The Formation of Same-Sex and Other-Sex Unions: Evidence from the 1958 and 1970 British Birth Cohorts

The rise of same-sex marriage has resulted in significant attention to the formation of same-sex relationships, including media coverage of same-sex weddings (Severson 2008), psychological studies about same-sex relationships (Peplau and Fingerhut 2007), and policy debates about the value of these relationships. Unfortunately, demographic knowledge about the formation of same-sex relationships is sparse, largely because of the lack of data. As a result, answers to basic questions about the formation of same-sex unions are unknown. For example: When in the life course do individuals enter same-sex unions, and how does this compare to heterosexual couples? What types of people enter same-sex unions compared to heterosexual ones? And given the rapid changes in the context of same-sex relationships, how same-sex coupling changed across cohorts?

In this paper, I investigate the formation of three couple types: same-sex cohabitation, heterosexual cohabitation, and heterosexual marriage. I use data from the 1958 and 1970 British birth cohort studies, which contain retrospective histories of both same-sex and heterosexual coresidential unions from age 16 through 35. I describe variation in the rates, timing, and demographic correlates by each union type. I also examine differences between female and male same-sex couples. Further, given changes in the context surrounding same-sex partnering, I also investigate birth cohort differences in the rates, timing, and correlates of entering each union type. In related work, I am studying the relative stability of these couple types using the 1958 and 1970 British cohort data (Strohm 2008).

This project addresses three limitations of previous research. First, most studies on the formation of same-sex unions are cross-sectional, which confound flows in and out of relationships (e.g., Carpenter and Gates 2008). Only one study investigates the formation of same-sex unions using a longitudinal perspective (Frisch and Hviid 2006). This study, however, investigates same-sex *marriages* in Denmark; the selective nature of marriage suggests that these unions may not be representative of all same-sex coresident unions. Second, most studies compare same-sex cohabitation to heterosexual marriage and ignore heterosexual cohabitation. This is a problem because non-marital cohabitation is an integral piece of the heterosexual union formation process (Seltzer 2000). Additionally, it is useful to compare same-sex and heterosexual cohabitation because neither union type is bound by the institutionalization of marriage. Third, no demographic study to my knowledge has investigated cohort differences in the formation of same-sex cohabitation.

BACKGROUND

Rates and Timing of Union Entry

Rates

 I anticipate that rates of entry into same-sex cohabitation will be significantly lower than rates of entry into heterosexual cohabitation and marriage. This is because individuals with minority sexual orientations, whether defined by self-identification or sexual behavior, comprise less than 5% of the U.S. population (Lauman et al. 1994). Rates of same-sex cohabitation may have increased across cohorts, however, due to the increasingly tolerant normative climate (Loftus 2001). Butler (2005), for example, finds that the proportion of adults who report same-sex sexual behavior increased from 1988 through 2002.

Timing

 I expect that individuals will enter same-sex unions later in the life course than they will enter heterosexual cohabitation and marriage. This is because some individuals may not identify as lesbian or gay until after they marry someone of the other sex. Others may be aware of their sexual orientation but marry anyway to satisfy normative expectations of heterosexuality. Indeed, approximately one-third of women and one-fifth of men in a same-sex couple were previously married (Andersson et al. 2006, Black et al. 2000).

Later entry into same-sex cohabitation, however, may be less prevalent in recent cohorts, as pressures to enter heterosexual unions and marry have subsided. I expect, then, that individuals enter same-sex cohabitation earlier in later cohorts compared to earlier cohorts.

Correlates of Union Entry

Family demographers have linked a number of family background and current characteristics to the probabilities of entering cohabitation and marriage (Berrington and Diamond 2000). Many of these studies are based on the different social psychology, economic resources, and socializations of women and men (Becker 1991, Oppenheimer 1988). It is unclear how these models will fare when applied to the formation of same-sex unions. In this paper, I consider three characteristics: structure of family of origin, economic resources, and geographic region.

Structure of Family of Origin

Heterosexual Marriage and Cohabitation. Parental divorce is negatively associated with entry into heterosexual marriage but positively association with entry into heterosexual cohabitation (Steele, Kallis, and Joshi 2006). This pattern may be due to the internalization of norms about the acceptability of living outside marriage (Thornton 1991).

Same-Sex Cohabitation. One Danish study found that individuals whose parents divorced were *more* likely to form same-sex marriages (Frisch and Hviid 2006). The reasons for this are unclear. It is possible

that parents who divorce also hold more liberal attitudes about homosexuality and same-sex partnering, so their children may themselves be more likely to form these unions.

Economic Resources

Heterosexual Marriage and Cohabitation. Studies generally find positive associations between marriage and economic resources, usually defined as education, occupational status, and income. Mixed results are found for the association between women's economic resources and marriage (Oppenheimer 1997). Compared to married people, heterosexual cohabiters generally are less economically advantaged (Bumpass and Lu 2000). Fundamental to the models underlying studies of economic resources and heterosexual unions is gender specialization in market and non-market work. The presumption here is that the marriage will be long-term and resources will be pooled.

