Cohabitation: One Form or Many? Evidence from the Canadian General Social Survey

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Premarital relationships have changed dramatically in the last forty years. The modern family is no longer an economic unit but is instead made up of individuals who rely on one another for personal fulfillment. Female participation in the labor force has increased, granting women more economic independence than ever before. Scholars have argued that because of this, rates of cohabitation have risen during this time period (Bumpass, Sweet and Cherlin 1991). It has also been noted that over half of all marriages now begin with cohabitation (Smock 2000). Much research has been done in attempt to explain why rates of cohabitation rose throughout the last half of the twentieth century (Rindfuss and VandenHeuvel 1990; Teachman and Polonko 1990). Regardless of the reasons, cohabitation is now a very real part of premarital relationships in our society (Coontz 2004).

Two facts have been widely cited in regards to cohabitation: rates of cohabitation have risen, and cohabitation is a relatively unstable relationship form (Smock 2000). Between 1990 and 1994, over 50% of couples cohabited prior to marriage compared to about 10% of those couples marrying between 1965 and 1974. Correspondingly, the number of women in the late 30s who reported ever having cohabited increased from 30% in 1987 to 48% in 1995 (Bumpass and Lu 2000). The stability of cohabitation has also been called into question. Of couples who cohabit, Bumpass and Lu (2000) showed that approximately 40% of these relationships end within five years while 55% marry during that same time period. This leaves only 5% of cohabitational relationships continuing as nonmarital five years after their inception. Those who choose to cohabit in the United States tend to share similar demographic characteristics in regards to socioeconomic status and personal ideology. Among 19 to 44 year old women, nearly

60% of those who had less than a high school education reported having ever cohabited while only 37% of college-educated women in the same age group reported having done so (Bumpass and Lu 2000). Interestingly, cohabiters also report having a more "liberal" personal ideology including being more supportive of neutrality in gender roles and considering themselves less religious (Smock 2000). Cohabitation prior to the 1960s was a relatively rare event restricted to lower socioeconomic status individuals and was therefore more a highly stigmatized relationship form than dating or marriage (Amato and Booth 1997). This rarity may have contributed to the high rate of relationship dissolution for cohabitation because without social acceptance of the relationship, there would be little cost to or stigma associated with ending it. However, as cohabitation rates have risen, social stigmatization of these unmarried couples has decreased, and these relationships have become increasingly normalized (Smock 2000).

However, few studies to date have attempted to tease apart differences in cohabitation (see Smock 2000 for a review of the literature). Instead, most scholars prefer to treat this new family formation path as one-size-fits-all (Wu 2000). Extensive comparisons of cohabitation have been made between the United States and Canada as well as other English-speaking and European countries (Le Bourdais and Lapierre-Adamcyk 2004; Heuveline and Timberlake 2004). However, these studies generally limit themselves to differentiating Canada as a whole without regard to linguistic subpopulations.

The goals of this study are twofold. First, I use latent class analysis to present a descriptive look at current non-francophone cohabitors within the Canadian General Social Survey in order to better understand who these people are and how cohabitation plays a role in their family formation choices. This method is a powerful descriptive tool when used to assess differences in group membership when an underlying latent characteristic is present. Second, I

attempt to explain the likelihood of class membership using demographic and family of origin variables such as parental cohabitation.

COHABITATION AS WE KNOW IT

Cohabitation has become increasingly common amongst groups of both young and older adults (King and Scott 2005). For young people, cohabitation can be seen as a trial or test run at a more permanent union. However, couples who cohabit prior to marriage without being engaging or having plans to soon become so have been found to have less stable unions (Amato and Booth, 1997). These relationships dissolve frequently and have been found to be less satisfying than marriage for this age group (Smock 2000; Manning and Smock 2005). However, for older adults, cohabitations can also be as satisfying and stable as marital unions (King and Scott 2005). Many members of this group have had prior cohabitations and/or divorces. This is substantiated by evidence that while divorce rates have held steady for the past several years near 50%, rates of remarriage have declined. High divorce rates may then be creating a causal loop that increases the likelihood people will cohabit (Smock 2000). It has been hypothesized that members of this demographic may hold more deviant views towards family formation (i.e. fear of potential divorce) or that they may be hesitant to reenter a legally binding union after a prior divorce.

