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Disentangling the link between having one child and partnership trajectories: a mixed-methods life-course research

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the relationships between partnership trajectories and having an only child. Few studies have focused on one-child families, even though in many countries having just one child is the main factor driving sub-replacement fertility levels. Little is known especially about how non-progression to a second child relates to partnership trajectories. This article contributes to filling these gaps by using a mixed-methods life-course research. We combine sequence and regression analyses of survey data with a biographical analysis of problem-centred interviews with parents of an only child. Based on the Czech Household panel survey, we estimate the probability of having an only child in relation to parents' different partnership trajectories after the birth of the first child. Analysing the problem-centred interviews, we explore parents' understanding of the processes that lead them not to progress to a second child. Our findings indicate that having an only child is associated with partnership dissolution after the first child's birth and with later entry into parenthood. High levels of education are negatively associated with the probability of having an only child among fathers, but positively among mothers. Partnership dissatisfaction and work-life balance issues contribute to non-progression to a second child.

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One-child families; partnership trajectories; sub-replacement fertility; mixed methods; life course; sequence analysis; problem-centred interviews

Sub-replacement fertility levels are common in Europe but only in some countries are they driven by childlessness. In others, having only one child is the more significant factor (Breton & Prioux, 2009; Zeman et al., 2018). Only a few studies have, however, focused on one-child families. This study explores the association between partnership trajectories and having an only child in Czechia. It contributes to the literature on sub-replacement fertility and partnership-fertility relationships.

The *first contribution* of this article is that it fills a gap in the knowledge on one-child families in the context of sub-replacement fertility. Czechia is a good case with which to study one-child families, as it has had sub-replacement fertility for almost 40 years, though permanent childlessness among women born since the late 1920s has not exceeded 10% (Šprocha et al., 2016).

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Partnership is among the major factors explaining fertility. The absence of a partner is a predictor of childlessness (Hart, 2019; Jalovaara & Fasang, 2017), and parents not living together are less inclined to have a second child (Breton & Prioux, 2009; Hašková et al., 2019). Unstable unions during reproductive age are associated with childlessness (Hart, 2019; Kreyenfeld & Konietzka, 2017). Therefore, to understand fertility it is important to explore union trajectories rather than partnership status at a certain time. However, there is a lack of knowledge on how parents' non-progression to a second child relates to their partnership trajectories.

The article's *second contribution* is that it fills the gap in the knowledge on whether and how partnership trajectories are related to having one child compared to a larger family. To identify various types of partnership trajectories of parents and estimate the probability of having only one child in the case of a specific partnership trajectory, we analyse quantitative life-history data from the Czech household panel survey (CHPS). To explore parents' understanding of the relationship between their partnership trajectories and the processes leading them to have only one child, we analyse the biographical narratives of Czech parents with only one child.

The life-course perspective is useful for studying reproduction because having children is the outcome of a long-term process (Hart, 2019; Jalovaara & Fasang, 2017; Kreyenfeld & Konietzka, 2017). However, only a few attempts have been made to link quantitative and qualitative life-course approaches.

The article's *third contribution* is that it demonstrates the power of the mixed-methods life-course approach for advancing the understanding of sub-replacement fertility. Three life-course principles can help explain the pathways to having a particular number of children: the principle of cumulative contingencies (previous experiences shape subsequent behaviour), the principle of interdependencies between pathways in multiple life-course domains (Mynarska et al., 2015), and the principle of linked lives (Elder, 1998) highlighting that individuals' reproductive trajectories are influenced by the lives of those closest to them, such as their partners and their children. One's child may influence one's reproductive trajectory, as the decision to have another child may be influenced by the experience of childcare and by the needs of the existing child. By addressing these principles, we focus on the association between parents' reproductive outcomes and their union trajectories. Quantitative sequence analysis is performed to describe the types of union histories among parents 12 years after having their first child,¹ and regression models are used to estimate the probability of having an only child among parents in relation to different types of union histories. Qualitative analysis provides insight into parents' decision-making about how many children to have, how they experience their partnership and reproductive trajectories, and the relationships between them.

1. One-child families in a sub-replacement fertility context

Despite the ideal of the two-child family across Europe (Sobotka & Beaujouan, 2014), many countries have experienced an increase in one-child families and childlessness (Frejka, 2008; Zeman et al., 2018). Where the norm to have a child remains strong, one-child families are more widespread than childlessness (Zeman et al., 2018). In relation to profound social, economic and political changes since the 1990s, fertility

has declined in Central and East European (CEE) countries, mainly because of the increase in one-child families (Zeman et al., 2018).

In Czechia permanent childlessness has been extremely low among women, and one-child families drive sub-replacement fertility: Childlessness declined to 5% among women born in the 1950s, then increased to 10% among women born in the late 1960s. The share of mothers with only one child dropped to 15% among women born in the 1950s and subsequently exceeded 20% among women born in the late 1960s (Hašková et al., 2019).

Previous studies have analysed the effects of individual and societal factors on whether a parent progresses to a second child. The effects of education especially have been debated. The opportunity costs of motherhood may be higher for highly educated women, but other factors, such as social policies and gender regimes, also affect the relationship. According to Klesment et al. (2014), there is a positive association between women's and their partners' education and second childbearing in Northern Europe. In Western Europe this relationship has a U-shaped pattern among women but it is positive among their partners. In Eastern Europe, the relationship between women's education and second childbearing is negative (Klesment et al., 2014). Consistent with this, Zeman (2018) found in Czechia, where family policy supports the male-breadwinner model, mothers with one child are more common among university-educated than lower-educated women.

Analysing the relationship between family policies and fertility, Van Bavel and Róžańska-Putek (2010) confirmed that in countries where most children attend formal childcare, highly-educated women have higher second-birth rates, but childcare availability does not affect parity progression among less-educated women. In countries where women have to choose between employment and motherhood, father's higher education and earning potential increases second-birth chance (Köppen, 2006; Prskawetz & Zagaglia, 2005). In countries with generous state support for families, men's higher education does not increase second-birth rates but an increased sharing of family responsibilities in a couple does (Oláh, 2003).

