

**Family Disruption in Canada:  
Impact of the Changing Patterns of Family Formation  
and of Female Employment**

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***Abstract***

Over the past twenty five years, Canadian families have undergone many important changes. On one hand, marriage does no longer appear to be the sole way to enter conjugal life and to start a family. On the other hand, mothers' participation to the labour market has risen importantly. What effect do these changes exert on the risk of family disruption? To answer this question, we examine the factors that are affecting the risk of disruption faced by families from the moment a child is born to the couple. We use proportional hazards models applied to the retrospective data on family collected by the 1995 General Social Survey conducted in Canada.

## **Résumé**

Au cours des vingt cinq dernières années, la famille canadienne a connu des transformations profondes. Celles-ci se sont notamment manifestées par un net recul du mariage, la constitution d'une union ou d'une famille n'y étant plus nécessairement associée, et par une augmentation sans précédent de la participation des mères au marché du travail. De quelle manière ces évolutions affectent-elles la stabilité des familles? Pour répondre à cette question, nous étudions l'effet que ces facteurs exercent sur la propension que les familles ont de rompre à partir du moment où le couple donne naissance à son premier enfant. L'analyse repose sur l'application du modèle semi-paramétrique (Cox) aux données de l'Enquête sociale générale (ESG) sur la famille, menée au Canada en 1995.

**Key words:** family disruption, cohabitating relationships, female employment

## **Introduction**

Over the past twenty five years, Canadian families have undergone many important changes. Among other changes, starting a family is no longer the sole prerogative of married couples. Indeed, the percentage of births occurring outside of marriage in Canada has risen from 13 % in 1980 to 30 % in 1994 (Dumas & Bélanger, 1997), and over 50 % of first births are now occurring to cohabiting parents in Quebec (Duchesne, 1996). Moreover, data from the 1995 General Social Survey (GSS) revealed that 57 % of the Canadians who entered their first union between 1990 and 1994 chose cohabitation, compared to 15 % of those who did so in the early 1970's; and this proportion has reached 80 % in Quebec (Dumas & Bélanger, 1997).

The restructuring of the economy has also affected Canadian families. Between 1951 and 1991, the rate of female labour force participation increased from 11 % to 50 % for married women, while the participation of mothers living with young children rose from 32 % in 1976 to 62 % in 1991. As in most advanced economies, the development of the service sector is mainly responsible for the growth of women's employment and is linked to low-paid jobs, flexible employment, and lack of union protection (Baker & Lero, 1996).

What do these changes mean for family life? In other words, are the changing patterns of family formation and mothers' increasing participation in the labour market having any impact on the stability of families? To answer these questions, we will specifically examine the factors that are affecting the risk of disruption faced by families from the moment a child is born to the couple. In order to do this, we will use proportional hazards models applied to the retrospective data on family collected by the 1995 General Social Survey conducted in Canada.

## **From Married to Cohabiting Couples**

Research pertaining to union dissolution has shown that cohabiting unions are less stable than marriages (Burch & Madan, 1986; Schoen, 1992; Balakrishnan et al., 1993; Le Bourdais & Marcil-Gratton, 1996). Even for cohabitators who chose to marry, their union has been shown to be at greater risk of dissolution (Hall & Zhao, 1995; DeMaris & Rao, 1992). In terms of values and attitudes, these results suggest that cohabiting unions are selective in that the couples involved are more willing to accept separation or divorce in case of conflict (Axinn & Thornton, 1992). Recent research, however, has questioned the capability of the selectivity hypothesis to account for the higher instability observed among couples who married after cohabiting. This research has hypothesised that the nature of the relationship itself (e.g., the lower level of commitment of common-law partners toward the relationship and their lower level of satisfaction) plays an important role (Nock, 1995). However, comparing marriages and cohabiting unions, irrespective of their ordering within the life course of individuals, when the latter is now said to be equivalent to "going steady" 30 years ago (Nock, 1995) or to be part of the changing nature of the courtship process (Oppenheimer, 1994) appears questionable.

To move the focus to a more meaningful comparison, we decided to examine the risk of separation among different types of union from the moment a first child is born (or adopted) to the couple. By including only these unions, we are comparing couples who, at some point, have made some commitment to their relationship.<sup>1</sup> In fact, studies have found that the presence of children reduces the risk of conjugal disruption for married as well as for cohabiting couples (Lillard & Waite, 1993; Wu, 1995; Wu & Balakrishnan, 1995). In both cases, the results suggest that children increase the "costs of disruption" because their presence is said to have a stabilising effect on the relationship. Comparing cohabiting and married couples, Nock (1995:67) considers the "exit costs" from a union as a measure of commitment, and he concludes that "because cohabitation is constrained by fewer social and legal rules than marriage", the exit costs from a cohabiting relationship should be "less than those associated with marriage". But, since the presence of children has been shown to have a positive impact on the existing relations between adult children and their parents, giving birth to a child should reinforce family support and, thus, union stability, no matter the type of union chosen.