Previous work on cohabitation found that its meaning has changed across birth cohorts with younger people being more likely to cohabit and more likely to divorce (Dush, Cohan and Amato 2003). The authors assessed marital quality and stability for two marriage cohorts – couples married between 1964 and 1980 and those married between 1981 and 1997. As cohabitation increased, marital satisfaction and quality decreased regardless of certain economic and demographic factors. New research on serial cohabitation has also suggested that individuals

who cohabit with multiple partners are more likely to experience a divorce in their lifetimes (Lichter and Qian 2008). Both articles provide support for what has been termed the "cohabitation effect hypothesis," suggesting that cohabitors select themselves into relationships which are more likely to end in divorce (Bennett, Blanc and Bloom 1988). Other studies have tried to explain the increased rate of divorce by looking to characteristics about the couples themselves, such as family beliefs, education, and the way one approaches a relationship. Findings confirm suggestions that cohabitation is more attractive to partners who express more egalitarian views about their relationships but also support evidence that marital dissolution is more common among couples who cohabited before their marriage (DeMaris and MacDonald 1993). Cohabiters have also been found to possess certain characteristics which make them more prone to divorcing later (Teachman and Polonko 1990; Teachman 2003). This argument suggests that people who are less suitable for marriage are more likely to cohabit than are their peers. Rhoades, Stanley and Markman (2006) found that men who cohabit prior to engagement are less committed to their relationship than are their spouses which may lead to divorce. However, it may be that as cohabitation becomes more common in our society, selection effects will diminish and the divorce rate among those who cohabited prior to marriage will drop.

It has been suggested that the rise in rates of cohabitation may be due to one of three reasons (Smock 2000). First, cohabitation may be viewed by some couples as a step in a family formation process culminating in marriage. This theory is supported by reports from cohabitational couples that they plan to eventually marry and posits that cohabitation plays a role similar to that of a formal engagement. Second, cohabitation may be viewed as an alternative choice to marriage made by the couple. Early research on cohabitation supported this argument

and found that cohabiters were more highly educated and less religious than their peers (Rindfuss and VandenHeuvel 1990).

Third, cohabitation is an alternative not to marriage but to living alone and/or not being in a relationship. This third view is supported by qualitative data presented in a study of 115 young adults in the Toledo, OH vicinity conducted by Manning and Smock (2005). Interviews with currently cohabiting respondents and those who had recently cohabited showed that for the majority of respondents, cohabitation was not conscious choice. It seemed to take place gradually for some couples while for others, the new partner just never went home. The sample used in this study was almost entirely working class, which may reflect both values held by respondents as well as economic constraints experienced by the couple. For many of the respondents, cohabitation was difficult to define because even though the partner spent multiple nights at the respondent's residence, the partner often had a separate residence as well. This was presented by one interviewee as a way of maintaining independence.

Cherlin (2000) posits that women are using pre-marital relationships as an opportunity for further investigation of partner characteristics such as willingness to share household chores and childrearing. Cohabitation, then, may act as an important information-gathering resource for women prior to marriage. This argument has been substantiated for women of higher socioeconomic status (Clarkberg 1997). Clarkberg (1997) found that women with better paying jobs were more likely to cohabit than to enter marriage.

Cohabitation may not work the same way for lower socioeconomic status women as it does for middle and upper class women. It has been suggested that due to the birth control pill and legal abortions, men are now able to demand sex in relationships without the benefit of marriage (Akerlof, Yellen and Katz1996). Women are then placed in a less powerful position in

these relationships because sex is required for it to continue. However, this argument is based on the assumption that all women have to offer in these relationships is sex. By ignoring the gains of women for whom the benefits of marriage are low, Akerlof and his colleagues (1996) assume that all women are in a weakened position in cohabitation relationships.

