

The Reproductive Context of Cohabitation in Comparative Perspective:
Recent Patterns of Contraceptive Use in the United States and Spain

Megan M. Sweeney
Department of Sociology
California Center for Population Research
University of California, Los Angeles
Msweeney@soc.ucla.edu

Teresa Castro-Martin
Center for Human and Social Sciences
Spanish National Research Council
Madrid, Spain
teresa.castro@cchs.csic.es

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Abstract

Using data from the 2006-08 National Survey of Family Growth, the 2006 Fertility, Family, and Values Survey, and the Fertility and Family Surveys of the mid-1990s, we apply a lens of contraceptive use to investigate change and variability in the reproductive context of cohabitation in the U.S. and Spain. Scholars frequently compare patterns of conception, childbearing, and childrearing to understand how the function of cohabitation differs from that of marriage. Although contraceptive use is a key proximate determinant of fertility, and provides an important alternate window onto intentions to avoid pregnancy, relatively little is known about patterns of contraceptive use among cohabitators. Comparing women in the U.S. and Spain, we ask how “marriage like” cohabitation is with respect to patterns of contraceptive use. We also investigate historical change and variability across educational groups in the extent to which cohabitation is “marriage like” with respect to contraceptive use in each country.

Extended Abstract

Demographers have devoted considerable attention to the recent and dramatic growth of non-marital cohabitation among couples in many industrialized countries. For example, in the United States, cohabitation shifted from being unusual to a relatively common phenomenon over the past thirty years. By 2002, six out of ten women in their early thirties had lived with a partner outside of marriage (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008). The proportion of U.S. births occurring within cohabitation has also notably increased over time. Whereas in the early 1980s roughly 8 percent of births were to cohabiting mothers, by the 1997-2001 period this figure had increased to 18 percent (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008; Raley, 2001).

Cohabitation has also increased rapidly in much of Northern and Western Europe in recent years, whereas diffusion of non-marital cohabitation has been slower across Southern Europe (e.g. Di Giulio & Rosina, 2007). Although cohabitation remains relatively uncommon in Italy (Nazio & Blossfeld, 2003), recent evidence suggests that a dramatic change in patterns of union formation may be taking place in Spain (Dominguez-Folgueras & Castro-Martin, 2008). Whereas only 8.5 percent of Spanish women born in the early 1950s had ever cohabited, the same was true of fully 42 percent of Spanish women born in the late 1970s (Authors' tabulations, 2006 Fertility, Family, and Values Survey). This rapid rise in non-marital cohabitation has been accompanied by considerable childbearing and childrearing within cohabiting unions, such that fully 39 percent of cohabiting couples reported children in common in the 2001 Spanish Census (Dominguez-Folgueras & Castro-Martin, 2008). Birth registry data further indicate that about 20 percent of all births in 2007 corresponded to cohabiting couples (Castro-Martin,

2010). This very recent and dramatic shift in family patterns makes Spain a particularly interesting comparative case for analysis.

These trends raise fundamental questions about how cohabiting unions fit into the broader landscape of family life in each country. Scholars frequently compare cohabitation to marriage with respect to patterns of conception, childbearing, and childrearing to better understand how the function of cohabitation differs from that of marriage and how these relative meanings may tend to vary among subpopulations, across countries, and over time (e.g. Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004; Kiernan, 2001; Manning, 2001; Musick, 2002; Raley, 2001). Although contraceptive use directly influences the likelihood that a woman will give birth, and is thus a key “proximate determinant” of fertility (Bongaarts, 1978; Davis & Blake, 1956), relatively little is known about patterns of contraceptive use among cohabiting women. Contraceptive behavior also provides an alternate window onto women’s intentions to avoid pregnancy (e.g. Edin, England, Shafer & Reed, 2007) and helps to “unpack” the dimensions of pregnancy wantedness and pregnancy planning from the broader concept of pregnancy intendedness (Bachrach & Newcomer, 1999). Finally, the relatively limited attention paid to this issue is surprising given suggestions by a number of U.S. scholars that the introduction of modern “medical” contraceptive methods such as the birth control pill, which are both highly effective and temporally separate decisions about sex from childbearing, may have facilitated growth in cohabitation among the unmarried (e.g. Cherlin, 2009; Nock, 2005; Thornton, Axinn, & Xie, 2007). Although rates of use of the most effective methods of contraception tend to be higher for cohabitators than for married women in the United States (Bachrach, 1987; Sweeney, forthcoming), remarkably little is

known about the contraceptive context of recent increases in cohabitation in Spain. Furthermore, while Sweeney (forthcoming) documents substantial social class variability in the contraceptive context of cohabitation in the United States in the early 2000s, with higher use of the most effective contraceptive methods associated with cohabitation (vs. marriage) only among the most highly educated women, little is known about whether these differentials are expanding or diminishing over time or whether a similar pattern of socioeconomic variability exists in the reproductive behavior of cohabitators in Spain.