In Canada, and especially in Quebec, research has revealed that the proportion of couples who start their family in a cohabiting union has increased significantly during the 1980's. Indeed, 30 % of all the births registered in Canada in 1994 were to unwed mothers, and this proportion has reached 48 % in Quebec (Dumas & Bélanger, 1997). Considering that births to cohabiting couples account for most of the trend observed, it is clear that family studies can

no longer focus exclusively on marriage and need to take cohabitation into consideration (Bumpass & Raley, 1995; Le Bourdais & Marcil-Gratton, 1996).

Recent research has also shown that family disruption patterns among couples who married their cohabiting partners during the 1980's are closer to those who married directly than to those who remained in a common-law union (Desrosiers & Le Bourdais, 1996). This result suggests that the selectivity effect might no longer operate among younger generations, in which case we would expect that the new families formed within the context of a cohabiting union in the future will tend to resemble those created directly within marriage. Nevertheless, the diversity of paths taken by families recently formed needs to be considered if we are to better understand the determinants of family disruption.

### **Focusing on Women's Changing Employment**

A large body of research has examined the effect of various demographic and socioeconomic factors on marital disruption (Bumpass et al., 1991; Cherlin 1992; Tzeng & Mare, 1995). Paralleling the changes observed in the sexual division of labour, the rise of marital instability has since long been associated with the increase of married women's labour force participation (see Ruggles, 1997 for a review). Consequently, most studies analysing marital disruption have focused upon variables related to women's work situation (employment status, number of hours work per week, income level, etc.); they still continue to do so. However, many of these studies measure women's participation in the labour market at a single time, usually at the beginning of the marriage and, thus, fail to capture the dynamic process occurring (for a critique of such studies, see Greenstein, 1990; Tzeng & Mare, 1995).

Recent analyses based on longitudinal micro-level data have challenged the idea of a fixed relationship between rising marital instability and the increase of women's employment per se. Using panel data from the National Longitudinal Surveys of Young Women, Young Men, and Youth (NLSY), Tzeng and Mare (1995), for example, developed an approach focusing upon the changes that women undergo in the labour market and in relation to their spouse. Their research suggests that both men's and women's work experiences would strengthen marital stability, however positive changes in wives' socioeconomic and labour market characteristics (such as an increase in the number of hours worked) over the course of their marriage would increase the odds of marital disruption.

Oppenheimer et al. (1997) have developed another approach to grasp the changes that young men are experiencing in the labour market. Rather than focusing on the timing of the first transition to work often done in other studies, they point to the importance of the sequencing of events in order to understand the links between delayed marriage and men's career development. Using a variety of indicators (such as school enrolment and time out of school, educational attainment, job type at the previous interview, work experience

during the previous year and earnings) derived from the NLSY, they developed a measure of "career maturity" to characterise the status of young men's career-entry process at different points in time. Their findings suggest that marriage formation among young men is closely related to career development: the more difficult it is to establish a career, the longer the marriage will be delayed.

The present paper aims to measure the impact of the circumstances surrounding the formation of the family on union dissolution. We also intend to examine the effect that the changing position of women in the labour market exerts on their risk of separation. Following the approach taken in recent research, we will try to refine our measure of female labour force participation by using various indicators that take into account women's movements into and out of the labour market. Our aim is twofold: 1) to measure the effect that the type of union in which the first child is born exerts on the risk of family disruption; and 2) to evaluate to what extent the changes experienced by women in the labour market mitigates or exacerbates this risk. In order to do so, we use the family and work histories of Canadian female respondents interviewed in 1995.

## **Data and Methodology**

### **Data**

The data used in this analysis come from the General Social Survey (GSS) on Family (cycle 10) carried out by Statistics Canada during 1995. The GSS is a stratified sample of 10,749 men and women aged 15 years and over in 1995 living in Canada<sup>2</sup>, with an oversampling of 1,250 residents living in Quebec which were sponsored by the province of Quebec; of these, 5,914 were women. The GSS collected detailed retrospective data on the conjugal (marriages and cohabiting unions), parental (children born to or raised by respondents) and work (employment and job interruptions) histories of both male and female respondents, in addition to respondents' current characteristics at the time of the survey (Statistics Canada, 1997).

