

**Multilevel Heterogeneous Diffusion Model of First Partnership in Canada and  
the US**

**[Extended Abstract]**

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The United States and Canada, among many other western societies, have witnessed tremendous family transformations during the last five decades. Marriage is no longer the single socially desirable gateway to conjugal partnership; on the contrary, cohabitation is replacing marriage for a growing number of individuals (e.g., Bumpass & Sweet 1989; Bumpass, Sweet & Cherlin 1991; Wu 1998; 2000). The innovative changes in first union formation interact with other life events, and have resulted in modifications in the trajectory of individuals' life-course transitions as well as in other family aspects (Beaujot 2000; 2004; Ravanera, Rajulton & Burch 1998; 2005).

Previous research suggests that the ongoing changes in marriage and family domain are spectacular in magnitude, speed and in their impact on social life, and that these changes seem to imply an irreversible transition process diffusing within and across societies (Beck 1994; Coontz 2004; Giddens 1991; Kiernan 2001; Liefbroer & Dourleijn 2006). Nevertheless, most of the findings are based on cross-sectional evidences, relying either on cross-population comparison or on comparatively static analysis. Limited research has been done to examine the dynamics of any within-society trajectory so far. In view of the potential "path dependency"<sup>1</sup> of the transition process, it is imperative to combine the cross-sectional evidence with the dynamics over time. A systematic study of the dynamics of partnership transformation processes among the sub-societies (such as regions) in North America can be very fruitful, since the North American societies are relatively comparable in their

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<sup>1</sup> Path dependency here refers to the fact that the transition trajectory may vary from one society to another depending on the cultural, socioeconomic and political diversities in different societies.

sociopolitical and economic conditions, and yet they have noticeable differences in family formation processes.

In this study, using the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979-2004 (NLSY79) in the United States and the Survey of Labor and Income Dynamics 1993-98 (SLID) in Canada, a two-level discrete-time event history model is built to examine the cluster effects of region and cohort on individual-level diffusion of first partnership formation. And, cross-level interactions are tested for certain variables to detect the potential differences that the aggregate-level factors can make for the effects of individual-level covariates on marriage and cohabitation processes. This would contribute to our knowledge about the mechanisms underlying the diverse diffusion processes of first partnership formation, and to test whether the two North American neighbors suggest cross-level interaction effects on the diffusion processes.

Among others, important effects are found for the cohort and regional characteristics of racial/ethnic composition, dominant home language, educational attainment, and the period when events are experienced (measured with the calendar year when first 10% of cohort members formed union). Together with the individual-level covariates, the aggregate-level factors greatly account for the offsetting trends of marriage and cohabitation among the cohorts under study. More homogenous settings facilitate the diffusion of declining marriage and rising cohabitation. Moreover, for historical and contemporary differences in cultural and socioeconomic developments as partly reflected in the factors under study, substantial

path dependency underlies the first partnership transformations across regions in these two North American neighbors.

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