

Cohabitation and Marriage: An Assessment of Research in Demography

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The twentieth century has witnessed extraordinary demographic transformations. Starting with the middle of the XIXth century, the demographic transition will have within the past 150 years completed its turn of the planet, rousing with it social and economic evolutions for which it is still quite difficult to evaluate the significance. Without giving the demographic changes more importance than they deserve, we can not prevent being filled with wonder by the metamorphosis of events that frame human life and constitute the fundamental phenomena of various demographic trends. We have indeed observed a mortality decline without precedent and a reduction of fertility; the different rhythm of these declines has produced the formidable population growth that culminated in the 1950's. The path that has lead to the stabilization of the fundamental demographic phenomena is associated with social transformations; therefore, societal structures will have to support this new demographic balance marked by the prolongation of life, a decreasing fertility rate, the aging of the population and migratory movements of unpredictable proportions (Jackson and Pool, 1994).

Undeniably, this second wave of transformations includes the installation of the conditions necessary to the maintenance of a low fertility rate. In this respect, the Western world is going through a certain "revolution" of its family system, which has been associated with modifications in its reproduction system. One can not believe that the other areas of the world will not give each other new family structures in order to reach a mode of weak fertility necessary to equalize their demographic situation. This "revolution" comprises several stages, some better known than others. The fall of the aspirations in regards to fertility undoubtedly constitutes the first step, followed by a reduction in the average size of families. The change in behavior has largely been facilitated by the availability of contraceptives which are very effective and largely accessible; moreover, changes of mentality towards contraceptive sterilization and abortion allows couples to decide how many children they will have and when they will have them (Jackson and Pool, 1994). This new context made fertility a phenomenon that was in the past largely dependent on physiological aptitudes and duration of exposure to the risk of conceiving, a phenomenon which will result from free decisions made by couples (van de Kaa, 1987). This new reality was to create a disruption between marriage and sexuality, more especially as other influences were being felt, we observe simultaneously almost everywhere an increase in divorce: marriage, formerly considered to be a permanent union, is increasingly revoked as couples are going through more and more often the failure of their union (Festy, 1985; Roussel, 1989).

Soon another disruption occurred: the social barriers, which reserved the expression of sexuality to the married couple, have rapidly weakened, – living as a couple has been freed from the obligation of marriage. In the middle of the 1970's, there was no doubt that cohabitation without marriage had its popularity increasing considerably, demographic indicators of the importance of a legal marriage recoiled in a consistent fashion (Roussel, 1989; Jackson and Pool, 1994; Kiernan, 1996; Toulemon, 1996). These events have disturbed the family scene and, gradually one observes the progression of cohabiting unions, of variable duration, fertile or not. The diversification of the family, the paths that men and women have followed, as well as the transformation of the environment in which children are raised; accordingly, the sequences which were traditionally followed are now not occurring in the same order (van de Kaa, 1987). The traditional sequence, marriage, co-residence of the couple, and having children have ceased to be more frequent. This sequence is often replaced by paths where marriage is no longer the necessary result, or where the members of the original couple leave and create a new union with new partners, or where some may live in more or less long periods of lone-parenthood. The increase of common law unions as a way to form couples and families constitute the most unexpected event of this revolution, that certain authors call the "second demographic transition" (van de Kaa, 1987; Lesthaeghe, 1991; Jackson and Pool, 1984).

Observers thus wonder where this new trend will go. Numerous studies regarding common law unions have been undertaken worldwide in order to investigate their importance in the family universe. However, researchers still have to establish with certainty the significance of this phenomenon and try to foresee its evolution in the centuries to come; it seems impossible, given what little historical depth there is regarding common law unions. However, facts have been accumulating and their analysis sheds a light which is interesting and stimulating. Volume 28, no. 1-2 of the journal *Cahiers québécois de démographie* relates mostly to this theme and covers multiple dimensions of this new form of union. This text was written as an introduction to this issue of *Cahiers*. It is relevant to review the demographic research regarding common law unions in order to identify the issues at stake. After an examination of the theoretical explanations suggested by demographers, we will review the analyses regarding the increase in common law unions, the dynamics of the formation and dissolution of this type of union, the role that conception or birth of a child plays in the formation of a cohabiting union or its transformation into marriage, and, finally, on the connections between cohabitation and marriage and fertility.