While not all women may benefit from decreases in social stigmas which allow for cohabitation, it still serves a beneficial function within society. Cherlin (2000) rightly asserts:

> But this debate can be resolved by introducing the concepts of manifest and latent functions, developed in sociology by Robert K. Merton (1968). A manifest function is a publicly stated, acknowledged one. A latent function is unacknowledged and unstated. The manifest function of cohabitation is to provide a satisfying intimate relationship; on a day-to-day level most cohabiters may think little about marriage. Nevertheless, the latent function is often as an information-gathering stage prior to making a decision to marry; that is evident by virtue of the regularity with which cohabitation leads either to marriage (about half the time) or to a break-up within a short period of time. (p. 135)

Actress Mae West was once quoted, "Marriage is a great institution, but I'm not ready for an institution yet." Qualitative interviews with cohabiters in New Zealand echoed this sentiment (Elizabeth, 2000). Respondents preferred cohabitation to marriage because they felt it was "free from social prescriptions, including those based on gender" (Elizabeth 2000:94). Marriage was viewed as an antiqued institution that binds couples in such a way as to restrict personal growth and freedom. Cohabitation represented a more committed partnership due to the ability to end it freely rather that in spite of it. For these couples, it was preferable because it was based on personal choice, rather than legal constraints.

COHABITATION WITHIN CANADA

Statistics Canada began enumerating cohabiting couples during the 1981 Census by providing a relationship category for common-law partners of the head of household. In 1986, a further step was taken in information gathering to ask marital and common-law status of the entire household. A similar count was not taken in the United States until the 1990 Census (Le Bourdais and Lapierre-Adamcyk 2004). Cohabitation is also more accepted as an alternative family form within Canada than it is in the United States, where it is still largely viewed as a threat to marriage. The Canadian Supreme Court has previously ruled that cohabitors cannot be assured an equal division of joint property held should the relationship dissolve. However, this also varies according to province. Provincial governments in both Alberta and Quebec have chosen to view common-law relationships as distinct from marriage in regards to division of shared assets. Laws within Quebec reflect egalitarian and anti-establishment views of cohabitors' about their relationships, similar to those expressed by those in the New Zealand qualitative study (Elisabeth 2000), and have determined that cohabitors have done to in order to avoid the legal entanglements of marriage and may divide property as they see fit. Albertan laws, however, are more like those of the U.S. and reflect a desire to encourage marriage as the optimal family type and to discourage joint assets outside of marital unions in order to preserve this (Le Bourdais and Lapierre-Adamcyk 2004).

Cohabiters within Canada present an interesting case due to the bilingual nature of Canada itself and the period of time for which cohabitation has been recognized by the Canadian government. Within francophone Quebec, cohabitation has taken on a role in family formation that serves as a marriage substitute, similar to that within Scandinavian countries. Cohabitational childbearing is common within Quebec, and such relationships are of a longer mean duration

than in the rest of Canada (Heuveline and Timberlake 2004). It has been argued that Anglophone Canadians tend view it instead as a normative premarital step in which childbearing is rare (Wu 2000; Le Bourdais and Lapierre-Adamcyk 2004). Cohabitation in English-speaking Canada has also increased at a much slower rate than in Quebec. In 2002, twelve percent of Canadians outside of Quebec reported having a common-law partner – with the highest rates being seen in British Columbia and the Atlantic provinces – as opposed to thirty percent of Quebecois respondents. The former figure is close to estimates of cohabitation within the United States (Statistics Canada 2002).

Much like the U.S., cohabitation is also an increasingly common phenomenon for adults of all ages. Cohabitation is the first union type for fifty percent of young Anglophone Canadians. As divorce has increased, cohabitation has been experienced more frequently by older Canadians as a precursor to higher order marriages or as an alternative to marriage at all (Wu 2000; Le Bourdais and Lapierre-Adamcyk 2004). Because of its similarity in number and function to the U.S. and proximity to Quebec, data from Anglophone Canada offers unique opportunity to determine if cohabitation plays differing roles within a relatively homogenous population and to observe if increasingly positive attitudes towards cohabitation may be diffused across geographic boundaries.

METHOD

Data

Data used in these analyses were taken from Cycle 20 of the Canadian General Social Survey (GSS). From June to October 2006, 23,608 people aged 15 or older and living in a private household in one of the ten Canadian provinces were interviewed. The target population for Cycle 20 was all Canadian residents ages 15 and older. The sampling frame excluded

residents of the Yukon, Northwest, and Nunavut Territories, as well as full-time residents of institutions. Respondents contacted by the GSS were interviewed by telephone and were mainly chosen according to a random digit dialing sampling method. This introduces significant bias to the study as it excludes residents without telephone access. The response rate was 68%.