The current analysis sheds much-needed light on recent patterns of contraceptive use among cohabitators in the United States and Spain and brings new evidence to bear on debates regarding change and variation in the relative meanings of cohabitation and marriage in each country. Two overarching questions guide the current research. First, comparing two sources of recently released data – the U.S. 2006-08 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) and Spain’s 2006 Fertility, Family, and Values Survey – to data from the Fertility and Family Surveys of the mid-1990s, we ask whether cohabiting women are more likely than married women to use modern contraceptive methods and also investigate whether the association between union status and contraceptive use has changed over time. Little is currently known about patterns of contraceptive use in Spain, and data from the recently released 2006-08 NSFG offers an opportunity to investigate how the reproductive behavior of cohabitators has evolved in the most recently available national data for the United States.

Second, we ask whether the association between union status and contraceptive use tends to vary across major socio-demographic groups defined by educational attainment. This question speaks to broader debates regarding “diverging destinies” across

social class in the U.S. with respect to many aspects of family behavior (e.g. Martin, 2004; McLanahan, 2004). Using data from the 2002 NSFG, Sweeney (forthcoming) identified a strong educational gradient in the use of the most effective contraceptives, such that cohabiting women with some college experience were substantially more likely than relatively less well-educated woman to use a highly-effective contraceptive method. Furthermore, the probability of using a very effective contraceptive method was greater among cohabiting than married women only among the well-educated. These findings suggest that cohabitation may have been most “marriage-like” with respect to reproductive behavior among the least educated American women – at least in the early 2000s. Data from the newly released 2006-08 NSFG offer the opportunity to investigate whether these differences between the most and least educated cohabiting women are increasing or converging over time. Little is known about whether and how contraceptive use may be differentiated by social class among Spanish cohabiting couples. This is a particularly interesting question in light of the very recent and dramatic increase in cohabitation experience in Spain.

BACKGROUND

A long tradition of family scholarship highlights the importance of marriage as a setting for childbearing, although recent discussions about the nature of family change in industrialized countries emphasize a shifting relationship between union status and reproductive behavior. For example, Kiernan (2002) argues that many European countries are in the midst of a partnership transition, progressing along a series of stages where cohabitation is first rare and viewed as a deviant phenomenon but eventually

becomes “indistinguishable” from marriage. A key feature of this ultimate stage in Kiernan’s partnership transition is that children are commonly born and reared within both marriages and cohabiting unions. Smock (2000, p. 10) similarly argues “if cohabitation is increasingly the arena for reproduction, then one might conclude that cohabitation is not merely a step in the process leading to marriage but perhaps an alternative to it.”

By investigating patterns of conception, childbearing, and the planning status of births, prior research offers important insights into change and variability in the acceptability of cohabitation as a context for childbearing. Yet we are left with an incomplete picture of reproductive behavior among cohabitators. Demographers have long called for attention to the proximate determinants of fertility, or those factors which directly influence childbearing by altering the probability of conception or fetal loss, such as frequency of sex and contraceptive practice (e.g. Bongaarts, 1978; Davis & Blake, 1956). This approach seems particularly important given the complex psychological underpinnings of reports on birth intentions (e.g. Edin, England, Shafer, & Reed, 2007; Trussell, Vaughan, & Stanford, 1999) and arguments that intendedness is a multidimensional concept jointly comprised of feelings of pregnancy wantedness and pregnancy planning (Bachrach & Newcomer, 1999). Furthermore, fully 75 percent of reported unintended pregnancies among never-married women, and 53 percent of reported unintended pregnancies among previously-married women, are thought to end in abortion (Brown & Eisenberg, 1995). Abortion is notoriously underreported in survey data, particularly so among unmarried women (Fu et al., 1998; Jones & Forrest, 1992), and likely relates to a woman’s or her partner’s views about the acceptability of

terminating a pregnancy. An investigation of contraceptive use offers an important alternate window onto the influence of union status on reproductive behavior.