The conjugal histories gather information on the timing of entry into and exit from all marriages and cohabiting unions that respondents have experienced through the course of their life; for each of these unions, we know the circumstances (separation, divorce, death of partner) surrounding its dissolution. The parental histories provide data for all the children born to or raised by the respondents (biological, adopted or step-children): for all these children, we know the date of birth<sup>3</sup>; and for adopted or step-children, we also know the date of the children's arrival into the respondents' household. With these data, we were able to identify the union in which respondents had or adopted their first child and, thus, to follow the unfolding history of their family. Respondents who had their first biological child outside of a union, as well as those who started their parental career as a step-parent of their partner's children were excluded from our analysis. Previous research has shown that step-families formed after separation or following the birth of a child out-of-wedlock or

outside of cohabitation<sup>4</sup> faced additional difficulties (such as the lack of institutional norms to guide step-parents' behaviours) over and above those experienced by intact families, and greater risks of marital dissolution (Cherlin, 1992). Since one of our main concerns is to examine the effects that the type of union exerts on the future of intact families, we retained only those families formed from 1970 onwards, i.e. couples who gave birth to their first child after the adoption of the Divorce Law in 1969 and during a period in which cohabitation was becoming more widespread. Following this strategy, 1,774 female respondents were identified between the age of 25 and 64, who gave birth to their first child while living in a couple relationship between 1970 and 1995. Of these respondents, 510 had experienced a separation when they were reached by the GSS in 1995.

### Indicators of Family Formation

*Family Formation Sequence* - To investigate the effect that the conjugal path followed by parents exerts on the risk of union dissolution, we distinguished three categories of respondents that are entered into the analysis as dummy variables: 1) those who married directly prior to the birth of the child; 2) those who were still cohabiting when the child was born; and 3) those who married their cohabiting partner before having a child (for respondents' distribution, see Table 1). A fraction of the latter will eventually marry along the road, and some of them had probably already planned to do so when their child arrived. In order to take into account those cohabiting unions that are legalised through marriage, we created time-varying covariates for the last two categories. In other words, women who were still cohabiting at the birth of their first child were first given a value of 1 on the second dummy variable and a value of 0 on the other two dummy variables; from the moment they marry, the third dummy variable (marrying after cohabiting) takes the value of 1, while the other two are set to 0.

*Period of Formation of the Family* - We introduced a cohort variable to control for the changing context in which the families were formed. Three periods are distinguished: 1) 1970-79; 2) 1980-89; 3) 1990-95. An equal proportion of approximately 40 % of the retained sample formed their family during either the first or the second period (see Table 1). The first period was characterised by the rise of divorce in Canada and by the development of cohabitation; during this period, the latter was still, however, used as a prelude to marriage. During the 1980's, the total rate of divorce reached a plateau, and cohabiting relationships became more widespread and more enduring. Finally, it was in the first half of the 1990's that common-law unions became the "norm", when first starting to live as a couple, and that the number of births occurring to cohabiting parents raised to significant proportions (Dumas and Bélanger, 1997).

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**Table 1. Distribution of Respondents Who have Entered Family Life by  
Socioeconomic Characteristics for Canada: 1995**

Variable	Quebec	ROC	Canada	
			% or x	N*
<b>Conjugal trajectory at family formation</b>				
Cohabiting	18.2	7.1	10.2	157
Married after cohabiting	20.4	15	16.6	256
Married directly	61.4	77.9	73.2	1129
<b>Period of family formation</b>				
1970-1979	39.3	38.4	38.7	597
1980-1989	41.4	42.8	42.4	653
1990-1995	19.3	18.8	18.9	292
<b>Age at union formation</b>				
Less than 20 years	23.2	23.8	23.6	364
20-24 years	55.2	54.1	54.4	839
25-29 years	16.7	18	17.6	272
30 years & over	4.9	4.1	4.4	67
<b>Pre-union conceptions (yes)</b>	9.7	12.6	11.7	181
<b>Highest diploma obtained</b>				
University	20.3	20	20.1	309
Post-secondary	29.4	37.8	35.4	546
High school	33.7	29.9	31	478
Less than high school	16.6	12.3	13.5	209
<b>Schooling completed at beginning of union (yes)</b>	75.8	69.2	71.1	1096
<b>Employed at beginning of union (yes)</b>	71.2	72.2	71.9	1109
<b>Duration of employment (in years) at family formation</b>	5.53	5.23	5.31	1542
<b>Number of work interruptions at family formation (excluding respondents who never worked)</b>	0.47	0.42	0.43	1318
<b>Total</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>439</b>	<b>1104</b>	<b>1542</b>
	<b>(%)</b>	<b>28.4</b>	<b>71.6</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Statistics Canada, 1995 General Social Survey (cycle 10) on Family.