Cycle 20 of the General Social Survey (GSS) was the fourth cycle to collect detailed information on family life in Canada. The previous GSS cycles that collected family data were Cycles 5, 10 and 15. This cycle focused on transitions experienced by respondents such as leaving the parental home, marrying or entering into a common-law union, having children, moving or buying a home, and separating or getting divorced. The GSS also gathered data on the respondent's main activity and other sociodemographic characteristics such as age, sex, and marital status.

For these analyses, I have limited my sample to survey respondents who report currently being in a cohabitational or common-law relationship and who list English as their household language. By removing Francophone respondents, I hope to present a cleaner comparison with U.S. cohabitors and to alleviate some of the bias present in Heuveline and Timberlake's (2004) study. Listwise deletion was used to obtain a complete case analysis. The final sample size was 1139 respondents.

Measures

To date, latent class analysis has not been used to assess differences within cohabiting relationships. However, several studies have used this method to look at competing pathways to adulthood among adolescents (Macmillan and Copher 2005; Osgood et al. 2005; Sandefur, Eggerling-Boeck and Park 2005; Amato et al. 2008). These studies consider cohabitation to be one possible pathway. Other commonly studied pathways include terminating educational

studies, parenthood, marriage, and obtaining employment (Amato et al. 2008). It was with these studies in mind that I chose my class predictors: having obtained a college degree, not having obtained a high school diploma, presence of a child in the respondent's home, being divorced and the importance of religion in the respondent's daily life. Descriptive statistics of these predictors are shown in Table 1.

--- Table 1 about here ---

Roughly twenty-one percent of respondents in my sample report having obtained a college degree at the time of the survey. Conversely, fifteen percent reported having terminated their education prior to obtaining a high school diploma. These variables were recoded as binary from a seven category measure of educational attainment. College degree status was collapsed to include respondents who reported holding graduate degrees. Nearly forty percent of respondents had at least one child present in their home on a full time basis. However, determination was not made as to whether household children were the biological children of both respondent and common-law partner so step-parenting families are treated as biological for the sake of these analyses. Almost thirty-six percent of this sample reports having experienced at least one divorce prior to the current cohabitation. Finally, a measure of religiosity was included ranging from zero to three. Zero indicated that religion was of no importance in the respondent's daily life while a score of three indicated it was very important. The mean score was 1.7.

Latent Class Analysis

Latent class models work on the assumption of a continuous categorical latent variable underlying the data which may or may not be normally distributed. Most literature treats these categories as unordered and thus its usefulness as a descriptive tool. Observed variables are then used to predict latent class scores and proportions of class membership. However, a fundamental

assumption of latent class analysis is that within a category, individuals are homogenous. This is tested by imposing additional classes upon the model until which point that differences between unique classes are no longer identifiable. A second assumption of the model is independence of observed variables at a measured level within the latent variable (Clogg 1995). The model can then be written for a five class model as:

$$\pi_{ijklm} = \sum_{t=1} \pi x(t)\, \pi A|\, X=t(i) \pi B|\, X=t\,(j) \pi C|\, X=t(k) \pi D|\, X=t(l) \pi E|\, X=t(m)$$

In order to present a descriptive look at current non-francophone cohabitors within the Canadian General Social Survey, I first had to determine an optimal number of latent classes within the data. Analyses were conducted using LatentGOLD 4.0 for models containing up to fifteen classes but for the sake of parsimony, fit criterion information is presented for only models containing up to eight unique classes. Model fit was assessed via likelihood ratio statistics, Akaike information criterion (AIC and Bayesian information criterion (BIC). These results are presented in Table 2.

--- Table 2 about here ---

Determination of model fit presented a challenge to the data. Likelihood ratio statistics were minimized at eight classes, at which point interpretability of the classes was also minimized. Minimization of the BIC statistic occurred at two classes, but this ignored unique information about the cohabitors. The AIC statistic, generally considered the strongest predictor of model fit, was minimized at five classes – the number presented for subsequent analyses in this paper.