The absence of a partner, partnership break-up and re-partnering are also studied in relation to the likelihood of having a second child (Breton & Prioux, 2009; Jefferies, 2001; Köppen, 2006; Parr, 2007; Prskawetz & Zagaglia, 2005; Rabušić & Chromková Manea, 2007; Štátná et al., 2019). Based on Czech data, Hašková et al. (2019) found that divorced and single women are more likely than married women to have just one child. Van Bavel et al. (2012) showed in their international study that partnership instability has a slightly negative effect on fertility and that divorce is associated with greater heterogeneity in childbearing. Kreyenfeld et al. (2017) found that countries differ in the prevalence of postseparation second births because of norms and childbirth spacing. But unlike other studies (e.g. Beaujouan & Solaz, 2013; Thomson et al., 2014), they did not find a consistent negative educational gradient in multi-partnered fertility.

Childbearing postponement is also studied in relation to the progression to a second child because higher age is associated with a higher risk of reproductive health problems (Štátná et al., 2019). Highly-educated mothers often have their first child later in life but their second child sooner after the first one than lower-educated mothers (Breton & Prioux, 2009). Bratti and Tatsiramos (2012) identified both a positive effect of increasing age at first birth on second-order births (the catch-up effect) and a negative effect, when

because of declining fecundity and norms about parenting timing, women do not have a second child (the postponement effect). Differences in catch-up and postponement effects were identified between and within countries because of intervening factors, such as women's economic activity and work-life balance conditions (Bratti & Tatsiramos, 2012).

Type of occupation and employment status also influence progression to a second child. Based on Czech data, Hašková et al. (2019) found more mothers with one child among mothers in specific occupations (artists, models, athletes, legislators, managers, police officers, army, and researchers) that may be difficult to combine with care or that are male-dominated. In France and England, managers are less likely while mothers in female-care dominated occupations and blue-collar workers are more likely to have a second child (Ekert-Jaffé et al., 2002). Moreover, in France, self-employed end reproduction at one child more than others (Breton & Prioux, 2009).

A decline in well-being after a first birth (Margolis & Myrskylä, 2015) and the expectation of decline in well-being after a second birth (Šťastná, 2007) were also found to decrease the likelihood of having a second child.

Callan (1985) and Jefferies (2001) found life orientations other than raising children to be factors contributing to stopping reproduction after one child. Being an only child is also associated with having one child (Hašková et al., 2019; Morosow & Kolk, 2020). Breton and Prioux (2009) note that having an only child is less common among men than women because of men's greater fertility 'specialisation' – fathers have on average more children than mothers while men are more often childless than women.

In France, Austria and the USA religious parents are less likely to have an only child (Breton & Prioux, 2009; Callan, 1985; Prskawetz & Zagaglia, 2005) but this relationship has not been observed in Czechia (Rabušic & Chromková Manea, 2007). Studies have also found more one-child parents in cities than in rural areas (Gray & Evans, 2018; Hašková et al., 2019; Rabušic & Chromková Manea, 2007). The effect of the first child's sex on progression to a second child also exists, e.g. in Sweden (Miranda et al., 2018) while Gray and Evans (2005) found this effect on progression to a third child only in Australia.

Despite the growing number of studies analysing the factors behind one-child families, little is yet known about the link between union trajectories and having one child.

2. Data and methods

The use of a mixed-methods design enabled us to elaborate, enhance, and illustrate the findings produced by quantitative sequence and regression analyses by using the results of a qualitative analysis of problem-centred interviews.

Using sequence analysis we identified the major partnership trajectory types, and with a regression analysis we estimated the probabilities of parents with different partnership trajectory types having just one child. However, these analyses do not explain which processes are behind the statistically documented associations and lead individuals to have an only child. Qualitative data provide insight into parents' perspectives on why they have an only child and how their partnership trajectories are related to having an only child. However, they provide no information on the incidence of various partnership

trajectories among parents and the extent to which the trajectories of parents of an only child differ from those of parents with more than one child.

Therefore, we conducted parallel mixed-methods research (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009), in which two independent datasets were analysed to obtain two partial understandings of the studied phenomenon before merging the data and findings into one interpretation.

2.1. Quantitative study

2.1.1. Data

In the quantitative analyses, we used wave 2 data from the CHPS, a nationally representative longitudinal survey conducted in 2016, providing self-reported partnership histories. We limited our analyses to parents who had at least one child aged 12 or older and had reported all the information needed to reconstruct their partnership histories ($N = 3,025$ respondents).² The fertility data were reconstructed from questions about the date of birth of the respondents' children living in the same household and non-resident children. However, the number of non-resident children could be underestimated, especially among divorced or separated men, who may not report them.

To construct partnership trajectories 12 years after the first child was born, union statuses were recorded monthly, leading to 144 consecutive statuses. The status alphabet contains six statuses (1st to 4th partnership,³ never partnered, and previously partnered). By considering the order of partnerships, we were able to obtain information about union histories preceding childbirth from the studied trajectories.

2.1.2. Methods

First, we identified the various types of partnership trajectories among parents by performing a sequence analysis with optimal matching (OM) and cluster analysis.⁴ Sequence analysis enables one to consider a life course as a series of statuses. Thus, it can complement event-history models that help study separate events but cannot capture the diversity of life-course trajectories. To measure pairwise dissimilarities between trajectories, we used spell-sensitive OM, which accounts for differences in the time spent in distinct successive statuses (Studer & Ritschard, 2016).⁵ This suits our research because the duration of a spell of being single or in a relationship is associated with fertility (Hart, 2019).