\*Weighted sample brought back to the size of the original sample.

## Indicators of Socioeconomic Characteristics

*Labour Force Attachment* - The retrospective data collected on work histories gathered information on jobs and work interruptions that lasted at least six months while respondents were not attending school full-time. For respondents who worked at a job or business for at least six months, either part-time or full-time, we know the age they had at the beginning of the job. For those who stopped working for a period of six months or longer, we know their age (in decimal form), when they quit the labour market, and the duration (in months) of their work interruption. These data are available for up to five jobs and four interruptions.

To examine the changing position of women on the labour market, three indicators were constructed that are time-varying covariates. These indicators were aimed to trace women's movements in and out of the labour market and to take into account the cumulative effects that either continuous employment or repeated work interruptions might exert on their propensity to experience family disruption.

The first indicator specifies whether or not the women were employed from the moment they had their first child up until the separation or the survey if they were still living in couple. This time-varying dummy is coded 1 for each duration (measured in tenths of a year) of the family in which the mother was employed, and 0 for each duration during which she had stopped working. The second time-varying covariate is a cumulative variable that measures the number of years (in decimal form) that women spent on the labour market. It starts with the number of years of work experience that a woman had accumulated when she gave birth to her first child, and this number increases continuously with her presence in the labour market. The duration of employment is entered as a series of dummy variables into the equation, since we assume the effect of this variable not to be linear. Finally, the third time-varying covariate is also a cumulative variable that counts the number of work interruptions experienced by a woman from the moment she started to work on a regular basis to the separation of the couple or up to the time of the survey. In order to distinguish women who have worked without interruption from those experiencing no interruption because they have never worked, we created four dummies variables that comprise: 1) women who have never worked; 2) those who have worked without interruption; 3) those who have worked and experienced one interruption; and 4: those who have worked and experienced at least two interruptions. Since women who never worked and, thus, experienced no interruption are necessarily part of the category "duration of employment equal to 0", the last two variables cannot be included together in the same model.

*Educational Attainment and Time Out of School* - The GSS provides information on the level of education attained at the time of the survey and on the age at which respondents completed their studies. Having no information on the level of schooling completed by respondents when they first entered a union or gave birth to a child, we were forced to use the level attained at the moment



of the survey as a proxy of educational attainment.<sup>5</sup> However, in order to take into account the impact that the sequencing of events has on the propensity of women to go through a family disruption, a dummy variable was created that measures whether or not the woman had completed her schooling when she formed the union in which she bore her first child. Three respondents out of ten had not completed their studies when they started living with their partner (see Table 1).

*Other Variables* - In addition to the circumstances surrounding the formation of the family and to the work and educational characteristics discussed above, we also examined the effects of other covariates that are likely to affect family disruption. We included the age of the woman at union formation, which is entered as a dummy variable into the model. We controlled for whether or not the child was conceived before the couple had married or started to cohabit; we considered as pre-union conceptions all births that occurred 0.7 year (i.e. 8.4 months) or less after the beginning of the union. Roughly one woman out of ten had conceived her child prior to union formation (Table 1). We also introduced the region of residence at the time of the survey to distinguish respondents living in the province of Quebec from those living in the rest of Canada (see Table 1). After a late start in embarking upon the "second demographic revolution", Quebecers have now taken the lead in the profound demographic changes that have affected the family. Not only is Quebec leading the country with the highest rate of divorce, but more importantly, it has the lowest total marriage rate and the highest percentages of common-law unions and of children born to cohabiting couples. Currently the majority of young adults living in Quebec favour cohabitation over marriage as they enter their first union and start family life. Accordingly, one could expect the negative impact associated with common-law unions to be lower in this province than in the rest of Canada, where these behaviours, while growing, remained true for a smaller proportion of the population. To explore the extent to which the effect of the conjugal path followed by women might affect their risk of going through family disruption differently according to their region of residence, we tested for interactions between these two variables in the model.

## **Statistical Methods**

We use proportional hazards models to study the process of union dissolution among intact families (see Allison, 1984). The dependent variable in the models is the instantaneous rate of union dissolution experienced by women living in those families, and it is expressed as a function of two components: an underlying or baseline function, which varies over time but whose form is left unspecified, and the effects on this baseline hazard of a set of individual characteristics, some of which may change over time (Cox, 1972). It is important to recall that the risk of union dissolution is estimated from the moment a child is born to the couple and *not* from the beginning of the union. The independent variables include the fixed and time-varying covariates described above. To gain better insight on the process of family disruption

among intact families, we estimated several nested models to examine how the progressive addition of each covariate mitigates or reinforces the effect of the others. However, only the complete model is shown here.