Same-Sex Cohabitation. Economic resources may be less important predictors of entry into same-sex cohabitation compared to heterosexual marriage and cohabitation. This may be because same-sex couples may not expect a long-term commitment or specialization into market and non-market work. Same-sex couples are less likely to pool economic resources and to have children than are heterosexual couples (Black et al. 2007, Blumstein and Schwarz 1983). As a result, I expect weak associations between economic resources and same-sex cohabitation.

Geographic Region

Heterosexual Marriage. Studies document lower rates of heterosexual marriage in urban areas than in rural areas (Berrington and Diamond 2000). This could be due to imbalanced sex ratios or variation in norms about marriage.

Same-Sex Cohabitation. Individuals in urban areas may be more likely to enter same-sex unions than are those in rural areas. This is because lesbians and gay men tend to cluster in urban areas (Black et al. 2000), increasing the pool of potential partners and thus an individual's probability of entering same-sex cohabitation. In addition, norms within urban areas may also be more favorable for the formation of same-sex cohabitation. As a result, I anticipate that individuals from the more urban regions of Great Britain – London and the Southeast – will have higher rates of entry into same-sex cohabitation than individuals from other regions.

METHODS

Data

I use data from two British birth cohort studies, the National Child Development Study (NCDS; n = 12,974) and the 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS; n = 11,924). Both studies track all people born in Great Britain in a particular week in 1958 and 1970, respectively, as well as people who immigrated to Britain by age 16. The retention rates for the NCDS and BCS were 80% and 74%, respectively.

Measures

Relationship History

During the age 30 and age 34/35 interviews, respondents provided a history of coresidential unions, including the sex of each partner, since age 16. By relating the cohort member's sex with the self-reported sex of the partner, I am able to classify unions as same-sex or heterosexual. This allows me to construct a monthly history from age 16-35 of whether an individual were single or in a same-sex cohabitation, heterosexual cohabitation, marriage.

Independent Variables

I include several measures of family background, including father's occupation (Professional, Skilled non-manual, and Manual), whether the cohort member experienced a family disruption in childhood, and region of birth. Using cleaned employment histories (Ward 2007), I use a time-varying indicator of an individual's employment and occupational status. This variable indicates whether an individual was in a high skilled occupation (managerial, professional), intermediate skilled occupation (clerical, sales), low skilled occupation (machine operation), or not employed. Because individuals may adjust their employment because they anticipate entering a union, I will experiment with different lags for this variable. Lastly, I will include a control variable for the number of previous unions an individual has had.

Analysis Plan

I estimate a series of event history models to analyze transitions into same-sex cohabitation, heterosexual cohabitation, and marriage (see Figure 1). Departing from the conventional practice of examining entry into first union, I consider both first and higher-order transitions. Doing so is crucial in this paper because some individuals may enter heterosexual unions before same-sex unions. Focusing exclusively on a person's first union would eliminate same-sex unions that followed a heterosexual union.

Figure 1. Transitions Studied
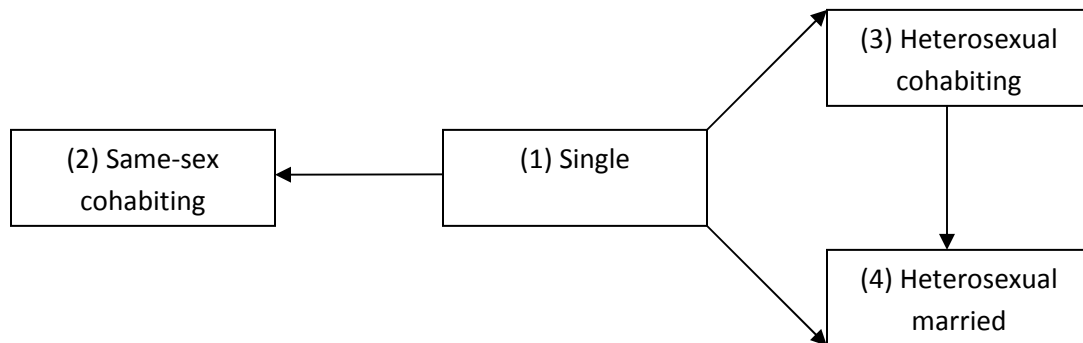
After using life tables to plot the raw hazard and to examine potential non-proportionalities, I estimate a series of event history models. I conduct separate analyses for a person's first union and higher-order unions because the correlates of transition may differ and the "clock" variable differs between first and higher-order unions.

In the analysis of entry into first union, I treat an individual's age as the "clock" variable. An individual is at risk of entering same-sex cohabitation, heterosexual cohabitation, or marriage from age 16 until they enter one of these unions or become censored. An individual may be censored due to attrition or if they never enter one of these unions by age 35. I use a competing risks, multinomial logistic regression to model transitions between being single and entering one of the unions. This model strategy makes no assumptions about a person's sexual orientation and assumes that every individual is at risk for all three union types.

Next, I model entry into higher-order unions. Here, the "clock" variable is the time an individual has been at risk for entering a higher-order union. This analysis consists of multinomial logistic regressions of transitioning from single to one of the three union categories, as well as logistic regressions of transitioning from cohabitation to marriage. In this analysis, I adjust for the clustering of spells within individuals.

State of the Analysis

I have prepared the data for analysis and have conducted some preliminary analysis. I expect to have a first draft of the paper by November 2008, which should allow me enough time to revise the paper for presentation in April 2009.

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