Some Hypothetical Theories

Understanding the significance of common law unions is no easy task. Although the change is marked, it is still relatively recent. Three decades have not passed since its first manifestations and they did not occur at the same time in every society, nor in every social group within a particular society. One can also believe that the significance of this new behavior changes as the place it occupies in society becomes more significant. From a theoretical point of view, two large groups of hypotheses try to explain why marriage no longer constitutes the only socially recognized mode of forming a union. Initially, according to micro-economic theories, the attraction which marriage embodies is essentially its capacity to allow complementary exchanges between men and women. Men provide the economic support a family requires, secondly, women offer their reproductive capacity and their housework (Becker, 1981). The mutual benefits the couple draws from the union would balance and the satisfaction of both partners ensures the permanence of the union. The attraction of the marriage assumes that this balance exists in reality; in particular, the labor market must make it possible for men to provide the needs for their family, and the cost of time (opportunity costs) devoted to domestic activities should not be raised. In the recent context, two elements disturbed the balance: on the one hand, the labor market attracts women, thanks to the progress made in education, and on the other hand, it offers good wages to women. Thus women acquire economic independence and resource satisfaction, which enter into competition with the desire to marry (Becker, 1981). In this case, the loss of attraction in marrying would be mainly dependent on the changes in the roles that women occupy. The transformations of the labor market due to

technological progress and to globalization of the economy modify the men's employment conditions, in particular for young men who are subjected to a slowness in labour force entry. Consequently, they see a decreasing capability to provide for the needs of a possible family (Oppenheimer, 1988). In this case, the loss of popularity of marriage is thus explained by the economic difficulties men incur, they hesitate to form a family and become less attractive partners.

This theoretical explanation, although enticing, is not the only interesting theory. The sociological point of view presents a different perspective. This perspective suggests that marriage has been a societal institution from which society has depended upon to assure its stability. A legal marriage constituted a starting point for the family, which framed sexual behaviors, especially those of women, thus ensuring the existence of a context where reproduction was realized and where the socialization of children was carried out (Jackson and Pool, 1994). Marriage, a social contract which could not be revoked without the approval of the State, despite the many modifications which have marked it, continues to represent a rigid framework for the young men and young women who reach the age to form a family in contemporary society (Latten, 1984). Indeed, since many decades, the social transformations allowed for individualism to prosper, which questions adhesion of the institutions (van de Kaa, 1987). In this context, the individuals develop the possibility of making choices, not according to the institutional imperatives, but rather according to their own will. The standard of choice for a more flexible union, such as common law, thus revealed a very powerful movement, which grants individuals the capacity to do what they please, in this case the possibility of living as a couple without engagement authorized by the community. It also grants them the choice that in the possibility of breaking this union as soon as happiness within the relationship disappears, since there is no approval required from the court (Villeneuve-Gokalp, 1994). According to this assumption, the increase of common law unions can be explained by an ever changing social world. The influence of traditional institutions has been reduced, in that the place which individuals occupy is larger and personal growth constitutes the ultimate criterion in deciding the type of union in which young people wish to start a family.

The Progression of Common Law

As we have underlined, the diffusion of the common law union as a mode of forming unions and families is a relatively recent phenomenon. There does not exist systematic data, which would allow for the measurement of its importance in the majority of societies and to demonstrate at which point in time it becomes part of the choice offered to young couples. It is by the means of retrospective surveys that the situation has become known. Common law unions almost escaping by definition the official statistics, although the censuses allow the observation in of it in certain countries, for example Canada and France (Lapierre-Adamcyk et al., 1996). In general, one can say that in the

Scandinavian countries common law initially spread in the 1960's. From the mid 1970's, it gradually became more important in Western Europe and Anglo-Saxon Countries, e.g., the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand (Lapierre-Adamcyk et al, 1997). It is essential to take into account the period when common law unions first formed and to analyze the dynamics of these unions, which is one indication that reflects the changes which have occurred in society (Desrosiers and Le Bourdais, 1993). Analyzing the behaviors of the previous generations also makes it possible to locate at which moment common law unions started to become more important in society. Couples from older generations have chosen marriage as a means of union formation, whereas the younger generations have chosen common law unions more and more often (Festy, 1985; Burch and Madan, 1986; Thomson, 1988; Rao, 1990; Desrosiers and Le Bourdais, 1993; Toulemon, 1996).

The Dynamic Formation of Unions

The dynamics of union formation is one of the research areas most frequently studied by demographers. Valid in its own right, identifying factors associated with the choice of the common law or marriage makes it possible to understand at least partially how the change affects society. This approach also allows for the verification of certain theoretical assumptions which follow well developed theories. These analyses are based on survey data and relate to the first union, generally that of women and more recently of men. The identified factors are demographic, socio-cultural and socioeconomic.

