

The realization of marriage plans among cohabiting couples in Scandinavia

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Cohabitation seems to be a rising phenomenon throughout the Western world. The Scandinavian countries have been leading this trend, and most likely still have the highest levels of cohabitation (e.g., Heuveline and Timberlake, 2008; Noack, 2010). It is thus rare in Scandinavia for a marriage to start directly, without previous cohabitation – in fact about half of all first births are born to cohabiting couples. Still, most people do get married eventually, and many young people seem to regard marriage as a positive option in their lives (Bernhardt 2002, Noack 2010).

The Scandinavian countries are often cited as examples of countries where cohabitation is largely indistinguishable from marriage (Heuveline and Timberlake 2004). In earlier analyses (Wiik et al., 2009) we have, however, shown that Scandinavian cohabitators are a heterogeneous group: commitment and relationship quality among those who intend to marry their current partner within two years seem to differ much less from those already married than from cohabitators with no marriage plans. Analysis of marriage plans among cohabitators shows that both ‘love’ and ‘money’ are associated with cohabitators’ intentions to marry their current partner (Wiik et al., 2010). University education and having a partner whose education is higher than one’s own increase the likelihood that cohabitators intend to marry. Likewise, being satisfied with and committed to the union is positively related to having marriage plans.

Although data about intentions and preferences for future behaviour has a solid tradition in demographic surveys, the usefulness of asking such questions is still much disputed. An intuitive premise for gathering this kind of data is that they to some degree predict future behaviour, either on an individual or a group level. We now know a good deal about the predictive value of fertility intentions (e.g., Morgan and Rackin, 2010; Noack and Østby, 2002; Schoen et al., 1999; Speder and Kapitany, 2009). Our knowledge about the fulfilling of intentions and plans to marry is much more limited, although some studies have been performed (e.g. Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005).

This paper intends to study the extent to which those with positive marriage intentions actually realize their plans and do get married within the next few years. In other words, are marriage intentions reasonably good predictors of actual marriage in a short time perspective? And which factors increase the probability of a wedding actually taking place?

Data and methods

We utilize data from the Swedish survey of *Family and Working Life in the 21st Century*, and the Norwegian *New Families Survey*, two postal surveys conducted in 2003. This gives us a joint data set

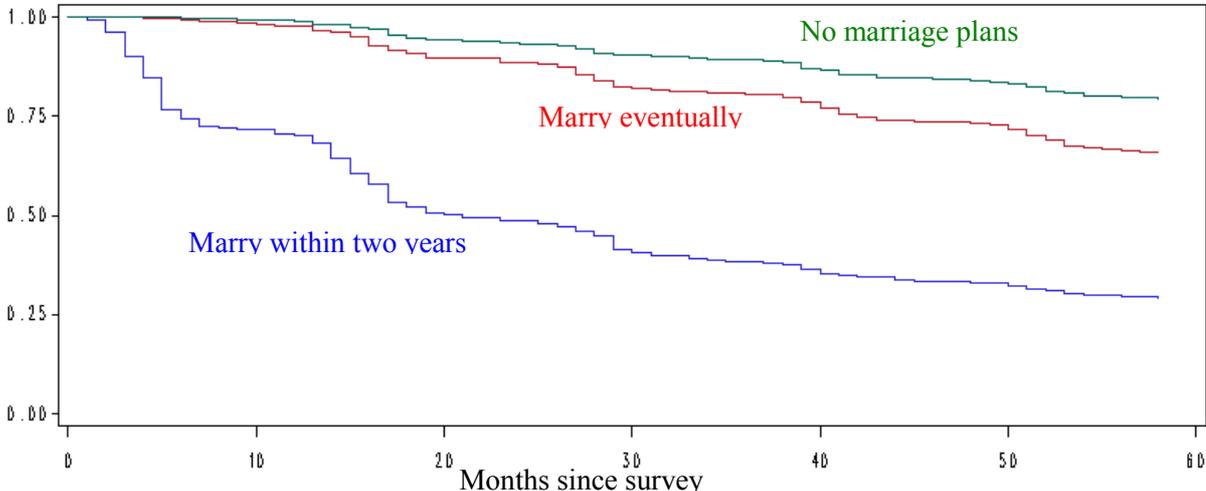
with about 1600 women and men aged 25 to 35, who were living as cohabitators at the time of the surveys in 2003. The fulfilling of the marriage intentions in a subsequent five years period is measured by looking at respondents' marriage histories in administrative registers. Provided that the respondents give their consent, linking such data is facilitated through the system of personal ID numbers we have in Norway and Sweden. For the analysis we have used Kaplan-Meier plots and discrete-time logistic regression of cohabitators' transition to marriage. Censoring occurs when a respondent marries, dies, or moves abroad.