The parameter estimates are presented in their exponential form and thus express the hazard of a specific group as a proportion of the baseline hazard. A coefficient greater than 1 indicates that the characteristic analysed increases the chances of women to experience a union dissolution, while a coefficient smaller than 1 reveals that it reduces that risk. All covariates are entered into the equations as dummy variables, and the coefficients presented in Table 2 thus need to be interpreted in relation to the reference category (given in parentheses).

The final weighted sample consists of 1,542 female respondents who formed a family after 1969, and for whom it was possible to reconstruct their family and work histories and for whom no data is missing.<sup>6</sup>

## **Results**

Four regression models are presented in Table 2. The first two models examine the effects that all covariates taken into consideration exert on the likelihood of Canadian women to experience family disruption, with the second model allowing for an interaction effect between the type of union chosen and the region of residence. The third and fourth models deal separately with women living in Quebec and in the rest of Canada.

Consistent with previous studies (Desrosiers et Le Bourdais, 1996), we found that the circumstances surrounding the birth of a first child exerts a strong influence on the propensity of women to experience a union breakdown. Other things being equal, women who were still cohabiting at the formation of their family, and who continued to do so later on, have nearly three and a half times more chances to separate than those who married directly prior to the arrival of the child (model 1); women who married their cohabiting partner have 42% more chances to do so than those who married before entering parenthood. When controlling for all the covariates retained in the analysis (and thus for the relatively different distributions of families over time according to the type of union), women who formed their family through the 1980's have 41% more chances to go through a separation than those who did so through the 1970's.<sup>7</sup>

As observed in most studies on marital dissolution, we found the age of women at the beginning of the union to be closely linked to their propensity to part from their spouse. Compared to those who were between the age of 25 and 29 when they formed the union in which they bore their first child, women who started to live with a partner before reaching the age of 20 were close to twice more likely to experience a conjugal breakdown. Pre-union conceptions also appeared to be linked to a higher probability of family disruptions after controlling for all other

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**Table 2. Determinants of Women's Risk of Family Disruption Using Proportional Hazards Estimates (EXP)<sup>a</sup> for Canada: 1995**

Variable <sup>b</sup>	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	Canada		Quebec	ROC
<b>Conjugal trajectory</b>				
Cohabiting	3.48***	5.17***	2.46***	4.73***
Married after cohabiting	1.42*	1.63**	1.14	1.60*
(Married directly)	1	1	1	1
<b>Period of family formation</b>				
(1970-1979)	1	1	1	1
1980-1989	1.41*	1.40*	1.80**	1.27
1990-1995	1.41	1.37	0.79	1.61
<b>Age at union formation</b>				
Less than 20 years	1.88**	1.88***	0.94	2.80***
20-24 years	1.01	1.01	0.74	1.18
(25-29 years)	1	1	1	1
30 years & over	0.82	0.81	0.55	1.05
<b>Pre-union conceptions (no)</b>				
Yes	1.51**	1.48**	1.61	1.56*
<b>Highest diploma obtained</b>				
University	0.87	0.88	0.84	1
Post-secondary	1.08	1.07	0.91	1.16
(High school)	1	1	1	1
Less than high school	1.25	1.25	1.81*	1.03
<b>Schooling completed at beginning of union (yes)</b>				
No	1.60***	1.59***	1.68*	1.52**
<b>Employed during the family episode (no)</b>				
Yes	1.50**	1.54***	1.83**	1.44*
<b>Duration of employment (in years)</b>				
0 year (never worked)	0.95	0.93	0.76	1.09
0.1 - 1.9 year	0.98	0.94	0.43	1.08
2.0 - 4.9 years	1	1	1	1
5.0 - 9.9 years	0.82	0.8	0.53*	1.21
10 years and over	1.1	1.09	0.54*	1.91**
<b>Region of residence (Rest of Canada)</b>				
Quebec	1.17	1.46*		
<b>Conjugal trajectory x Region of residence</b>				
Cohabiting x Quebec		0.45*		
Married after cohab. x Quebec		0.64		

Source: Statistics Canada, 1995 General Social Survey (cycle 10) on Family.

<sup>a</sup>The analysis is based on 1542 female respondents (weighted sample).

\*\*\* p < .001; \*\* p < .01; \* p < .05.

<sup>b</sup>The variables in italics are time-varying covariates, whose value might change through the family episode.

covariates. Conceiving a child prior to forming a union increased the risk by half for women to experience family disruption.<sup>8</sup>

When controlling for the age of women at the beginning of the union, the level of schooling completed at the time of the survey did not appear to be linked to the propensity of women to experience a separation. However, women who had not completed their studies when they entered the union in which they bore their first child clearly faced a greater risk (1.50) of experiencing a union dissolution than those who were definitely out of school. These results seem, at first, to suggest that the ordering of family and schooling events in women's lives affects the risk of separation more than the achieved level of schooling.