In addition to the period of formation of the unions, certain demographic or family behaviors seem to be strongly linked with the choice of a common law union or of marriage as a first union. The conception or birth of a child before the union is one of the most interesting factors found in the literature. However, the results are not always consistent with one another, and the links vary according to the stages of diffusion of common law unions and according to society. Desrosiers and Le Bourdais (1993) have shown that before 1990, in Canada, a birth outside of a union had a negative impact on the choice of cohabitation; however, this type of birth at the doorstep of adulthood and favored marriage (also see Rao, 1990). Dumas and Bélanger (1997), in their analysis of 1995 data, note on the contrary that a birth outside of a union strongly increases the probability of a common law union forming in comparison to a marriage. On the other hand, Bennett et al., 1995 indicate that in the United States a birth outside of a union has a negative impact on the probability of a first union forming. In France, according to Toulemon (1996), a pregnancy contributes to a very high risk of contracting a marriage, particularly among women who never had a union before in comparison to those who have cohabited. There is little difference in the risk of getting married according to whether a woman has or has not had her first child, and this occurs no matter what type of couple is considered. In all events, this question is one of most

importance in evaluating the depth of the social change produced by the diffusion of cohabitation.

The family of origin of young adults constitute another interesting demographic factor, which not only makes it possible to establish a link between the characteristics of the individuals and their choice of forming a common law union, but associated it with the environment in which they have been educated and with its values. Several north American studies suggest that the probability of couples choosing a common law union to form a couple increases when these individuals' parents are separated or divorced (Cherlin et al., 1995; Axinn and Thornton, 1996; Le Bourdais and Marcil-Gratton, 1998). Axinn and Thornton (1996) have demonstrated that divorced mothers are more accepting of a common law union than of marriage. These attitudes were positively associated with the attitudes of their children, in particular with regard to family formation.

The social-cultural environment is another dimension of life quoted in the literature as a factor which probably have an influence on the choice of union. The study by Rao (1990), for example, tends to show that place of residence has an impact on the type of union chosen. Those residing in greater metropolitan areas would be more inclined to delay a first marriage than are residents living in small cities and rural areas. This author, like others (Landale and Forste, 1991; Dumas and Bélanger, 1997; Lapierre-Adamcyk et al., 1998), are also interested in the influence language has. In Canada, it appears that the respondents whose mother tongue is French choose a common law relationship more frequently than other linguistic groups.

Religion is another element, which captures a culture's influence "in as much as religions value the institutions, the faithful are as inclined as to follow the precepts set by these institutions" (Dumas and Bélanger, 1997: 176). As we suspected, the traditional religions tend to favor marriage. Thus it is not surprising that the people who do not practice any religion generally chose a common law union whereas those who frequent religious institutions regularly chose marriage as a means of entering into a matrimonial union (Tanfer, 1987; Rao, 1990; Thornton et al., 1992; Dumas and Bélanger, 1997).

The social cultural environment is not the only component of the dynamics of the formation of unions; the social-economic situation plays a significant role and for this reason, arouses the interest of researchers. Recognized like the significant indicators of the social-economic environment and of economic independence and of the freedom of choice associated with it, the level of education and the economic activity are factors susceptible to be associated with variations of marital behaviors. Thus, according to Blom (1994) and Dumas and Bélanger (1997), the fact of being a student is associated with a lower probability of being in a union, that is of marriage or common law. Dumas and Bélanger (1997) have also indicated that the more educated a woman is the more likely she is to cohabit rather than to marry; in their opinion, it is a voluntary

choice women make in order to preserve the advantages of their economic independence. However, Desrosiers and Le Bourdais (1993) have noted that women who have very little education have a stronger propensity to cohabit than women who have attained 12 or 13 years of study or who have attended university.

With regards to economic activity, according to economic theories, the increasing participation of women in the labor force has an impact on the family by reducing the relative gains they withdraw from marriage (Oppenheimer, 1994). Supporting this theory, Desrosiers and Le Bourdais (1993) and Dumas and Bélanger (1997) emphasized that women who are employed before their entry into a union were more inclined to choose cohabitation than those who remained unemployed were. From 1992 Swedish data, Bracher and Santow (1998) strongly demonstrated that economic factors, such as the job market and the level of education equally affects the marital choices of men and women; thus dismissing the assumption that the decline of marriage is primarily due to the economic independence of women.

The Dynamic Dissolution of Unions

Soon after its gain in popularity, it was found that the common law was often transitory and presented rather high instability (Burch and Madan, 1986). However, Landale and Forste (1991) believe that the theoretical framework used to explain the dissolution of marriage is also valid in explaining the dissolution of a common law union. There would indeed be similar factors equally linked to the formation of the unions, like the social-economic resources of the family of origin and the behavior that occurred until the onset of adulthood. The factors, which contribute to the stability of common law unions would resemble those which intervene in the formation of unions.