Based on pairwise dissimilarities between sequences, groups of similar union histories were identified using hierarchical clustering (Ward method) (Gabadinho et al., 2011; Studer, 2013). The final five-cluster solution was selected using a combination of average silhouette widths, and it indicated well-defined clusters and theoretical validation of the proposed solution (Aisenbrey & Fasang, 2010; Studer, 2013).

To explore the relationship between union-history types and the probability of having only one child at age 42 or older, we applied binary logistic regression (the reference category is having at least two children). We used a sample of respondents aged 42 and older ($N = 2,521$ respondents), who were mostly at the end of their reproductive period.⁶ In this analysis, we explored only the associations between union history types and having only one child, not causal relations, because partnership and reproductive trajectories influence each other, and they might be influenced by the same underlying preferences and circumstances. The main explanatory variable in this analysis were *union-*

history types identified by sequence analysis. Owing to low frequencies, the categories *Solo parents* and *Re-partnered solo parents* were combined into one category. The models were estimated separately by gender.

Because previous research has demonstrated that educational attainment affects a person's fertility (Trimarchi & Van Bavel, 2017; Zeman, 2018), we controlled the models for education. *Educational attainment* was measured at the time of the interview. We used a three-category classification: (1) low education, (2) secondary school with high-school diploma, (3) university level. Furthermore, *the age at first birth* (<24 years of age, 25–29, and age 30 and over) was controlled for because postponement of child-bearing may diminish a person's fertility outcomes (Breton & Prioux, 2009; Jefferies, 2001). Secondary education and age 25–29 at first childbirth were set as the reference categories. Finally, *birth cohort of the first child* was controlled for because the share of persons without siblings between cohorts has increased in recent decades (Šprocha et al., 2016). We distinguished three cohorts: born before 1970, born in 1970–1989, and born after 1989. The last was set as the reference category in order to compare people who had their first child under state-socialism with people who had theirs after 1989, when Czech family behaviour transformed significantly. CHPS data do not include information about a respondent's number of siblings, although this is a predictor of fertility outcomes (Morosow & Kolk, 2020).

2.2. Qualitative study

2.2.1. Data

In the qualitative analysis, we conducted 24 problem-centred interviews with 18 mothers and 6 fathers of an only child; the interviewees were in their 40s and early 50s. The interviews were conducted in 2017–2018 by one of the authors. We opened the interviews by asking the interviewees to narrate their life story: 'I know that you have one child. Can you tell me how it came about, what is your life-story?' We followed up with clarifying questions about why they have only one child, the barriers to having another child, reproductive plans, and partnerships. A problem-centred interview starts with a narrative-generating introductory question, offers the interviewees room to develop their stories, and asks general exploratory questions to develop the interviewees' views and ad-hoc questions to elicit information about topics the interviewees omitted (Witzel, 2000).

The sample included single women who broke up with their partner (6), women married or living in a partnership (6), and couples, where the parents were interviewed separately (6 + 6). By including parental couples we were able to obtain information about a couple's negotiations over the number and timing of children. The interviewees were residents of Prague or a small town in Czechia. Educational backgrounds ranged from low to university. The snowball method was used to recruit the interviewees. Socio-demographic categories missing from the sample (low-educated parents and parents in recomposed families) were searched for and added to the sample before its completion.

2.2.2. Methods

We employed biographical analysis to explore the parents' understanding of the processes that led them to have an only child. We transcribed the interviews and analysed them using the Atlas.ti programme.

First, the key categories of factors leading to one-child families according to the narratives were identified. Second, the analyses of individual narratives and the system of identified categories were combined into one interpretative framework – a collective analytical story (Charmaz, 2003). This story included a narrators' personal interpretations and constructions of identity and a meaningful life, and the structural conditions, resources, and barriers they faced in lives.

Partnerships, along with age, health, work, and economic situation, were the main themes that emerged in the interviewees' narratives about their paths to an only child. The analysis focused on the experiences and meanings assigned to the partnership trajectories and their relationships with having an only child. We performed triangulation across the quantitative and qualitative data to search for links between partnerships and having only one child, and among the different investigators. We searched for disconfirming evidence, in addition to researchers' reflexivity and peer debriefing (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

3. Findings

3.1. Types of partnership trajectories

Five clusters of partnership trajectories were identified in 12 years after the first childbirth. Figure 1 displays these clusters as sequence index plots, which present the status changes over the studied period for all individuals in each cluster. The clusters are labelled according to the most dominant partnership status in the studied period. Table 1 summarizes the descriptive characteristics of the union-history clusters.

