

Can we take them at their words?

Cohabitors' marriage intentions and subsequent marital behavior in Norway

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Abstract

Using a unique combination of survey data and register data ($N=1,731$), this paper investigates the correspondence between cohabitators' marriage intentions (as stated in a representative survey) and their subsequent actual behavior (as shown by marital histories from official registers six years later) in Norway. In particular, we investigate what groups of cohabitators fulfill their marriage intentions. Methodologically, the follow-up approach taken allows us to investigate how powerful marriage intentions are as predictors of future marital behavior. Cohabitators' marriage intentions seem to be fairly strong predictors of future marital behavior, at least for cohabitators with concrete marriage intentions: 63% of the cohabitators with intentions to marry within two years were actually married by the end of the follow-up period. The comparable figures for those with less concrete or no marriage plans were 29% and 17%. About 50% of cohabitators with concrete marriage intentions made the transition to marriage within two years.

Introduction and previous research

In Norway, living together without being married is more widespread than in most other countries, and cohabitation has been a well-established phenomenon for several decades and is nearly completely socially acceptable. Today, 90% of first partnerships are cohabitations (Wiik, 2008) and more than half of all first births are born in consensual unions (Statistics Norway, 2008a). Also, cohabiting couples have gradually been given many of the same rights and obligations as married couples (Noack, 2001). Nonetheless, according to official statistics for 45-year olds, as few as 27% of men and 19% of women have never been married (Statistics Norway, 2008b). Survey data also show that a majority of young cohabitators expect to get married eventually (Lyngstad & Noack, 2005).

There may, however, be discrepancies between marriage expectations and subsequent behavior (e.g., Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005). In the present paper we use a unique combination of survey data and register-based follow-up data six years after the survey was taken to assess the correspondence between cohabitators' marriage intentions and actual behavior. In particular, we aim to investigate which cohabitators are most likely to follow up their intentions and make the transition from cohabitation to marriage within the follow-up period. Methodologically, the follow-up approach taken allows us to make strong claims about how powerful marriage intentions are as predictors of future marital behavior.

Numerous studies have underscored the importance of socioeconomic factors on the transition to marriage for cohabitators. For instance, higher educated cohabitators are more likely to marry their partners compared with the lower educated (Bernhardt, 2002; Manning & Smock, 2002). In Sweden, Duvander (1999) found that female cohabitators whose partners' education was high had an increased likelihood of marrying. Also, having a high income partner could be positively related to planning to marry. Such a partner is more likely to contribute to the household economy, and could bring social status and prestige to the couple.

Drawing on in-depth interviews with cohabitators from the working and lower middle classes in the U.S., Smock, Manning, and Porter (2005) found that financial issues were important for the decision to marry. Their results showed that these cohabitators did not want to marry before they had an “economic package” including home ownership and financial stability.

Correspondingly, financial concerns were found to be an important obstacle to marriage among cohabiting parental couples in the U.S. (Gibson-Davis et al., 2005).

As argued by Amato (2007), surprisingly little research on marriage has tried to incorporate romantic love into their models. Love can be defined as a strong emotional bond between partners that involves sexual desire, a preference to put the other person's or the couple's interests ahead of one's own, and willingness to forgive the other person's transgressions (Amato, 2007, p. 307). According to Stanley and Markman (1992) “dedication commitment” refers to a desire to be with the partner and to prioritize the relationship. Dedication commitment could be conceptualized as one component of love, and we expect cohabitators who are committed to their current unions to be more likely to marry than the less committed. Moreover, the findings of Brown (2004) show that cohabitators who were satisfied with their current partnerships were more likely to marry compared with those living in relationships of lower quality. Similarly, Gibson-Davis et al. (2005) reported that poor relationship quality was a barrier to marriage among cohabiting parental couples.

Consequently, we set out to investigate the following research questions:

- i) Are there correspondence between cohabitators' marriage intentions and their actual behavior in Norway, and how many cohabitators with marriage intentions make the transition to marriage within six years after the survey was taken?

Next, we will investigate what groups of cohabitators fulfill their marriage intentions. As prior research has found that socioeconomic variables as well as relationship assessments are related to marriage, we include them as predictors of cohabitators' later marital behavior.

- ii) Are cohabitators who are most committed to, and satisfied with their unions more likely to follow up their plans than the less committed and satisfied? And are socioeconomic variables, like education and income, positively associated with the transition to marriage?

We also investigate the association between a range of sociodemographic and attitudinal measures and cohabitators' transition to marriage. For instance, do the childless, those with step children and those living in shorter-lived unions have a lower likelihood of marrying? And although cohabitators are equalized with those married in public law areas, far more restraint is exercised in the area of private law, which to a large degree is left to the cohabitators themselves to regulate by private agreement. Cohabitators who make such agreements and those engaged to be married could be more "trustworthy" and have higher marriage rates than other cohabitators.

Data and method

We use data from the *New Families Survey*, a nationally representative postal survey conducted by Statistics Norway in 2003. The survey includes questions about respondents' plans, expectation, and attitudes regarding family and working life. In addition, some information, such as the respondent's education and place of residence, was taken from administrative registers. The sample consists of men aged 23 to 47 and women aged 20 to 44 years who have at least one Norwegian-born parent ($N = 6,317$). The overall response rate was 63.3%. In the present analysis we are interested in individuals who were living as cohabitators at time of the interview. After excluding married respondents and those without a

co-residential partner our final data set comprises 1,731 cohabitators.