Among the factors frequently mentioned in the studies of marital dissolution, age at the beginning of the union and the period of formation would both have a major impact on the dissolution. We frequently find these factors in studies concerning common law unions. Various authors associate the short duration of the union with the young age of the couple at the time of their union. They draw further attention to the influence of a lack of information of the characteristics of the partner and to higher probabilities of the divergent ideas this type of couple may have (Becker, 1981). It seems that an older age at the beginning of cohabitation weakens the probability of the union dissolving (Undon, 1990; Desrosiers and Le Bourdais, 1993; Lindgren, 1995, Wu and Balakrishnan, 1995, Le Bourdais and Neill, 1998). In addition, Burch and Madan (1996) have found that older common law unions were more stable than most recent unions. The duration of cohabitation has thus been decreasing with the generations (Wu and Balakrishnan, 1995). These results will have to be re-examined in light of the recent evolution, especially in societies where common law is becoming the

predominant way of forming a union. In conclusion, the difference in age between partners could affect the direction and stability of the union (Wu and Balakrishnan, 1995).

In addition, it appears clear that the presence of children is generally favorable and contributes to the stability of the union. Economic theory emphasizes the specific investment which children pose in married life and their value depreciates, by definition, within the framework of a separation (Wu, 1995). The sociological theory draws attention to the role children play in the gender division of work within the family, making the point that they are generators of marital solidarity. According to these two theoretical frameworks, the presence of children has a positive effect on the success of the union and could thus increase the stability of cohabitation. Accordingly, Desrosiers and Le Bourdais (1993) and Wu and Balakrishnan (1995) have noted that in Canada the presence of children decreases the probability of dissolution within a union. In addition, Wu (1995) has shown that it is not the number, the age or sex of the children which have a negative impact on the risk of dissolution, but rather their presence. On the other hand, a birth outside the union weakens the relationship because the child belongs to only one of the partners and relates to a former relationship. Thus, it would cause conflict and tension in the current union (Wu and Balakrishnan, 1995).

Among socio-cultural factors, religion and area of residence have been noted as having an influence on the stability of cohabitation. However, if religion is a significant factor of stability in the case of a marriage (Lehrer and Chiswick, 1993), it appears that people who choose cohabitation as their preference of union are less practicing of their religion (Dumas and Bélanger, 1997). Under these conditions, one is not astonished that religion does not have a significant effect on dissolution of the cohabitation (Wu and Balakrishnan, 1995). As for the area of residence, in a country like Canada, it is usually used to take into account society, particularly for certain social groups. Thus, Wu and Balakrishnan (1995) have seen that in Quebec, cohabitation was more stable and more socially acceptable than in the remainder of Canada.

Lastly, the socio-economic environment is associated with union stability. For Becker (1974), education should increase the stability of the union in as much as two qualified people can gain more from a marriage than a common law union. However some studies have shown that women who have finished their secondary studies have a lower probability of having their relationships not working out (Desrosiers and Le Bourdais, 1993; Le Bourdais and Neill, 1998). Women's labor force participation is another dimension mentioned in the literature, which is likely to influence the stability of the couple. However, a woman's experience in the job market seems to only have a weak impact on the dissolution of a union (Le Bourdais and Neill, 1998).

Links between Marriage and Cohabitation

Demographers have been preoccupied with a certain number of questions, which concern the possible influence cohabitation has on the marriage and the stability of the union. Has marriage as a means of forming a couple been replaced by cohabitation? Are these two forms of union equivalent? Has the augmentation of cohabitation favored the increase and progression of divorce? Are couples who cohabit more unstable than married couples? Is marriage more fragile when it follows a common law union? The literature brings some brief replies to these questions.

For a certain number of authors (Bumpass et al., 1989; Villeneuve-Gokalp, 1990), until the 1980's, the decrease in the proportion of the people married among the young adults has been compensated by the increase in the proportion of people cohabiting. The average age at first union has not really increased, but the first union occurred outside of marriage (Bumpass et al, 1989). In many regards, cohabiting couples resemble married couples since they share housing, food and are sexually intimate (Rindfuss and Vanden Heuvel, 1990). It is equally appropriate to compare them with singles, since their aspirations in regards to fertility and their extra conjugal activities and their rate of access to property resembles that of people who are single (ibid.). In addition, the majority of cohabitators consider their union to be a prelude to marriage. For Bumpass et al (1989), and for Brown and Booth (1996), the relationships in which cohabitators are engaged is qualitatively similar to marriage. These two types of union are also influenced in similar ways by previous unions and the presence of children. Bumpass et al. (1989) suggest that cohabitation is a family statute where the expectations for the survival of the relationship are simply lower than in a marriage.