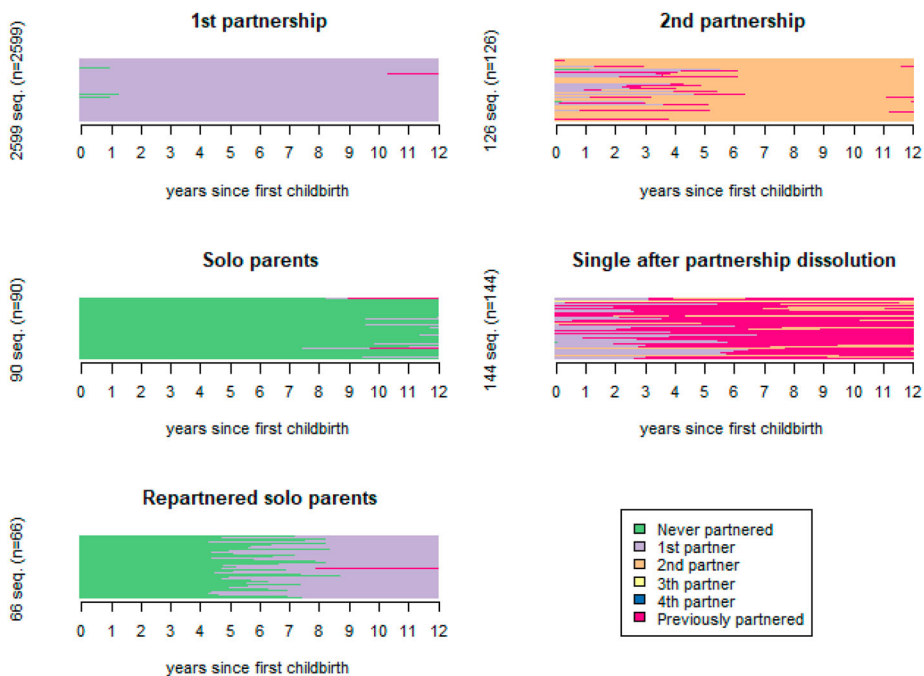


Figure 1. Sequence index plots. Types of partnership trajectories after first childbirth. Data: CHPS 2016. Parents with at least one child aged 12+ years. $N = 3,025$.

Table 1. Characteristics of partnership trajectory types 12 years after first childbirth (row %, mean).

	First partnership	Second partnership	Solo parents	Single after partnership dissolution	Re-partnered solo parents	<i>N</i>
Men						
Union type distribution (row %)	88.72	3.73	2.80	2.71	2.04	1179
Age at first childbirth (mean)	26.44	29.87	24.10	27.99	23.85	
Partnership status at 1st childbirth (row %)						
Married	94.26	3.12	0	2.62	0	993
Unmarried cohabitation	79.75	12.66	0	7.59	0	79
Not living with partner	43.93	2.80	30.84	0	22.43	107
Number of children at age 42 (row %) *						
1	79.43	7.18	4.30	6.70	2.39	209
2	91.95	2.25	2.43	1.87	1.50	534
3+	88.95	1.75	1.74	3.49	4.07	172
Women						
Union type distribution (row %)	84.13	4.44	3.09	6.06	2.28	1846
Age at first childbirth (mean)	23.67	25.31	21.94	23.60	22.38	
Partnership status at 1st childbirth (row %)						
Married	90.47	4.08	0	5.45	0	1543
Unmarried cohabitation	75.93	13.89	0	10.18	0	108
Not living with partner	38.46	2.05	29.23	8.72	21.54	195
Number of children at age 42 (row %) *						
1	78.74	5.51	3.94	9.97	1.84	381
2	86.63	4.27	2.36	4.94	1.80	890
3+	82.69	2.99	4.48	4.77	5.07	335

Note: *Only respondents aged 42 years and older.

Data: CHPS 2016. Parents of at least one child aged 12+ years.

The first two clusters are dominated by stable partnership unions. The most prevalent cluster is *First partnership*, in which individuals had their first children with their first cohabiting partner, and most of them married and stayed with their first partner for at least 12 years after the birth of their first child. The *Second partnership* cluster includes individuals who had their first child with their second cohabiting partner and on average later than the individuals in the other clusters.

The remaining clusters include persons without a partner. The cluster *Single after partnership dissolution* contains individuals whose partnerships ended after the first child was born. Individuals in this cluster experienced the longest average spell of being single with union experience. Moreover, the cluster includes also individuals with more complex union histories due to multiple partnerships. Finally, two groups of individuals who were not living with a partner at the time of first childbirth were identified: *Solo parents* and *Re-partnered solo parents*. While solo parents remained single, re-partnered solo parents found their partner after childbirth. *Solo parents* had their first child on average at a younger age than parents in the other clusters.

3.2. Association between union history and probability of having only one child

Logistic regressions exploring the associations between union-history types and the probability a person at age 42 or over has just one child were estimated separately by gender. The odds ratios and 95% confidential intervals (CI) estimated from the logistic regression are displayed in Table 2. The models were built stepwise. Model 1 controlled for education and childbirth cohort and Model 2 controlled for education and age at first childbirth. Finally, Model 3 tested the interaction between union types and education.

Model 1 confirms that higher proportions of mothers and fathers aged 42 or over with an only child were present in the cluster *Single after partnership dissolution*. Men and women in the cluster *Single after partnership dissolution* were associated with an increased probability of having only one child by 23 percentage points and 18 percentage points, respectively, comparing to those in the *First partnership* cluster (difference between estimated marginal means 0.42; 95% CI 0.26–0.61 and 0.19; 95% CI 0.17–0.22 for men, and 0.41, 95% CI 0.32–0.52 and 0.23, 95% CI 0.21–0.26 for women, see Figure 2). The probabilities of men and women on the *Second partnership* trajectory of having only one child were 28 and 9 percentage points higher, respectively, than those in the *First partnership* cluster. Men on the *Solo parent* trajectory were more likely to have only one child than those in the *First partnership* cluster.

Model 1 does not show a statistically significant association between education and the probability of having only one child when controlling for partnership trajectory types ($p > 0.1$). However, the findings suggest that the direction of the education effects might differ by gender – that higher education might increase the probability of having only one child among women but decrease the probability of having only one child among men.

Model 2 tested whether the effect of education is mediated by age at first childbirth, which is higher among higher-educated men and women. It confirms that having a first child at age 30 and later increased the probability of having only one child among both men (OR = 3.30, $p < 0.001$) and women (OR = 4.69, $p < 0.001$) compared to the reference category of 25–29 years of age. The findings in Model 2 indicated that,

Table 2. Odds ratios of having only one child at age 42 years estimated from a binary logistic regression (ref. category at least two children).

