

Lisbeth Trille G. Loft

Department of Sociology, Brown University, USA

& Department of Sociology, University of Copenhagen, Denmark

Introduction

As a consequence of the significant social change that has come about since the 1960s, young people, regardless of social class and gender, had to navigate a society and make decisions in a way that was largely unknown to their parents. Whereas their parents had been a part of the 1950s golden age of marriage, children born during the mid-1950s entered adulthood in a time where women's roles in the family was changing, where a prolonged period of adolescence began to be viewed as a time to gain life experience before entering marriage, and where divorce became an increasingly common option for leaving an unhappy marriage.

It is often argued that out of these new normative structures also grew the idea of marriage not being the principal setting for sexual activity or reproduction (Kiernan 2001; Coontz 1997), which, in turn, lessened the validity of marriage as the dominant type of union (Kiernan 2004b). Today the rise of cohabitation during the late 1960s and 1970s is frequently described as a kind of progressive development, and especially so in the Scandinavian context (Ibid). This is mainly the case because of assumed linkages between to greater female autonomy, increased participation in education, access to contraception and increased level of secularization.

Yet, so far only a limited number of studies have practically asserted whether these theorized connections paint a realistic picture of who, among those to come of age during this rapid social change, was likely to experience cohabitation. The objective of this present study is to empirically inform part of the theoretical discussion on the rise of cohabitation in the Danish context from the late 1960s and onwards. More specifically, this paper investigates how parental social status, childhood circumstances, family formation attitudes, and personal values affect the likelihood of forming a cohabiting union between age 16 and 45 for a cohort of Danish men and women born during the mid-1950s. This cohort was among the first to cohabit in great numbers as well as to come of age during a well-established Danish welfare state offering a new individual right-based (as opposed to need-based) opportunity structure largely unknown to previous generations.

Data and Methods

Only limited datasets follow respondents over a satisfying period of the adult life course, and even fewer dataset include personal aspirations prior to family formation. However, in 1968 the Danish

National Centre for Social Research introduced the Danish Longitudinal Survey of Youth (DLSY), which satisfies both of these necessities.

The DLSY is designed as a nationally representative prospective longitudinal survey of a cohort of 7th graders¹ enriched by retrospective life histories. More specifically, this dataset include relationship histories, fertility histories, extensive information on family background, attitudinal data, as well as social networks, health, and personal interests. Presently the DLSY consists of 7 waves of data collection, as the respondents were interviewed for the first time in 7th grade when they were about age 14 (1968), and again when they were about age 16 (1976), about age 17 (1971), about age 19 (1973), about age 22 (1976), about age 38 (1992), and about age 47 (2001).

This repeated and comprehensive data collection effort allows me to observe cohabitation beyond the transition to adulthood years, and facilitates an expansion on the set of indicators previously employed in research on cohabitation. Thus, it enables a sociologically nuanced assessment of cohabitation as an emerging social phenomenon during a time of great social change.

Sample. Among the entire 7th grade classes in Denmark in 1968 a total of 152 were randomly selected, constituting 4 percent of all 7th grade classes nationwide². These 152 classes held a total of 2998 students available for interview in the initial 1968 wave of data collection. Among these 2998 respondents, it is possible to generate full life histories for 2272 respondents (1174 females and 1098 males), which constitute the initial sample in this present study. Taking into account the 33 year-span of data collection 24 percent attrition must be considered a satisfactory result, and no evidence of attrition bias has been identified.

In the Danish context respondents who never experience to form neither cohabiting nor married unions before their mid-40s are likely to be a select group. Thus, only those respondents who ever form a union (married or cohabiting) at some point during the window of observation are included for analysis. Among this study's initial sample of 1174 females and 1098 males, 22 females (2 percent) and 50 males (4 percent) never experience a cohabiting or married union. After the exclusion of these 62 respondents, the actual analytical sample consists of 1152 females and 1058 males.

Analysis. Multivariate logistic regression is used to predict cohabitation experience between age 16 and age 45. The base outcome (omitted category) is never to have experienced cohabitation. In

¹ This sampling procedure resulted in that 10 percent of the sample was born in 1953, 3 percent in 1955, and 84 percent in 1954. I refer to the respondents as a cohort although technically they are not all born in 1954.

² Counted as of September 1st 1967.

addition to the above-described independent indicators, all models are controlled for age at first union and age at first child. As family formation processes and life course experiences are likely to differ between the sexes, models are estimated separately for men and women.

Results

In short, the results presented in this paper suggest that several factors jointly shape people's decisions to engage in cohabitation. Examining this from a cohort perspective using a rich longitudinal prospective data, demonstrate that parental social status together with the type of area a person lived longest growing up influence the likelihood of cohabitation, thereby challenging the popular perception of new family behaviors emerging in the middle class and then transferring to other strata in society. In the Danish context modern cohabitation appears to have developed simultaneously from two opposite origins, namely the urban elite and the rural working class.