Other studies have examined the links between cohabitation and divorce. For Sweet and Bumpass (1990), the growth in the rate of cohabitation could reduce the rate of divorce to a lower level: if cohabitation is perceived as a trial marriage by those who choose it, then there may be an effect of selection. Badly matched unions would be eliminated before embarking upon a marriage. Under these conditions, the rate of marriage breakups could be even lower than it would have been without the increase in cohabitation. The progression of cohabitation rather than "familism" can thus explain the slow growth of the rate of divorce observed in the United States at the beginning of the 1980's.

At the individual level, does cohabitation have an impact on the breakup of ulterior unions? For Axinn and Thornton (1992), people who have cohabited engage in a marriage with a weaker resolution and therefore find it easier to consider and approve divorce. When consensual unions are considered to be similar to a trial marriage, they would probably attract people who, on average, accept the disruption of a union more easily. People who have cohabited regard divorce, as an acceptable solution should their marriage fail, consequently, the

probability of divorce increases more so in their case than that of people who have never cohabited before. Thus it is possible that couples in cohabitation attach less importance to a marital union (Thomson and Colella, 1991; Axinn and Thomson, 1992), it also seems that cohabitation exerts a favorable effect on selection to the stability of a marriage (Axinn and Thomson, 1992; Hall and Zhao (1995). However, to reinforce this interpretation, Hall and Zhao (1995) suggest the use of additional indicators – attitudes, values, ways of life – in order to measure the effect of cohabitation.

Links between Cohabitation and Fertility

Regarding the link between cohabitation and fertility, the literature emphasizes a certain number of points. Initially, the increase in the number of births outside of marriage seems to be closely bound to the progression of cohabitation (Lelievre, 1994; Kiernan, 1996; Le Bourdais and Neill, 1999). These births represent a significant share of the total fertility rate. In 1990, more than one out of two births took place outside a marriage in Sweden and Iceland (Kiernan, 1996)

Does the reproductive behavior of cohabiting women differ from that of married women or of women who never cohabited? In the United States as in France, the women who live in a cohabiting union have their children later than those who are married (Manning, 1995; Toulemon, 1996). Manning (1995) suggests that the period of cohabitation does not correspond in the life of women to periods of family formation. However, there does exist differences between ethnic groups concerning having children outside of a marriage; in the United States, white women are less likely to have their children within this framework than African-Americans or Puerto Ricans (Manning and Landale, 1996). Several studies also indicate that when an unmarried woman conceives, it is more likely that a child is born to an unmarried woman who cohabits than to a single woman who lives alone. Those who live alone show a stronger propensity for the woman to legitimize their child by getting married (Toulemon, 1996; Manning and Landale, 1996).

The literature has highlighted the role that births play in the transition from a common law union to entering a marital union. According to Desrosiers and Le Bourdais (1993), in Canada, a first birth, which is produced outside or within a common law union does not necessarily lead to a marriage, in their opinion, this reflects 'the crumbling of the links between marriage and fertility' (Desrosiers and Le Bourdais, p.209). A study by Toulemon (1996) confirms these results in France. However, an American study (Manning and Landale, 1996) indicates that cohabiting women who become pregnant are more susceptible to transform their union into a marriage if they are White than if they are African-American or Puerto Rican. It thus seems that the choice to transform a cohabitation into a marriage due to the arrival of a child varies according to the country. This

expresses their attitudes and values of diverse societies or cultural groups in regards to the development of new family forms.

In short, the literature regarding common law unions produces many results founded on empirical observation. Despite the short historical experiences we have of this phenomenon, the tendencies are beginning to reveal themselves. For example, the dynamics of the choice between common law union and marriage seem to depend on many factors, sometimes common to both forms of union, sometimes specific to only one type of union. However, these differences are perhaps only due to the stage of development of the common law union in social groups and society at large. This short assessment of knowledge allows a certain number of dimensions of conjugal life to be pointed at, when little research in this area has been done. The absence of systematic measures concerning the phenomenon of cohabitation, through time and space, counts among the aspects which would justify a particular research effort. In particular, the effects of cohabitation on the following dimensions of family life should be investigated: on marriage and fertility, on the nature of the relations between men and women, on the parent-child relationship and their affiliation; on the nature of the engagement of the partners, the sharing of financial responsibilities and material resources, the division of domestic duties, their fidelity to each other and, finally, the assumption of responsibility of the children.

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