	Model 1						Model 2					
	Men			Women			Men			Women		
	OR	Sig.	95% CI	OR	Sig.	95% CI	OR	Sig.	95% CI	OR	Sig.	95% CI
(Intercept)	0.37	0.000	0.27–0.53	0.28	0.000	0.22–0.36	0.27	0.000	0.20–0.37	0.43	0.000	0.33–0.54
Partnership trajectory types (ref. first partnership)												
2nd partnership	3.63	0.001	1.73–7.66	1.56	0.101	0.92–2.66	3.51	0.002	1.6–7.68	1.23	0.480	0.69–2.21
Solo parents	1.79	0.083	0.93–3.47	1.18	0.509	0.72–1.95	2.42	0.012	1.21–4.85	1.30	0.326	0.77–2.21
Single after partnership dissolution	3.08	0.003	1.46–6.52	2.31	0.000	1.51–3.55	3.16	0.004	1.46–6.85	2.22	0.001	1.4–3.51
Education (ref. secondary)												
Low	0.94	0.725	0.65–1.35	0.86	0.262	0.66–1.12	1.01	0.979	0.69–1.46	1.02	0.864	0.78–1.35
University	0.76	0.191	0.50–1.15	1.26	0.163	0.91–1.74	0.63	0.037	0.41–0.97	0.82	0.273	0.58–1.17
Birth cohort of first child (ref. >1989)												
<1970	0.49	0.003	0.30–0.78	1.22	0.233	0.88–1.69						
1970–1989	0.75	0.114	0.53–1.07	0.97	0.848	0.74–1.28						
Age at first childbirth (ref. 25–29)												
<24							0.50	0.001	0.34–0.75	0.40	0.000	0.30–0.53
>30							3.30	0.000	2.21–4.94	4.69	0.000	3.04–7.23
BIC	152.53			199.29			150.90			206.66		

(Continued)



Table 2. Continued.

	Model 1						Model 2					
	Men			Women			Men			Women		
	OR	Sig.	95% CI	OR	Sig.	95% CI	OR	Sig.	95% CI	OR	Sig.	95% CI
AIC	113.95			196.24			112.36			163.70		
	Model 3											
	Men			Women								
	OR	Sig.	95% CI	OR	Sig.	95% CI						
(Intercept)	0.26	0.000	0.19–0.37	0.42	0.000	0.32–0.53						
Partnership trajectory types (ref. first partnership)												
2nd partnership	3.33	0.049	1.00–11.07	0.94	0.884	0.40–2.19						
Solo parents	3.09	0.085	0.86–11.14	2.16	0.066	0.95–4.91						
Single after partnership dissolution	4.65	0.010	1.44–14.98	2.77	0.003	1.42–5.39						
Education (ref. secondary)												
Low	1.06	0.794	0.70–1.58	1.18	0.293	0.87–1.59						
University	0.66	0.084	0.41–1.06	0.72	0.105	0.49–1.07						
Birth cohort of first child (ref. >1989)												
<1970												
1970–1989												
Age at first childbirth (ref. 25–29)												
<24	0.51	0.001	0.34–0.76	0.40	0.000	0.30–0.53						
>30	3.36	0.000	2.24–5.04	4.72	0.000	3.05–7.31						
Partnership trajectory types*education												
Second partnership*low	2.09	0.500	0.25–17.7	1.42	0.605	0.37–5.44						
Second partnership*university	0.77	0.772	0.13–4.65	2.58	0.247	0.52–12.79						
Solo parents at first childbirth*low	0.64	0.587	0.13–3.20	0.23	0.024	0.06–0.82						
Solo parents *university	0.91	0.926	0.13–6.23	1.82	0.435	0.40–8.2						
Single after part. dissolution*low	0.37	0.310	0.06–2.51	0.43	0.099	0.16–1.17						
Single after part. dissolution*university	0.68	0.688	0.10–4.54	2.49	0.232	0.56–11.2						
BIC	189.59			235.56								
AIC	122.55			160.31								

Data: CHPS 2016. Parents aged 42+ years with at least one child aged 12+ years. Men $N = 915$, Women $N = 1606$.

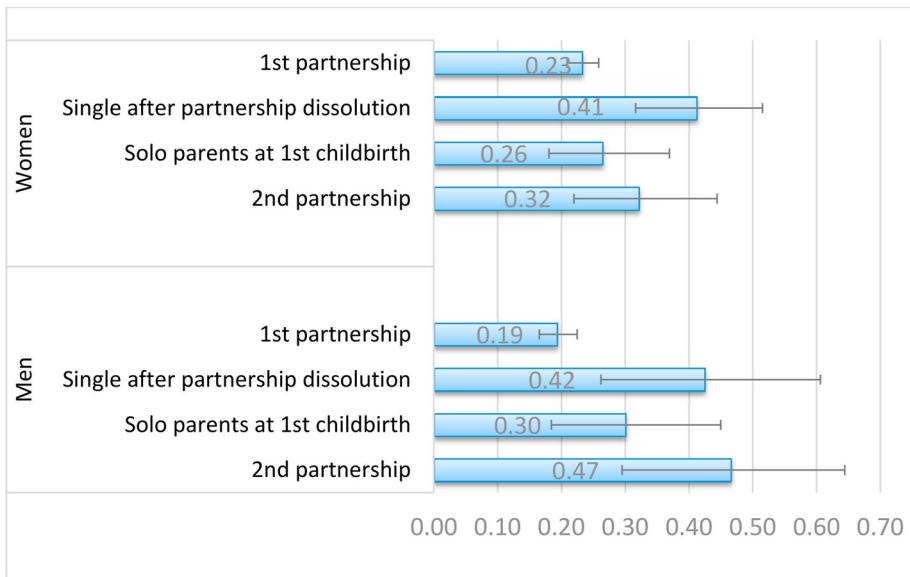


Figure 2. Predicted probability of having only one child by partnership trajectory and by gender (marginal means from Model 1; 95% confidence intervals).

Note: Based on average marginal means estimated using Model 1 (controlled for education and year of birth of first child). Data: CHPS 2016. Parents at age 42+ years with at least one child aged 12+ years.

controlling for age at first childbirth, university-educated men were less likely than secondary-educated men of having only one child (OR 0.63, $p = 0.037$). In contrast, among women the effect of education, when controlling for age at childbirth, is not significant. Among highly-educated women, the probability of having only one child is higher because they had their first child at a higher age than less educated mothers.

