not spend any time minding children had higher log odds of 0.412 of marital dissolution (odds of 1.5 times more likely to experience marital separation than women who were full time minders of children). So when controlling for all other covariates, women without children to mind are more likely to spilt from their marital partners, thus indicating that there may be a stabilising influence of children on marital relationships. The absence of children under the age of 16 in the household did not significantly differ from the base category of having one or more child living in the household. This indicates that presence of children alone is not enough to determine risk of marital dissolution. Instead it is the burden of childcare hours that has an effect. Women who spend between 14 and 28 hours a week caring for children have higher log odds of 0.479 of marital separation than women who can be considered to be full time child minders (more than 40 hours a week). It can be argued that women who spend this amount of time in childcare are likely to also be working part-time or full time and it is probable that the burden of minding children on top of domestic duties and work commitments is a contributing factor to the dissolution of a marriage. The carer role falls to women whether it is children earlier in the life course or care for elderly relatives later in life. This disrupts women's paid work. If two incomes are necessary, this can put financial strain on the marital relationship. Furthermore, if the partner pursues a more traditional breadwinner/father role, the lack of or limited input into childcare can further strain relations. Paid work as measured by type of employment and works spent in work per week showed no significant differences from the baseline categories of unpaid family worker and less than 20 hours a week spent in a paid job. This was expected as women's participation in the workforce has increased over time resulting in the norm being women working and running a household simultaneously. In this dataset, 83.7% of the women were in paid employment. For the analysis, this would mean smaller numbers for the baseline category and for the self employment and paid apprenticeship/training categories, thus making it difficult to detect effects. However, it can be concluded that the burden of childcare has an impact on marital dissolution for women with the dual role of working and raising a family straining a marital relationship.

Martial stability did not significantly increase with women's age at marriage until the effects of presence of children and childcare hours were controlled in Model 2. Here, irrespective of having children, being employed, the number of hours worked at week, country of residence and duration of marriage, the older a woman is at marriage, the lower her log odds of separation. For each year of age, the log odds of marital break-up decreases by 0.38 (the odds decrease by 4%). The covariate age at marriage borders on significance in the Model 1 (log odds of -0.33). Age at marriage brings little additional explanatory power to the models once length of marriage is considered. It is very possible that the effects of age at marriage are compromised by the presence of older cohorts of women in this analysis. The average age of women at first marriage has increased in Europe since the 1970s thereby women who married prior to this decade are likely to have married at a younger age than later birth cohorts. As these women were still married at the wave 1, they would have had a longer marital duration than younger women and this would have impacted upon the effects of a woman's age at marriage. Another explanation could be that younger women are more likely to cohabitate before marriage this raising the age at marriage. For all countries, the largest proportion of women cohabiting was the group of women born in the 1970s (between 45% and 55% for all countries except Italy, which had 35%, in 2000). It is when the effects of children and childcare are controlled for that the effect of age at marriage becomes significant. This indicates that presence of children and time spent in childcare somewhat mediates the relationship between age at marriage and marital dissolution. Once the effects of children are removed, age at marriage is seen to have a significant negative coefficient. While age at first marriage has been found to be a good single predictor of marital instability in previous research, there has been evidence to suggest that there may be a curvilinear relationship between age at first marriage and marital stability especially when divorce probability is measured over marital duration (Davis & Greenstein, 2004). It is possible that risk of divorce is high in the early years of marriage where children are absent but when children are present, women may wait until the children have grown up or left home before undergoing martial separation. This of course can be due to a number of reasons including parents remaining together for the sake of the children. Additionally, once children have grown up, women who married young may resent the loss of youth in marriage or may seek a new form of personal fulfilment which leads to a rift between partners. It may thus be difficult to detect the impact of age at marriage on marital dissolution if the stabilising effects of children are not taken into account.