Being employed at any time through the family life course from the moment the child was born was found to increase the risk of separation by 50%. This result concurs with those that have been observed in previous research concerning the negative impact of female presence in the labour market on marital stability (for a review, see Ruggles, 1997). When controlling for the presence of women on the labour market through the duration of the family life course, neither the cumulated experience of employment, nor the cumulated number of work interruptions (variable not included in Table 2), appeared, at first, to be related to the risk of family disruption. The duration of employment did, however, turn out to significantly influence the propensity of women to experience a separation, but in a different manner in Quebec and in the rest of Canada (we will come back to this later); this result explains why this variable was retained in the final model.

The region of residence at the time of the survey did not in itself influence the probability of women to go through a family disruption. However, because of the widening differences observed over time in the conjugal behaviours of individuals across Canada, we included interaction terms in the model to allow for the type of union to affect the risk of separation differently according to the region of residence (see model 2). The introduction of the interaction terms into the equation did not significantly modify the size of the coefficients of any of the covariates included in model 1, except for those related to the interaction terms. Because the parameter estimates of the interaction terms included in Table 2 did not allow direct comparison of the gaps existing across regions for given conjugal trajectories, the relative risks separating these groups were calculated by multiplying the appropriate parameter estimates in Table 2; these risks are presented in Table 3.

A comparison of the relative risks shown in Table 3 reveals that Quebec's women who married directly had nearly one and a half (1.46) more chances to part from their husbands than those living in the rest of Canada. Women living in Quebec who cohabited before marrying their partners did not, however, face a lesser risk to separate than those from the rest of Canada, nor did those who were still cohabiting<sup>9</sup>. The comparison of the relative risks of separation within each region showed that the gaps separating women who followed different

**Table 3**  
**Comparing Relative Risks of Family Disruption**  
**Among Sub-groups of Women for Canada: 1995**

<b>Variations between regions of residence for each conjugal trajectory</b>			
<b>Conjugal Trajectory</b>	<b>Region of Residence</b>		
	<b>Quebec</b>	<b>Rest of Canada</b>	
Married directly	1.46**	1	
Married after cohabiting	0.93	1	
Cohabiting	0.65	1	
<b>Variations between conjugal trajectories among each region of residence</b>			
<b>Region of Residence</b>	<b>Conjugal Trajectory</b>		
	<b>Married directly</b>	<b>Married after Cohabiting</b>	<b>Cohabiting</b>
Quebec	1	1.05	2.31***
Rest of Canada	1	1.63**	5.17***

Source: Statistics Canada, 1995 General Social Survey (cycle 10) on Family.

Note: Relative risks for each group are obtained by multiplying the appropriate parameter estimates of Table 2. The confidence interval of these coefficients is calculated by combining the variances and covariances of the \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; and \* $p < .05$ .

conjugal trajectories were much narrower in Quebec than they were elsewhere in Canada (see the lower panel of Table 3).

Cohabitation is much more widespread in Quebec than in the rest of Canada, not only as a way to enter conjugal life, but also to start family life. With more than half of first births now occurring to cohabiting couples, one can doubt if the selection process, noted in several studies (Axinn and Thornton, 1992; Nock, 1995), is still operating as strongly in Quebec as in the rest of Canada. In other words, the generalisation of common-law unions in Quebec could mean that

women who chose to first cohabit before marrying and even to give birth to a child while still cohabiting do not present distinctive characteristics that make them more prone to separate. If that was the case, we could expect certain covariates to exert a different effect on the risk of women to separate according to their region of residence. To test this hypothesis, we ran separate models for women living in Quebec and in the rest of Canada (see models 3 and 4 of Table 2).<sup>10</sup>

A quick glance at models 3 and 4 of Table 2 confirmed our hypothesis that the factors linked to the risk of family disruption operate differently across the country, and it reinforced the idea that cohabitation and marriage could be taking divergent meanings between regions and, thus, lead to different selective processes. On the one hand, women who married after cohabiting did not appear in Quebec to face a higher risk to part from their spouse than those who married directly (coefficient of 1.14 non significant), as it was still the case in the rest of Canada (coefficient of 1.60); on the other hand, those still cohabiting had nearly two and a half times more chances to separate, as compared to more than four and a half times elsewhere in Canada (see models 3 and 4). As shown in Table 3, the difference seems largely attributable to the loss of the "protection effect" of direct marriage in Quebec.