Model 3 included the interaction term between educational attainment and partnership history. It confirmed that among women the association between union-history types and their probability of having just one child at age 42 differed by education level. Lower-educated women on the *Solo Parents* and *Single after partnership dissolution* trajectories had a lower chance of having only one child than women with higher levels of education. Among men the interaction between educational level and partnership trajectory did not matter.

3.3. How parents understood the relationship between their partnership trajectories and the processes leading them to have only one child?

Using the biographical narratives of men and women with the different partnership trajectories identified in the sequence analysis we were able to elucidate how the actors themselves understood partnership trajectories as related to having an only child.

According to our interviewees, most of them did not plan a one-child family, but various life events and their timing led them to decide not to have a second child or permanently postpone having a second child, or to be unable to progress to having a second child. Two interviewees mentioned that they originally wanted one child, but later in another stage in life reconsidered and wanted to have more children. None of the

interviewees said they had wanted to remain childfree. The fact is that only a minority of Czechs declare a zero-child or one-child family to be their personal fertility ideal.⁷ Moreover, Hašková and Pospíšilová (2019) showed (on representative data for the Czech population) that people with non-normative lifetime fertility intentions (zero, one, three or more children) more often changed their preferred number of children (based on experiences and events in their life) than those with a two-child plan did.

The interviewees' reproductive plans were subject to change in the context of 'linked lives', highlighting the importance of the interviewees' and their partners' opinions and experiences, and the experiences of caring for their first children. In addition, children from previous relationships and family re-compositions following partnership dissolution and subsequent formation of a new union influenced a person's non-progression to a second child.

3.3.1. First partnership

According to CHPS data, compared to the *First partnership* trajectory, other trajectory types increase the probability of having only one child, but this union type remains the most common among parents of an only child.

Sofie (age 41, university educated) and Stefan (age 42, secondary education) were married, had a seven-year-old son, and lived together for 23 years in Prague. Stefan worked as a manager, and Sofie worked for a non-governmental organization. At the outset, Stefan wanted just one child because he was a happy singleton and had no strong desire to become a parent, while Sofie wanted three children. Consequently, they agreed on two children:

You spend time with that person, you live with him, so you talk about it. I said I wanted to have three children. He said, "well, no way. One!" I said one is not enough. The child would be lonely. So, we agreed to have two children. (Sofie)

However, the experience of pregnancy and childbirth was difficult for Sofie and she did not want to bear more children: 'The duty of caring for the child and fear for him – sometimes, it paralyses me. I know I wouldn't be a good mother to more kids.' (Sofie) Stefan was intrigued by parenting, and after the first experience he wanted more children: 'After the first child was born, I told myself it was perfect. I was stupid for not having children earlier. Until you have children, you don't know what it's like.' Nevertheless, he respected Sofie's wishes: '... my wife didn't want another baby after the first birth. So, overall, it was clear for me, because it was a matter of agreement ...' (Stefan)

The decision about the number of children changed with the experience of parenthood for both partners. Like the other men in our sample, Stefan stated that he left the final decision to his partner. Sofie and Stefan were both convinced that postponing their first child influenced their decision about a second child. In their 20s, they enjoyed an active, childfree lifestyle. When they finally had a son, they were aged 34 and 35, respectively. Both admitted that had they been younger when they had their first child, they would probably have had more children – Stefan because he discovered the joys of parenthood too late and Sofie because she thought that she would be less anxious if she were a younger mother: '... if I had the child earlier, I wouldn't think about these things. It'd be more natural.' (Sofie)

The postponing of parenthood to a later age meant an increased risk of ill health for other informants. According to Vanda (age 40, university educated), she and her husband did not have a second child mainly because her husband's chronic illness had worsened with age: 'If we'd had the first child earlier, we might have had another one around the age of 30. He would be less tired.' His poor health also meant an economic risk for the family because he could not work full time. The couple felt that a second child would adversely affect their economic standard.

Other parents of an only child living with their first partner attributed the one-child situation to having postponed the second child. Pavel (age 42, secondary education) and Pavla (age 40, secondary education) were in their late twenties when they had their first child. They then started a family business and could not imagine that Pavla would be able to stop working to care for another child. Marcela (age 40, secondary education) found herself in a similar situation. Investment into their businesses worked against these women staying at home for several years, but they could not accept deviating from the cultural norm of being 'a good mother': 'If I had a child, I would want to devote the most of myself to it, not to push it away somewhere to a balcony while working.' (Marcela)

Women spoke more about their desires and needs concerning childbearing, while men presented more loosely defined reproductive plans. Yet, even for women, their partners' opinions and trajectories played a key role in their reproductive outcomes. Moreover, childbirth and parenting experiences influenced the relationship between partners and their reproductive plans. When one of the partners did not want to have more children, the couple decided not to have more children.

3.3.2. *Second partnership*

Based on CHPS data, the *Second partnership* cluster is characterized by higher age at first birth. Accordingly, all eight interviewees 'representing this cluster', except one, had their first child in their late thirties or later. Higher age at first birth was the most important factor for having only one child in their narratives. But the 'postponement of childbearing' assumed various forms.