--- Table 3 about here ---

Probabilities of a yes response to each of the predictor variables are shown in Table 3. Class one constitutes twenty-seven percent of the total sample. Respondents in this category

possessed almost no chance of holding a college degree but had a nearly 0.21 probability having dropped out of high school or of reporting that religion was not at all important in her or her life. The defining characteristic of class one was likelihood of the presence of a child in the home, to which respondents in this class had a probability of 0.92. This class had only a twenty-five percent chance of being divorced, suggesting that the majority of births to respondents in this class were nonmarital or that children in the household are not biological their own. For this reason, I have termed this group "Single Parents."

Twenty-five percent of the sample fell into class two, which I have named "College Graduates." Within this class, respondents held a fifty-three percent likely to hold a college degree, the highest of any class. This group also had an effective zero probability of being a high school drop out. Probability of divorce increased compared to the previous class to 0.39 but having a child in the home decreased to 0.37. There was also a very low probability of reporting that religion was unimportant in their daily lives at 0.08. I use this group as my comparison category for subsequent multinomial logistic regressions.

Class three, at about twenty-two percent of the sample, is slightly less likely to possess a college degree than is the College Graduates group but has the second highest likelihood among the five classes. This class also has a very low probability of having dropped out of high school. Unlike the College Graduates, however, this group also has the lowest probabilities of having a child in their home or of being divorced. They also report the second highest probability of religion not being at all important in their daily lives. Based on these probabilities, I have termed this group "Secular Childfree."

Respondents in classes four and five were highly unlike to have obtained a college degree. The main differences between these two classes were probabilities of having dropped out

of high school and for lack of importance of religion. Class four made up twenty percent of the total sample and had a 0.26 probability of having dropped out of high school. However, this group also had only a two percent chance of reporting that religion was of no importance in their daily lives. This group was the most likely to have reported being divorced, with a 0.64 probability, but was relatively unlikely to have a child in the home (0.19). Because of this, I refer to this class as "Divorcées."

Class five, at about five percent of the total sample, was the smallest overall group and was categorized by their 0.92 probability of not having obtained a high school diploma. I hypothesize that this group will be the oldest members of the sample. This group also has 0.5 probability of being divorced and a nearly 0.6 probability of religion not being important to them. Likelihood of a child being in the home is also relatively low at 0.22 but not at low as the previous two classes. This final group is referred to as "High School Dropouts."

Multinomial Logistic Regression

I now attempt to explain the likelihood of class membership by using demographic and family of origin variables. Descriptive statistics for these independent variables are shown in Table 4.

--- Table 4 about here ---

Within the overall sample, about fifty-five percent of respondents were female. The mean age was nearly forty-one years old. The sample was also majority non-visible-minority and non-First-Peoples Canadian. Twelve percent of the sample reported knowing that their biological parents had cohabited at some point either before or after the respondent's birth.

--- Table 5 about here ---

Results of multinomial logistic regressions to predict likelihood of class membership are show in Table 5. College Graduates is used as the base category for this model. For respondents whose parents previously cohabited, class membership is least likely to be within the College Graduate group. Compared to this group, class membership is most likely to be among High School Dropouts or Single Parents. Being female was negatively associated with movement from the College Graduate group but most noticeably so for comparisons between this group and High School Dropouts. As age in years increased, likelihood of moving from College Graduate to Single Parent or Secular Childfree significantly decreased but likelihood of moving into the Divorcee or High School Dropout groups significantly increased. Being a visible minority was associated with a significant decrease in the probability of moving out of the College Graduate group into any of group but most noticeably so for movement into the High School Dropout group due to their being no visible minority respondents in the sample within that class (i.e. zero cell count). However, being of First Peoples descent was associated with an increased probability of movement from College Graduates into all other groups but only significantly for comparisons against Single Parents and Divorcees.

DISCUSSION

Results shown here suggest that research would benefit from a more nuanced treatment of cohabitation. To do so, we must go beyond mere descriptivism to assess the role gender plays in changing societal definitions of family forms. It remains to be seen if cohabitation can be regarded as more gender-neutral than is marriage. However, by looking into the strategies used by cohabitors to shape their relationship trajectories of their as well as how they manage gendered aspects of their identities within these relationships, we can better assess the ability of both partners to demand egalitarianism in their personal lives.