Using data from the 2006-08 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), the 2006 Fertility, Family, and Values Survey, and the Fertility and Family Surveys, the current research investigates contraceptive use among cohabiting women in the U.S. and Spain. We address two sets of specific questions in this research. First, we ask whether cohabiting women differ from married women in their likelihood of using the most effective and reversible methods of contraception. If marriage has greater normative acceptability as a setting for childbearing than does cohabitation, we expect cohabiting women to be more likely than married women to use the most effective contraceptive methods. Although cohabiting women tend to be younger and to have fewer prior births than married women (Fields & Casper, 2001), we expect these differences to persist after adjusting for group composition with respect to age and parity. If cohabiting women are more likely than married women to foresee potentially wanting children with a future partner – which may indicate that cohabitation is less normatively viewed as a long-term setting for childrearing -- we would further expect cohabitators to be more likely than married women to choose reversible methods of contraception, even once adjusting for differences in age and parity distributions. We also explore whether the answers to these questions have changed since the mid-1990s, indicating that the reproductive context of cohabitation may have shifted over time.

The second stage of the analysis is motivated by a broader interest in understanding the nature of socio-demographic variation in family behaviors. Specifically, we ask whether the association between union status and the previously

described aspects of contraceptive behavior tends to vary across educational groups. Such differences, should they exist, would provide suggestive evidence of variation across groups in the reproductive context of cohabitation. We expect to find the greatest resemblance between cohabitators and married women with respect to contraceptive behavior among the least educated. As the meaning and function of cohabitation may vary depending on whether a union is formed before first marriage or after a marital dissolution (Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin, 1991), and because of relatively greater ambiguity in the timing and relationship context of decisions to use non-reversible contraceptive methods among the previously married, we focus on comparisons between never-married cohabitators and women in first marriages throughout this research.

METHOD

Data and Measures

To study the contraceptive behavior of cohabitators in the United States, this research relies primarily on data from the 2006-08 National Survey of Family Growth (Lepkowski et al., 2010). The sample is large, representative of the U.S. civilian non-institutional population of women ages 15-44 when properly weighted, and includes oversamples of women who are Black, Hispanic, or between the ages of 15 - 24. The 2006-08 sample includes interviews with 7,356 women and is the most recently released wave of data from the NSFG. The 2006-08 NSFG interviewed men as well as women, but these data are not used in the current analysis. The NSFG is particularly appropriate for the current analysis because detailed information is gathered on contraceptive method use and self-reported union status at the time of interview and sample sizes are

reasonably large. Moreover, the similar design of the various cycles of the larger NSFG study facilitates an analysis of change over time. For comparisons over time, data from the 2006-08 NSFG will be compared primarily to the 1995 NSFG, which represented the United States in the Fertility and Family Surveys (FFS). All analyses and descriptive statistics will be adjusted for the complex sample design of the NSFG using STATA svy routines with probability sampling weights, pseudo strata, and pseudo cluster variables.

To study the contraceptive behavior of cohabitators in Spain, we use the 2006 Fertility, Family and Values Survey, conducted by the Spanish Center for Sociological Research. In this nationally representative sample, 9737 women aged 15 and over were interviewed, although the current analysis is confined to 4758 women aged 15-44. Detailed information was gathered on contraceptive method use and union status at the time of interview. The questionnaire administered was very similar to that of the Spanish Fertility and Family Survey 1995, which facilitates the comparison and analysis of change over time.

Analytic Strategy

The first stage of the analysis will explore broad patterns of contraceptive use in the mid-to-late 1990s and 2000s. We will begin by examining descriptive statistics of the association between union status and contraceptive use, broadly defined, in each of the countries for the two time periods. We will next turn to a multivariate analysis of the association between union status and two outcomes: use of a “very effective” method of contraception (vs. an “effective” method, “less effective” method, or no method) and use of a reversible method of contraception. Here we ask whether key patterns of association

between cohabitation and contraceptive use persist once adjusting for group differences with respect to age and parity. To avoid confounding reversibility with level of effectiveness, the analytic sample for the latter analysis is limited to women using a “very effective” method of contraception. The second stage of the analysis will investigate potential variation in the association between union status and contraceptive use across educational groups in each country. Specifically, we will add measures of schooling, and interactions between schooling and union status, to the previously described model specifications to investigate potential socioeconomic variability in the reproductive context of cohabitation.

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