Independent Variables	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	b	*exp(b)*	*b*	*exp(b)*	*b*	*exp(b)*
Ireland	-.532	.588	-.41	.664	-.411	.663
Italy	-.159	.853	-.069	.934	-.073	.930
Netherlands	.032	1.032	.082	1.085	.066	1.069
Belgium	-.059	.943	.011	1.011	.018	1.018
Martial Duration	-.047**	.954	-.053**	.949	-.065**	.937
Age at marriage	-.033†	.967	-.038*	.963	-.047	.954
Paid employment	.940	2.559	.912	2.489	.882	2.416
Paid apprenticeship/training	1.275	3.580	1.24	3.457	1.22	3.388
Self employment	.683	1.980	.664	1.942	.649	1.913
Work > 40 hours a week	.413	1.512	.321	1.379	.312	1.366
Work 20 to 39 hours a week	.083	1.086	.03	1.031	.016	1.680
Achieved 3rd level education	.361	1.435	.377	1.458	.362	1.436
Achieved 2nd level education	.529**	1.697	.533**	1.704	.519**	1.680
No children under the age of 16 in household			-.071	.931	-.032	.968
Do not look after children			.412*	1.510	.393	1.482
<14 hours spent a week in childcare			-.501	.471	-.521	.594
14-28 hours spent a week in childcare			.479*	1.614	.449*	1.566
Born in 1970s (cohort 1)					.716	2.047
Born in 1960s (cohort 2)					.801	2.228
Born in 1950s (cohort 3)					1.09	2.975
Born in 1940s (cohort 4)					1.069	2.914
Constant	-4.652**		-4.665**		-5.135*	
Initial -2 log likelihood	2449.380		2449.380		2449.380	
Final -2 log likelihood	2392.429		2381.74		2377.885	
Model chi-square	62.306		72.994		76.850	
df	13		17		21	
p	0.000		0.000		0.000	

* p < 0.05
** p<0.005
† p at 0.05 but ex(b) confidence interval includes 1.

In Model 3, birth cohort was included to see if the association between age at marriage and marital dissolution persists when controlling for cohort. Age at marriage could vary according to birth cohorts. After the Second World War, there was a trend towards a more youthful marriage, with women marrying at younger ages compared to their mothers' generation. However, from the 1970s onwards, this trend was reversed, with women's median age at marriage increasing (Coleman, 2000). We would thus expect the birth cohorts of the 1940s and 1950s who would have married in the intermediate years between the Second World War and the 1970s display younger ages at marriage than the latter birth cohorts and the baseline category of those born in the 1930s and earlier. Interaction effects did not add to the predictive power of the model so only main effects were included. Birth cohorts did not have any significant effects on marital dissolution compared to the baseline category when controlling for other effects in the model. Again, marital duration, secondary level education achieved and 14 to 28 hours spent in childcare were significant relative to their baseline categories. Age at marriage was again not shown to be statistically significant (hovering just outside the p< 0.05 level, p= 0.079). It is possible that the effects of age may be moderated by all the women being raised in what has been termed the 'divorce culture' (Davis & Greenstein, 2004). Women who were raised after the Second World War see continued marriage as being dependent on the relationship. If the relationship does not fit their ideals, then they may simple leave it. This would occur irrespective of age at marriage.

Davis & Greenstein (2004) found that age at marriage was dependent on women's ideology of marriage. The more traditional the view of a woman as housewife and mother, the more likely the woman was to divorce. The ECHP dataset did not cover attitudes to gender roles in family and so this argument could not be explored. However when looking at the significant effects of childcare between 14 and 28 hours per week and secondary educational level achieved, it is possible that women who do not achieve third level education and its linked high status careers may instead be tempted by domestic bliss. However, the reality of juggling childcare, work, financial commitments and household chores may prove a strain on a marital relationship. It may be that previous predictors such as age at first marriage is no longer suffice to explain marital patterns, especially since age at marriage has increased overall for women in Europe. Instead, we should probably look at peoples' expectations of marriage and family life. It could be that there is a clash between the idea and the reality with the sustenance of the traditional breadwinner family being more and more difficult to sustain in a climate of rising costs in the standards of living.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to dispel the persistent picture of Irish demographic patterns being different to its European counterparts. Certainly, Ireland had prolonged traditional family practices compared to other EU countries with divorce and contraceptive illegal until the 1990s. Given the rapidity of changes in sexual morality in the mid 1990s, it was timely to investigate if Irish family composition had become more typical of western European countries in its aftermath. Using the European Community Household Panel dataset, average household size was seen to be larger for Ireland in the 1990s than for Netherlands, Belgium, France and Italy. Like Italy, Ireland also had a low level of cohabitation. However in relation to marital dissolution, there were no significant differences between Ireland and the other countries. Length of marital duration was inversely linked to odds of marital separation, while childcare of 14 to 28 hours per week and secondary educational level achieved increased the likelihood of marital spilt for women compared to their baseline categories. The standard predictor age at marriage did not show a significant effect until the covariates of

childcare and number of children per household were controlled. Given that the majority of Irish households were family orientated and levels of cohabitation were low, it would be interesting to further explore the effects of gender expectations of marriage on marital dissolution. It is hypothesised that there may be a clash between women's gender ideology of the traditional family unit with the reality of running a household in a society with rising costs of living. This is beyond the scope of this paper but it is suffice to state that in the late 20th century, Irish family practices were becoming more similar to its EU counterparts and it is expected that this will continue.

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