Cohabitation clearly plays different roles for Anglophone Canadians according to age, and educational status. The results support previous studies which have shown that cohabitation has become more common for younger people as a family formation step but also among older respondents who may be choosing it as an alternative to a second marriage. There is also evidence that a certain group outside of Quebec cohabits as a lifestyle choice in order to eschew legal entanglements of marriage. Nonmarital childbearing also appeared to be common among select classes such as the Single Parents. Cohabitation also seems to exist among a group of college educated women, substantiating arguments made by gender scholars that it is a way for women to achieve a more gender-neutral relationship.

Because of the increasing commonness of cohabitation, it no longer has the radical meaning once associated with it (Manting 1996). Cohabitation may well serve as a trial run prior to marriage for many couples, but it is important to note that by its very nature, cohabitation does not imply the same level of stability and permanence as marriage. For the couples who opt for this type of relationship, a long-term commitment may not be desired or expected. Rising cohabitation rates may well be tied with a shift in the meaning of marriage within Canada. If we consider that marriage is no longer the only way for a woman to leave her parents' home, the value placed on marriage may have decreased due to increased earning potential for women in the labor force and gains in personal independence for all women, regardless of social class (Manting 1996).

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Tables

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Class Predictor Variables

Variables	Obs	% or Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Class Predictors					
R is a college graduate	1139	20.90%	0.41	0	1
R is not a high school grad	1139	15.28%	0.36	0	1
R has a child in his/her home	1139	39.60%	0.49	0	1
R is divorced	1139	35.73%	0.48	0	1
Importance of religion in R's life	1139	1.699737	1.07	0	3

Table 2. Determination of Number of Latent Classes

Classes	Log-Likelihood	L2	AIC	BIC
2	-4375.6683	113.292	8790.337	**8843.8287**
3	-4356.3814	74.7181	8769.763	8847.9434
4	-4346.315	54.5853	8767.63	8870.4993
5	-4336.15	34.2553	**8765.3**	8892.8579
6	-4331.3683	24.6919	8773.737	8925.9831
7	-4325.5075	12.9703	8780.015	8956.9501
8	-4323.5652	9.0857	8794.131	8995.7542

Table 3. Latent Classes

	Single Parents	College Grads	Secular Child-Free	Divorcées	HS Drop Outs
	Class 1	Class 2	Class 3	Class 4	Class 5
	0.2704	0.254	0.2253	0.2021	0.0482
Probability of Yes Response					
R is a college graduate	0.0006	0.5292	0.3113	0.0006	0.0007
R is not a high school grad	0.2073	0.0002	0.0003	0.2591	0.92
R has a child in his/her home	0.9162	0.3723	0.0291	0.1915	0.2234
R is divorced	0.2503	0.3901	0.1301	0.6441	0.5018
Religion not important in R's life	0.2127	0.0768	0.3534	0.0203	0.595

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics of Independent Variables

Independent Variables					
R is female	1139	54.87%	0.50	0	1
R's parents cohabited	1139	12.03%	0.33	0	1
R's age in years	1139	40.63	13.40	17	80
R is a visible minority	1139	6.58%	0.25	0	1
R is North Amer. Indian or Inuit	1139	7.64%	0.27	0	1

Table 5. Results of Regression on Latent Classes

	Class 1			Class 3			Class 4			Class 5		
	β		SE	β		SE	β		SE	β		SE
R's parents cohabited	0.94	*	0.38	0.82	*	0.39	0.47		0.45	1.66	**	0.58
R is female	-0.40	*	0.20	-0.53	**	0.21	-0.12		0.20	-1.32	***	0.37
R's age in years	-0.04	***	0.01	-0.05	***	0.01	0.05	***	0.01	0.03	*	0.01
R is a visible minority	-0.84	*	0.34	-0.86	*	0.35	-0.60		0.35	-32.65		#####
R is North Amer. Indian or Inuit	1.30	*	0.54	0.28		0.59	1.63	**	0.55	1.15		0.74
Constant	2.51	***	0.39	2.63	***	0.41	-1.68	***	0.43	-2.24	**	0.71