Marriage intentions were captured by asking the respondents whether or not they intended to marry their current partner, with the possible response alternatives: 1) yes, within the next two years, 2) yes, but later on, and 3) no marriage plans. In our combined data set, 20 percent said they intended to get married within two years, 29 percent said they planned to get married later on, and 51 percent had no marriage intentions at the time of the survey. The large proportions of those with marriage plans indicate that cohabitation is often not perceived as a permanent situation, and that marriage still has a fairly strong position in Scandinavia. However, do the respondents actually fulfill their marriage intentions?

Preliminary results

The Kaplan-Meier plots of the realization of cohabitators' marriage intentions for a five-year follow-up period in Figure 1 show that among those with definite marriage plans (within the next two years) over three fourths (77.5%) had actually realized their plans. Among those with more vague marriage plans (yes, but later on) as much as one-third had actually got married within the five-year period. Even among those who at the time of the survey said they had no plans to marry their current partner, 20 percent had nevertheless celebrated their wedding. Note, however, that this is not a couple study. We do not know whether the other part may have had marriage intentions or not.

Figure 1 Kaplan-Meier plot of realization of marriage intentions



Preliminary results of discrete-time logistic regression of cohabitators' transition to marriage showed that those with definite marriage plans were more than five times as likely to actually get married compared to those with no marriage plans. Also those with more vague marriage plans were significantly more likely to make the transition from cohabitation to marriage. Positively related to actual transition to marriage among cohabitators were the following factors: university education, age, home ownership and most friends being already married. Not surprisingly, cohabitators who are satisfied with their unions are more likely to realize their intentions than the less satisfied, but intentions itself carry more weight than satisfaction with the relationship. These results corroborate some of the previous findings of Moors and Bernhardt (2009), who analyzed the Swedish data, and showed that familistic attitudes, work-related values and reflections about the quality of the partner relationship positively influenced the transition to marriage among cohabitators, even taking intentions into account.

We found no significant effect of the duration of the union. Those who have lived together more than 3 years do not fulfil their intentions to marry more than those who have lived together for a longer time. Neither has having children at the time of the interview any significant effect on marrying during the follow-up period. The fact that having children does not influence the fulfilling of marriage intentions, may be viewed in the light of the high frequency and the acceptance of cohabitators having children in Scandinavia and that the Nordic welfare states represent a security net which makes it less risky economically to have children without being married. There seems to be no difference between women and men when it comes to fulfilling marriage intentions. The Swedish cohabitators, whether they had marriage intentions or not, were a little bit more prone to marry than the Norwegians. This difference did, however, disappear in the multivariate analysis.

Further analyses

We intend to pursue our event history analysis by adding time-varying variables of the number of children in the relationship and income. We will also include additional variables such as being engaged and the general acceptance of cohabitation. Moreover, we will run regressions separately for Norway and Sweden, as each data set has some strengths – and some shortcomings. For Sweden, we can take advantage of the fact that there was a follow-up survey in 2009. Thus we can censor the cohabiting relationships when separation occurs. For Norway we can take advantage of including older cohabitators (women up to 44 and men 47).

Conclusions

The large proportions of preferences for marriage, approximately half of cohabitators aged 25-35, indicate that even in Scandinavia, cohabitation is often not perceived as a permanent situation, but rather as a step towards a more lasting and committed union, a marriage.

So far, our analysis indicates that data on marriage intentions are not only easily collected, but are also reasonably good predictors of future marriage on an individual level, at least in a short time perspective (less than 2 years).

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