After reaching a peak for the families formed during the 1980's, the risk of conjugal break-down faced by the 1990 cohort living in Quebec had fallen to the level observed for the families started during the 1970's; by contrast, the likelihood of family disruption was still on the rise in the rest of Canada. One should note, however, that the relative increase in the risk of separation experienced by women who gave birth to their first child during the 1980's was much larger in Quebec than in the rest of Canada; it nearly doubled (1.80) from the first to the second family cohorts in Quebec, compared to the non significant increase of 27% noted elsewhere in Canada.

Among variables that exerted a similar effect in both regions, pre-union conceptions positively affected the risk of separation, but only in the rest of Canada was the effect found to be significant at the 0,05 level. The fact that women had or not completed their education when they began to live with their partner also similarly influenced their propensity to separate, with women who had not finished their schooling being clearly more at risk of experiencing family disruption than those who were definitely out of school when they started their union.

The age at union formation appeared to differently affect women's propensity to go through a separation, depending upon their region of residence. Outside of Quebec, women who started living with their partner before the age of 20 were nearly three times (2.80) more likely to separate than those who entered their union between the age of 25-29; in Quebec, no difference separated these two groups when all other covariates were taken into consideration. Completed level of schooling also operated differently across regions in affecting the risk of family disruption. Outside of Quebec, the level of education attained did not

appear to significantly influence the propensity of women to experience a union dissolution, once we controlled for other covariates. However, in Quebec, women who did not complete secondary education faced 81 % more chances to separate than those who obtained a high school diploma.

The presence of women on the labour market played a similar role, no matter the region of residence. Hence, being employed through the family life course turned out to significantly increase the risk of family disruption in Quebec, as well as in the rest of Canada (coefficients of 1.83 and 1.44). As mentioned previously, the cumulated number of work interruptions experienced by women did not appear to significantly affect their propensity to go through a separation in both regions of residence, once we controlled for the presence of women on the labour market through the family life course. However, the cumulated duration of employment was found to exert a significant influence, but in opposite directions according to the region of residence. In Quebec, the more committed to the labour market a woman was, the less likely she appeared to part from her spouse. In the rest of Canada, the relation ran in the opposite direction, with the longer the cumulated duration of employment, the higher the risk of family disruption. Hence, women present on the labour market for ten years or more in Quebec faced half (0.54) the risk of separation of those who had been working between two to five years; in the rest of Canada, the former were found to be twice more likely (1.91) than the latter to experience union dissolution.

The positive association between employment and family disruption tends to suggest that the experience of stress or conflicts associated with multiple roles to be performed (worker, spouse and parent) when a women is currently employed (Duxbury, Higgins and Lee, 1994) is an important factor of family stability or instability. However, as noted in past research, it is very difficult to ascertain whether women's continuous presence in the labour market is a reaction as much as a cause to the increase of separation (Goldscheider and Kaufman, 1996). Our analysis clearly points to the fact that continuity in female work trajectories does not play the same role across Canada. Outside of Quebec, work experience is linked to a higher propensity of women to separate, when controlling for other variables, whereas in Quebec, it has a protective effect against family disruption. Part of the difference could be due to the existing variations observed in the regional labour market conditions that are available to women, and for which we did not control for. But, it could also be linked to the fact that maintaining the presence of women in the labour market has become a strategy to ensure the economic stability of the family that is more often pursued by couples in Quebec than in the rest of Canada.

## **Conclusion**

In line with previous research, we found that women's age at the beginning of the union, pre-union conceptions, and the period and conjugal setting in which the child was born all affect the odds of conjugal separation. However, our

analysis has shown that these factors might operate differently across Canada, and has confirmed our intuition that cohabitation and marriage are now viewed differently between regions. Hence, our results suggest that the gap separating cohabiting women or women who married their common-law partner from those who married directly is narrowing in Quebec, as these types of behaviours are becoming more widespread, while it is not elsewhere in Canada. As we have seen, part of the explanation seems to be attributable to the loss of the "protection effect" of direct marriage in Quebec, as the difference of behaviours observed for married people living in various regions suggests. Another part of the explanation is the more enduring nature of recently formed cohabiting unions, that has been documented in recent research (Desrosiers & Le Bourdais, 1996; Dumas & Bélanger, 1997). All these results point to changes in the signification that cohabitation, as compared to marriage, and conjugal trajectories are now taking for individuals.