The analysis also takes into account that men and women are likely to experience life conditions differently. Results associated with both childhood circumstances and personal attitudes display a novel gendered perspective on modern cohabitation. For example, not to spend the majority of one's childhood years in an intact nuclear family is among members of this cohort associated with a higher likelihood of experiencing pre-marital cohabitation among men and post-marital cohabitation among women. To experience the severe illness of an immediate family member as a child significantly decrease the likelihood of cohabitation among men. A more career-orientated approach to paid labor as something that should be challenging and disagreement with traditional gender roles show more substantial effects on women's subsequent decisions to cohabit than it did among men.

Implications

An overarching contribution of this study is that it furthers our empirical understanding of cohabitation in a life course perspective. The simultaneous analysis of the effect of a broad variety of social circumstances and personal aspirations enhances knowledge gained from previous studies. Studies on the likelihood of forming a cohabiting union concerned with the effect of socio-economic background, of structure of family of origin, or of gender attitudes have all been useful in establishing that in comparison to married couples, those who engage in cohabitation are likely to differ on all or some of these variables. However, these studies rarely have access to high-quality measures for all of these predictors in the same dataset, and are thus unable to assess the relative effect as well as how these predictors may interact.

Social circumstances during childhood proved to be of significant importance, when understanding who is likely to experience cohabitation. However, effects were not limited to well-known determinants such as social status and the structure of family of origin. For instance, the fact that the experience of an immediate family member's severe illness play a substantive part in men's likelihood of forming a cohabiting union, suggests that non-economic measures of deprivation during childhood are necessary components in fully grasping the complexity of childhood circumstances.

Finally, this study includes a variety of measures regarding attitudes and personal values, which add substantively to our knowledge on who is likely to experience cohabitation. Quantitative studies often overlook the fact that individuals do exercise agency in that they make decisions based their personal values as well as on the opportunities and constraints they perceive before them.

TABLES

Odds Ratios for Logistic Regression Models Predicting to Ever Have Cohabited Among Those Forming Unions Between Age 16 and 45.				
	<i>Model 1</i> Women	<i>Model 2</i> Men	<i>Model 3 (full)</i> Women	<i>Model 4 (full)</i> Men
N	1152	1058	1152	1058
Parental social status group 1968 [continuous and decreasing]	1.02	1.04	1.17*	1.27**
Childhood circumstances (until age 16)				
Lived with both parents (ref.)	1	1	1	1
Did not live with both parents	1.48*	1.40†	1.51*	1.40†
Number of siblings in 1968 [continuous and increasing]	1.05	0.89*	1.05	0.89* ■
No family member had severe illness (ref.)	1	1	1	1
Any family member had severe illness	0.97	1.53*	0.97	1.54* ■
Lived longest in a rural area (ref.)	1	1	1	1
Lived longest in town area	1.15	0.98	2.16**	1.98*
Lived longest in city or capital area	1.27†	0.86	4.48**	3.38**
Attitudes about family formation 1968				
Agree that if expecting child should marry (ref.)	1	1	1	1
Disagree that if expecting child should marry	1.32†	1.43*	1.31†	1.42*
Want two children (ref.)	1	1	1	1
Want no child or one child only	1.01	0.83	1.01	0.83
Want three or more children	0.81	0.81	0.80†	0.81
Personal values 1968				
Agree that an easy job becomes boring (ref.)	1	1	1	1
Disagree that an easy job becomes boring	0.68**	0.90	0.68**	0.90 □
Level of disagreement with trad. gender roles [continuous and increasing]	1.17*	1.02	1.17*	1.02 □
Similar opinions as own parents (ref.)	1	1	1	1
Not similar opinions as own parents	1.21†	1.39**	1.22†	1.39**
Control variables				
Age at first union [continuous and increasing]	0.84***	0.80**	0.85***	0.80**
Age at first child [continuous and increasing]	1.32***	1.21***	1.32***	1.21*** □
Interaction effects				
Parental social status group 1968*area lived longest	-	-	0.84**	0.82**
LR chi2	139.33	178.43	146.10	187.44
Number of imputations	10	10	10	10

Note: Models estimated separately for men and women. Respondents who never experience to be married or to form a cohabiting union are excluded. LRchi2 is provided for multiple imputed dataset #1.

■ Men versus women significantly different at $P < .05$, □ Men versus women significantly different at $P < .01$. Differences only noted in full models. † $P < .10$; * $P < .05$; ** $P < .01$, *** $P < .001$.