Michal and Michaela (age 45 and 42) were university-educated and married for eight years. They lived in Prague and had a 3-year-old son. They met nine years ago. Michal was divorced, and Michaela had just come out of a ten-year relationship. Until she was 30, Michaela did not consider having children, although she wanted to have a large family later. She continued her studies abroad and gained work experience. When she wanted a child, her previous partner forced her into a traditional division of gender roles: 'He wanted me to stay at home and obey him, which was not acceptable to me.' After she broke up with him, she spent three years single before she met Michal. Soon, they decided to have a child, but it took them five years of infertility treatment. In the interviews, they explained why it was unlikely they would have a second child. While Michal emphasized their age and reproductive health, Michaela admitted that she could not imagine having another child because of the work-care balance involved: '... I can't imagine stopping work ... We both are tired, and we are happy our son will start attending a kindergarten soon and we'll rest a bit.' (Michaela)

They ascribed having only one child to starting the childbearing process later because of previous relationship break-ups and their preferences in their 20, so they only met 'the

right partner for parenthood' later in life: 'When we discussed why we have only one child, the answer is because we started late, and we didn't manage to have a second.' (Michal)

Karla (age 46, university education), by contrast, wanted to become a mother sooner in life. After two unsuccessful relationships, she met her current partner when she was 35 and had her first child at age 38. She considered a second child as risky for her health. Before age 35, she travelled abroad and completed her PhD, but she criticized the idea that postponing motherhood is a choice:

It was not my choice. Journalists write that it is the era of women studying and traveling, and according to them, I fit this type. I was studying and traveling, but I knew I wanted children and that they are the most important. Only because I was not successful in this I took the opportunity of advanced study and travel. However, this was not my goal. (Karla)

Having a partner with (a) child(ren) from a previous partnership(s) was yet another factor behind not having a second child. Václav (age 49, vocational education) married a woman who had a son as a solo parent. Together, they have a 2-year-old daughter. Because of his age and the demands of caring for a small child and his wife's son from her previous partnership, they decided not to have more children. Similarly, Kamila (age 42, vocational education), a divorced mother of a 14-year-old boy, married a man with three adult children. Kamila, like Václav, did not see her family as a one-child family: 'I had one child already ... He had three adult children. So, in fact, we have four children.' (Kamila) These narratives show how family re-composition may influence a person's reproductive plans.

3.3.3. Single after partnership dissolution

Quantitative analysis shows that parents who separated from their partner after their first child was born and then lived without a partner have the highest probability of having only one child. For all the interviewees 'representing this cluster', not having the right partner after they had their first child was the main reason they did not have another child. Their partnerships broke up within four years of the first child's birth.

In every case the break-up was triggered by the birth of the first child and the experience of childcare. Hanka (age 45, university-educated) planned to have a second child with her husband within two to three years of the first one's birth, but her husband was disappointed by the changes that parenthood brought to their life:

He was surprised by what it means. That it's not as interesting as the previous situation in which a woman's flying to London three times a week because of her job. She changes a bit when she's sitting in the playground. The main thing was that I stopped being that happy, easy-going person ... (Hanka)

When their son was three her partner started another relationship, and the couple divorced.

Another source of union instability was when the women-informants were disappointed with their partner's participation in family life and the division of labour once they had a child. Zara (age 40, university-educated) felt unhappy when her husband (whom she later divorced) expected her to stay at home with their child, provide all the care, and give up other activities: 'We worked a lot before, but once I got pregnant

he shut me in at home. I felt the power disbalance. Having a second child was never an option for me at that time.’ (Zara)

In these narratives, lifestyle changes and the radical division of gender roles after childbirth led to dissatisfaction and the end of a relationship, which had previously been more egalitarian, before they could plan a second child.

The story of Sandy (age 42, secondary education), who had an 18-year-old son at the time of the interview, illustrates that women can also make the strategic decision not to have a second child while they are living with a partner but doubt the quality and stability of the relationship: ‘I told myself, I’d be able to feed one child on my own, but not two.’ (Sandy) Knowing that relationships can be fragile and that it is difficult to be a solo mother contributed to the decision not to have another child in a subsequent relationship also in Hanka’s case.

These narratives show the importance of the period after the first childbirth for diminishing reproductive plans. When childbirth causes a radical shift within a couple towards separate gender roles, where mothers provide full-time intensive childcare for several years and men become the sole breadwinners for that period, couples may be destabilized, especially if a previously more egalitarian division of labour has thus been completely dismantled.

3.3.4. Solo parents

According to CHPS data, the *solo parents* cluster contains people who were single when they had their first child. Although being a single parent may be the main reason for not having a second child (see above), Táña’s narrative (40, college educated) highlights yet another factor.

Táña started a business with a colleague with whom she was in love. Although he lived with his family, they decided to have a child together when Táña turned 35. As in the *Single after partnership dissolution* trajectories, childbirth was a turning point. The father of Táña’s child left her because their relationship suddenly involved responsibility and limitations, so she was struggling with the difficulties of solo motherhood. After six months, she moved in with a woman friend who was living alone with her three children and they formed an alternative family, offering each other support. When she considered re-partnering, she emphasized that her child’s interests came first: ‘Children know that they have you just for themselves. This complicates my situation a bit when I fall in love with someone.’ (Táña) Táña described herself as an independent person: ‘I’ve lived alone all my life, and I can take care of myself alone.’ According to her, all her partnerships were ‘colourful’ and ‘anything but traditional’. She had a child because she wanted to experience motherhood. She thought if she had a second child, she would lose her independence, lifestyle, and economic stability. Her narrative suggests that a single child may be a consequence of life orientation, unconventional trajectories, and non-adherence to conventional partnership and family norms.

4. Findings and discussion

This study contributes to knowledge on sub-replacement fertility and the connection between partnership and reproductive trajectories. It contributes to previous research by addressing the link between having an only child and partnership trajectories in a

sub-replacement fertility context with low levels of permanent childlessness. Moreover, it highlights the advantages of combining qualitative and quantitative life-course approaches to address fertility-related issues.

Sequence and regression analyses identified the links between having only one child and partnership trajectory types. Qualitative data provided insights into parents' perspectives and the meanings they ascribe to the lived processes behind the statistically documented relations and trends. Altogether, the different types of data provided a deeper understanding of the link between partnership trajectories and having just one child.