Marriage intentions were captured by asking cohabiting respondents whether or not they were planning to marry their current partners. For cohabitators with marriage plans the response categories were: “yes, within the next two years,” or “yes, at some later time.” Cohabitators who plan to marry within the next two years were defined as having concrete marriage intentions. Thus, we separate between cohabitators with intent to marry within the next two years (1), those who intend to marry their partners eventually (2), and cohabitators without such intentions (3).

Using an ID number system, the survey data on marriage intentions were linked to marital histories from administrative registers that cover the subsequent period. Although we do not have the ID number of respondent’s partners, we do have their date of birth. If the birth date of the spouse is the same, we assume that respondents have married the partner they were cohabiting at time of the survey. In order to grant respondents’ time to fulfill their intentions, 6-year follow-up data were linked to the survey data in March 2009.

This follow-up approach implies that we can ignore typical problems that plague panel studies such as non-response in a follow-up survey. Similarly, retrospective union histories often have their flaws. For instance, Hayford and Morgan (2008) showed that retrospective cohabitation histories tend to underestimate the rates of cohabitation in distant periods relative to rates estimated closer to the date of survey. The survey data were also supplemented with longitudinal register data on respondents’ education (level and activity), income and place of residence. We employ discrete time event history analysis to estimate the occurrence and timing of an eventual marriage among the cohabitators.

Preliminary findings

38% of the cohabitators were planning to marry their partners. Of these, 15% had concrete marriage plans, i.e. planned to marry their partners within two years after the survey was taken, whereas the remaining 23% were planning to marry eventually.

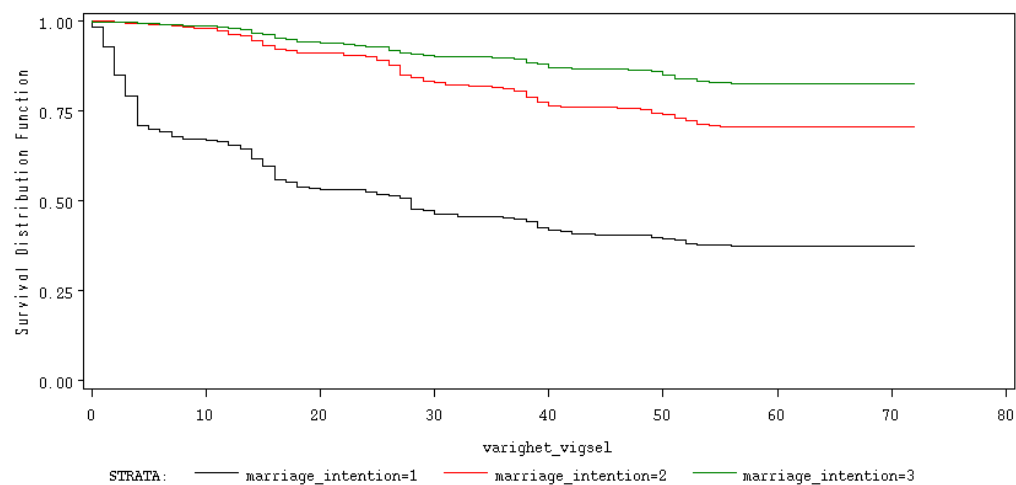
As can be seen from Table 1, 27% of the cohabitators had married their partner by the end of the follow-up period. There are, however, major differences by whether or not the cohabitators had (concrete) marriage intentions at the time of the survey. As much as 63% of the cohabitators with intentions to marry within two years were actually married by the end of the follow-up period. The comparable figure for those with less concrete marriage plans was 29. 17% of cohabitators without any marriage intentions had married (see Table 1).

Table 1 Per cent married in 2009 by their marriage intentions in 2003. $N = 1,687$

	Concrete marriage plans	Marry eventually	No plans	All
Not married	37	71	83	73
Married	63	29	17	27
<i>n</i>	256	395	1,036	1,687

There seems to be a fair amount of correspondence between cohabitators' marriage intentions and their actual behavior in Norway. This is at least true for cohabitators with concrete marriage intentions: About 50% of these cohabitators made the transition to marriage within two years (see Figure 1, black line). We also note that there are clear seasonal variations and that there is a sharp increase in the number of marriages during spring. There are no major differences between cohabitators with intentions to marry within five years (red line) and cohabitators without marriage intentions (green line).

Figure 1 Survival time as non-married by marriage intentions. $N = 1,687$



Further analyses show that university educated cohabitators with marriage intentions have a higher marriage transition rate compared to their lower educated counterparts: Approximately 70% of the university educated cohabitators with concrete marriage intentions married within two years compared with 45% of their less educated counterparts. Also, cohabitators with a high annual income (> 350.000 NOK) as well as those with a higher earning partner more often follow up their intentions to marry within two years relative to those less well off. Cohabitators who report satisfaction with their partnerships, as well as cohabitators whose majority of friends are married, are more likely to transform their unions into a marriage within two years than the ones who are moderately to less satisfied and those whose majority of friends are single or cohabiting.

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