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WHO WILL BE THE FIRST TO MARRY? EDUCATION AND TRANSITION FROM COHABITATION TO MARRIAGE

Keywords: cohabitation, marriage, education, Lithuania

Introduction

Increase in cohabitation which started in the late 1960s in Northern and Western Europe has been one of the most striking changes in the institution of family in the 20th century. Although non-marital unions existed in the earlier historical periods (Kiernan, 2002), the contemporary cohabitations play a substantially different role in the demographic and sociological development of the family. However, after more than half a century, the history of cohabitation in the countries where the diffusion of non-marital unions started first, cohabitation did not become a substitute for marriage. In many cases it is not a life-long choice but mere a stage in the marital process (Anderson and Philipov, 2002). Moreover marriage sustains its social desirability and social value, even in such countries as Sweden, where cohabitation is widespread and socially acceptable (Bernhardt, 2004). The evidence on the temporary nature of the cohabitation in the life course raises the question on the social forces that determine the progression from cohabitation to marriage. There is a growing body of research evidence from various developed countries that this process is socially differentiated in regard to individual social and economic characteristics (education, employment) (Kravdal, 1999; Oppenheimer, 2003; Kalmijn, 2011) and that this differentiation is dynamic over time (Ni Brochlain, Beaujouan 2013) and it’s gradient depends on such contextual factors as the gender role segregation and the socio-economic outcomes of educational differences in the country (Kalmijn 2013). Contrary to the growing evidence from the countries of North America, Western and Northern Europe, the research on Eastern Europe remains scarce although there are some studies on the role of the educational recourses in the marital behavior in Russia, Ukraine and Romania (Gerber and Berman 2010; Perelli-Harris, 2008).
In the current study we focus on the event of transition from cohabitation to marriage in Lithuania, an Eastern European country that within this region represents the case of relatively late adoption of the non-direct family formation pattern, adherence to the familialistic values and traditional gender attitudes and together with other countries of the region shares large educational differences in employment (Heyns, 2004). Our principle interest is the investigation of the effect of individual’s educational resources on the exit from cohabitation and entry into marriage. The analysis is guided by the following research question: what is the educational gradient in the transition from cohabitation to marriage across gender groups and across various partnership cohorts in the Lithuanian society?

Through answering this question we could assess several issues. First, we could identify the social groups that in the Lithuanian socio-economic setting stay in cohabitation longer and thus adopt the cohabitation as an alternative to marriage. Considering the education one of the main precursors of individual’s economic and life-style outcomes, we could assess whether the prolonged cohabitation is the choice of those with higher resources or with the lower. The answer to the question opens up the opportunity to theorize on the social mechanism of the family formation changes in the light of the two competing theoretical explanatory frameworks – the economic and the cultural. Second, looking at the effect of education on the transition from cohabitation to marriage in the dynamic perspective (across various partnership cohorts) we could assess the continuity or change of the role of educational resources in various socio-economic settings – both, in the Soviet and the transitional society. Third, we hope that our case study from Eastern Europe could contribute to the broader socio-historic discussion on the return of the family to its historical complexity (Therborn, 2004, p. 314) and to the relevance of social class divisions in the marital behavior that were historically inherent to many societies (Mitterauer, 1983; Kiernan, 2004).

Theoretical background

Theoretical explanations of the family formation changes in the countries of Eastern and Central Europe that became visible and better empirically documented after the 1990s attracted a lot of scientific attention and basically replicated two predominant and competing explanatory domains employed in the Western scholarship. The demarcation line between the two frameworks in general follows the culture-structure divide and, in explaining family changes, prioritizes either cultural or structural, predominantly economic, factors. The first explanatory framework is the theory of the Second Demographic Transition (Lesthaeghe, 1983; Van de Kaa, 1987). The second one is “the pattern of disadvantage” (Perelli-Harris, Gerber, 2011), “uncertainty hypothesis” (Oppenheimer 2003) or the “crisis perspective”, developed in relation to the family and fertility changes in Eastern and Central Europe.

In regard to the first theoretical framework we expect that people with higher education were the first to initiate the prolonged cohabitation in Lithuania and this association would be stable for the partnerships contracted at different periods during the 1980s and well into the 2000s. Considering the economic explanatory framework and looking at the trends in other developed countries, we could expect that in the Lithuanian society after the 1990s the educational resources would become relevant for the transition from cohabitation to marriage. Lower economic and social security, bleaker economic prospects associated with lower education would negatively affect the timing of transition and facilitate longer spells of cohabitation in the life course calendar.

Data and methods

We use pooled data sets of two waves of Generations and Gender Survey (GGS) carried out respectively in 2006 and 2009 in Lithuania. The GGS samples are large, nationally representative and include men and women aged 18–79 and living in non-institutional households. The surveys recorded the complete partnership histories and dates of events in a monthly accuracy.

In this analysis we use the pooled dataset that integrates the partnership histories from the first and the second waves of the GGS surveys. The pooled dataset has the advantage of recording more
partnership histories and better opportunities to analyze the family formation behavior of the older generations that are less well represented in the single survey dataset. The sample size in the first wave was 10036, in the second – 8042 respondents. In the pooled dataset, there are 12,127 first partnerships; out of the total, 5,780 are men’s and 6,347 women’s partnerships. There are 3,127 first partnerships that started as cohabitations, out of them, 1563 men’s and 1564 women’s. Considering the main aim of the study and in order to control for the union dissolution, the cohabitations that were dissolved were not included into the further analysis (223 men’s cohabitations and 222 women’s cohabitations).

Our main dependant variable was the transition from cohabitation to marriage. Population under risk was all women and men who entered the first partnership as cohabitation. The process time was measured in months elapsed since the entry into the first partnership that was cohabitation. The respondents were followed for the five years after the beginning of cohabitation and the right censoring was performed. The time axis was partitioned into five intervals each lasting up to twelve months. We applied the descriptive and parametric methods of event history analysis. The piecewise constant exponential models were used to examine the shift from direct marriage to cohabitation. Separate models were run for men and women subpopulation and different calendar periods. The main control variable (time-varying) was education with four categories distinguished: high (ISCED 5-6), medium (ISCED 3-4), low (ISCED-2) and in education. The other time varying covariate was the calendar period partitioned into five intervals 1970-1979, 1980-1989, 1990-1999, and 2000-2009. Also the time-varying covariate was the parity-pregnancy status and it included three categories: childless and non-pregnant, childless and pregnant, and with children. Additionally we considered age at the first partnership, respondent’s birth cohort and parental divorce till the respondent was up to 15 years old.

Results

Our analysis revealed that the role of education in the transition from cohabitation to marriage is dynamic over time, which in this study stretches across two essentially different societal conditions and encompasses diverse developmental stages of cohabitation. Educational recourses were insignificant for the transformation of cohabitation to marriage during the two last Soviet decades that coincided with the initial stage of the diffusion of cohabitation in the Lithuanian society, when cohabitation represented a selective behavior and played a role of a prelude to marriage. Thus, the exit from cohabitation to marriage was not conditioned by the men’s and women’s education in the 1970s and 1980s in Soviet Lithuania, if controlled for various demographic and social factors. The two following decades mark a changing role of education in the marital behavior, with low education becoming disadvantageous for the transformation of cohabitation to marriage; cohabitants with higher education demonstrate higher propensity to enter marriage if compared with those with lowest education. This turn toward educationally differentiated partnership behavior progressed simultaneously with further development of cohabitation as it becomes the dominant pattern of family formation, loses its role as a short term partnership arrangement. Moreover, these developments happen in the context of sweeping political, social and economic transformations that the Lithuanian society experienced after the 1990.

References