Quantitative data confirmed that partnership trajectories after the birth of the first child influence the final number of children a parent has. Remaining single after a partnership dissolves following the birth of the first child was found to be associated with a higher probability of parents' having only one child. The parents' narratives revealed that the timing of the break-up is crucial: If the couple breaks up before they have the second child they were planning to have, the parents may then face the unfavourable fertility situation of being single and a solo parent. In subsequent partnerships later in life, there is a higher chance of having a partner who has children from previous partnerships. The result is that these people may have fewer own children than they originally planned to have. Moreover, a higher age itself is associated with reductions in fertility plans because of health and other reasons (Iacovou & Tavares, 2011).

The qualitative analysis revealed the mechanisms underlying the multi-directionality of the relationships between partnership and reproductive trajectories. Childbirth may contribute to partnership dissolution and union dissolution may diminish parents' reproductive plans. In addition to partnership dissolution after the first childbirth, the fragility of a relationship also leads mothers to have just one child so as to avoid the difficulties caused by the possible dissolution of their ongoing partnership.

Quantitative analysis highlighted that not living with a partner when one has one's first child is among men associated with a higher probability of having only one child. It also showed that low-educated solo mothers are more likely to have another child than highly-educated solo mothers. These findings are consistent with those of Morávková and Kreidl (2017), who showed that solo mothers with low education levels were more likely to establish a new partnership than highly-educated solo mothers. Moreover, our qualitative analysis highlighted some of the reasons that lead highly-educated solo mothers to not have another child. According to the narratives of the highly-educated mothers (especially those with unconventional partnership-reproductive trajectories), the second child posed a risk to their work-life balance, professional trajectories, management of their independence, class, and economic and social status. Having a second child would also prevent them from providing 'proper childcare' as they defined it. For parents who had their first child with a second (or later) coresidential partner, a higher age at first childbirth and a partner's children from previous relationships are some of the reasons that lead to them not having another child.

Partnership trajectories and the transition to parenthood influence each other and may be influenced by the same underlying preferences or circumstances. The narratives of some mothers who were not on the aforementioned conventional trajectory illustrated how an orientation towards values other than conventional heterosexual family values may lead to unconventional partnership-reproductive trajectories. These women found fulfilment in their work and network of friends and were unwilling to accept separate

gender roles in a heterosexual couple family. They valued the experience of motherhood, but remaining at one child became their strategy by which to avoid compromising their other identities.

Although unconventional union histories were found to be associated with a higher probability of having an only child, most parents of an only child followed the conventional trajectory of having a child with their first long-term coresidential partner. The qualitative analysis showed that for those who had their first child in their 20s, work-life balance issues and negative changes in their partnership after they had their first child were the main factors that led them to not have a second child. Similarly to Oláh (2003) and Nagase and Brinton (2017), who found that men's poor participation in household tasks lowers the probability of having a second child among dual-income couples, our research suggests that mother's perception that her partner is not participating enough in childcare (while her childcare responsibilities were too intensive) may lead to them not having another child.

The quantitative analysis showed that becoming a parent later in life reduced the probability of having another child. Among women, higher education was related to a higher probability of having only one child, but this effect was driven by their later entry into motherhood. By contrast, among fathers, low education was associated with having an only child even when controlled for the timing of the first birth. Economic factors and the traditional responsibility of men as the main breadwinners may have played a role (Trimarchi & Van Bavel, 2017) when Czech family policy supports the male-breadwinner model.

Postponing a first child is only partly a matter of choice: finding the right partner may take some time, and conception may be hindered by health issues, especially with age. Some (mainly university-educated) interviewees shared the 'dominant cultural story' (Erel, 2007) about postponing parenthood to a later age in connection with self-realization, but some of them were critical about the trend they had followed in their younger years. Some felt that the trend had been imposed on them. In either case, later transitions to parenthood were associated with non-progression to a second child.

Our study has a few limitations. First, the self-reported histories and the biographical narratives may suffer from recall errors. This could result in the underrepresentation of more complex partnership-reproductive histories (Berrington et al., 2011). Second, we acknowledge men's tendency to underreport (especially non-resident) children (Vergauwen et al., 2015), which potentially reduces the quality of the quantitative data and makes men less available for qualitative interviews. Third, the qualitative data generated in this study do not include narratives of always wanting just one child and do not allow for a comparison between parents of one child and parents of more children.

Despite these limitations, we believe that researchers can benefit from a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative life-history data and biographical narratives when studying reproduction. Using quantitative life-history data to study socio-demographic trends that reflect changes in the life trajectories of individuals is apt because this approach is effective for testing hypotheses about the timing, pace, and extent of the studied phenomena and for estimating the relationships between the studied phenomena and other factors. The use of biographical narratives to study the same phenomena is also apt because they provide information on the meanings that actors assigned to the lived processes that drive socio-demographic trends. Combining

these approaches enhances our understanding of current socio-demographic trends, especially from the viewpoint of formulating evidence-based policies to tackle phenomena such as sub-replacement fertility.

Notes

1. In CHPS data, 97% of second children were born within 12 years after the first childbirth.
2. We excluded 211 individuals who did not report the year of any union entry or dissolution (if they occurred). In cases with missing months, we used imputation by a uniformly random variable.
3. The maximal number of partners in the sample was four.
4. Sequence analyses were performed using the TraMineR package for R (Gabadinho et al., 2011) and WeightedCluster for sequence clustering (Studer, 2013).
5. Costs of transformation are given in terms of empirical status-specific substations costs, and indel was set to 1.
6. According to CHPS data, more than 99% of fathers and mothers had their first child before the age of 42. Among the parents with at least two children, 99.7% of mothers and 97.2% of fathers had their second child before this age.
7. The European Values Study from 2017 suggests that if ideal living conditions were secured, only 1% of Czechs would like to be lifelong childfree, 10% to have an only child, more than half to have two children and more than a third to have more than two children (Rabušic & Chromková Manea, 2018).

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