One result that surprised us was the relatively low influence that the level of schooling completed exerted on the propensity of women to experience family disruption. One possible explanation could be linked to the fact that this characteristic was measured only at the time of the survey and could thus differ from the level of schooling achieved when women formed a union and gave birth to their first child. Controlling for whether or not women had completed their education when they began to live with their partner did, however, turn out to significantly affect their risk of separation. This result is in agreement with both the emphasis expressed by Oppenheimer et al. (1997) on the ordering of events in individuals' lives to explain their conjugal behaviour and that put by Tzeng & Mare (1995) on the changes taking place during the course of marriage. One could argue, as Tzeng & Mare (1995: 349) do, that "changes in the relative position of spouses may clash with the expectations they hold when they marry". Hence, a change of status, from student to worker, could well lead to changing expectations and, thus, increase the risk of separation, especially if the partner was not experiencing similar changes.

As found in previous research, female employment turned out to significantly augment the likelihood of family disruption. Once we conducted separate analyses by region of residence, the effect of cumulative duration of employment then became significant, due to the opposite role it played in both regions. Part of the difference between the work behaviours observed across regions could be due to differences in the labour markets to which women have access and for which we did not control. It could also be argued that it is linked to the different meanings associated with conjugal relationships in different regions and to the varied economic strategies that couples are now pursuing in order to ensure the stability of the family. This interpretation concurs with that developed by Oppenheimer (1994), who argues that dual earner couples might be the only viable alternative for families to cope in a context of economic instability and job precariousness.

Clearly, more research is needed if we are to better understand the relations existing between family disruption and the changing patterns of family



formation and of female employment. Due the limits of the 1995 GSS data, our measure of labour force attachment did not take into account the number of hours spent by women into employment, nor its variation over time. Yet, it is likely that the number of hours worked by women and, more importantly, the positive changes that they experienced play an important part in increasing marital disruption, as previous studies have suggested (Starkey, 1991; Tzeng & Mare, 1995). The variables constructed to take into account female employment continuity/discontinuity were also very crude measures that clearly underestimated the number of work interruptions experienced by women, since only interruptions that lasted at least six months were counted. This could doubtlessly explain in part the lack of association observed between work interruptions and family disruption.

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### ***Endnotes:***

1. As mentioned by one reviewer, one cannot assume that cohabiting couples with children are necessarily committed to their relationship, since they might have started living together after the conception or the birth of the child; but, the same reasoning can apply to married couples.
2. Excluding residents of the Yukon and Northwest Territories and full-time residents of institutions.
3. In fact, the public microdata file provides the age (in decimal form) of respondents at each event: union formation and dissolution, birth or adoption of a child, etc.
4. A single-parent family created by the birth of a child outside a union may lead to the formation of an intact family if the two biological parents start living together, or of a step-family if, for instance, the single mother enters a union with a man who is not the father of her child. The GSS contains no information on the conjugal and parental status of the respondents' partners and, thus, does not allow us to distinguish among these two types of family. Based on previous work, we assumed that the single mothers who started

living with a partner less than six months after giving birth did so with the biological father of their child; they were thus included in our analysis.

5. The GSS collected the number of years of elementary and high school education completed (up to thirteen years), and the highest level (in terms of diploma) of education achieved past high school. We thus had no other choice than to use dummies to measure educational attainment at the time of the survey.
6. 196 (unweighted) cases were excluded from the analysis because of missing data in the education or work histories. In order to check for the possible biases induced by the elimination of these cases, we compared the coefficients associated with all covariates except for the work related variables when including and excluding these cases from the model. We observed no significant differences between the two sets of coefficients.
7. We tested for interactions between the period of formation of the family and the type of conjugal path followed, i.e. we allowed the risk of separation associated with each type of union to vary across periods, but found no significant results.
8. For births conceived within the union, we also tested the effect that the duration of the interval between union formation and child's birth exerts on the propensity to separate. First, we introduced duration as a continuous variable in the equation, but found no significant association. Second, to take into account the fact that this effect might not be linear, we introduced a series of dummy variables, each reflecting a given interval (e.g. less than a year, 1-1.9 years, 2-3 years, 3 years and over), as suggested by an anonymous reviewer. Again, we found no statistical association and, thus, excluded these variables from the final model.
9. We ran a separate model using the type of union existing at the birth of the child. The use of time-varying covariates that take into account the conjugal trajectory of women (i.e. allowing for cohabiting unions to be legalised during the family life course) has the effect of increasing the gap that separates cohabiting women living in Quebec from those living elsewhere in Canada, and of reducing that observed for those who married their cohabiting partners. This result is due to the longer duration of common-law unions in Quebec and the lower propensity of Quebec cohabitators to marry their partners.
10. The size of the coefficients can no longer be directly compared across regions, but this approach allows for all covariates to differently affect the risk of women to face separation.

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