Same-Sex and Other-Sex Unions in Two British Birth Cohorts: A Dynamic Perspective

Same-sex unions are the subject of vigorous debate, but demographic research on these couples is in its infancy. This paper provides a dynamic perspective on same-sex and other-sex coresidential unions throughout young adulthood. Using relationship histories from two British birth cohorts, I study the timing, duration, and sociodemographic correlates of same- and other-sex unions. I also examine differences between women and men, given gender differences in economic resources and psychological orientations towards relationships. In light of changing attitudes towards same-sex partnering, I also investigate intercohort change in the demography of same- and other-sex unions.

BACKGROUND

Why should the demography of same-sex unions differ from that of other-sex cohabiting or marital unions? First, same-sex unions are less institutionalized than are male-female couples: same-sex unions are not governed by the legal or economic interconnections of marriage, nor by norms about appropriate roles within male-female couples (Weeks, Heaphy & Donovan, 2001).[1] Second, the gender composition of these couples also differs: same-sex unions are comprised of two men or two women, and other-sex couples contain one man and one woman. I argue below that the different institutionalization and gender composition of these couple types implies variation the timing, duration, and sociodemographic correlates of relationships. At the same time, recent social and economic changes have altered the context in which individuals make decisions about entering and exiting relationships. As a result, differences in the timing, duration, and correlates between same- and other-sex unions may have shifted across birth cohorts.

Timing

Individuals may enter same-sex unions later than other-sex unions. This could be because some may not identify as lesbian or gay until after they marry heterosexually, or because lesbians or gay men may also marry to satisfy normative expectations. Indeed, approximately one-third of women and one-fifth of men in same-sex couples report ever being heterosexually married (Andersson et al., 2006; Black et al., 2000). I anticipate, then, that rates of entry into same-sex unions will be low at young ages: the average age of entry into first same-sex union is expected to be older than the average age of entry into first other-sex relationship. This difference in timing may be even greater for women than for men.

The median age of heterosexual marriage has increased steadily since 1950 (Office of National Statistics, 2003), but the opposite may be true for same-sex unions. More favorable normative climate towards homosexuality (Loftus, 2001) may have relaxed pressure to form heterosexual unions and led to same-sex union formation at younger ages. I anticipate that the average age of entering into first same-sex union has decreased across birth cohorts.

[1] Same-sex marriage is currently legal in seven countries and the U.S. state of Massachusetts. Other jurisdictions, including the United Kingdom, have arrangements, such as civil or domestic partnerships, that entail many but not all of the rights and responsibilities of marriage. Civil partnerships for same-sex couples became available in the United Kingdom in December, 2005, after the observation period of the current study.

Duration

Institutionalization encourages relationship stability by reducing uncertainty about the economic and social bargain individuals make when they become part of a couple and by encouraging social support for the relationship (Becker, 1991; Teachman, Thomas & Paasch, 1991; Weiss, 1997). This theory implies that same-sex unions, which are less institutionalized than heterosexual marriage, should be of shorter duration than other-sex marriages. Same-sex and other-sex cohabiting unions are expected to have similar rates of dissolution because both lack the institutional commitment of marriage. Several studies provide support for this hypothesis. Same-sex registered partnerships in Sweden and Norway had a higher risk of dissolution than did other-sex marriages (Andersson et al, 2006), although this study only considers unions that were registered with the State. Same-sex cohabiting couples in the United States were also more likely to dissolve after 18 months in Blumstein & Schwartz's (1983) study. This study was based on a convenience sample, however, making the generalizability of the results unclear. Finally, Gates (2006) showed that American same-sex couples were less likely than other-sex married couples to live in the same household for five years or longer. This hints at a higher risk of dissolution for same-sex couples, but also confounds geographic mobility with relationship dissolution.

Relationship duration may also depend on the couple's gender composition. Social-psychological theory views women as more invested and skilled in relationships than are men (e.g., Cross & Madson, 1997). This theory implies that female same-sex couples should have lower rates of dissolution than do male same-sex couples. Two studies, however, found that female same-sex couples had higher risk of dissolution than did male same-sex couples (Andersson et al., 2006; Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983).

Rates of dissolution from same-sex unions may have decreased across because of the improved social climate toward homosexuality (Loftus, 2001) and increased economic gains to same-sex relationships through domestic partnership and health insurance coverage for same-sex partners (Badgett, 2001). The AIDS epidemic may have also increased the attractiveness of long-term, exclusive relationships, possibility decreasing dissolution rates for men (Adam, 2006). No study to my knowledge has investigated cohort change in the duration of same-sex couples.

Sociodemographic correlates

Heterosexual marriage is an economic partnership in addition to a romantic tie; as such, education, earnings, and employment affect the formation and dissolution of marriages (Oppenheimer, 1997). Same-sex couples lack the economic character of heterosexual marriage: same-sex couples are less likely to pool income and raise children together than heterosexual married couples, for example (Black et al., 2000; Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983). This suggests that socioeconomic factors may be less important in decisions to enter and leave same-sex unions. One recent study, however, found that education was positively associated with cohabitation for self-identified lesbians and gay men (Carpenter & Gates, 2007). The cross-sectional nature of this study, however, overrepresents relationships of long-duration and prevents analysis of how factors that are both causes and consequences of relationships (e.g.,

earnings) affect entry into unions. In addition to socioeconomic factors, there may be differences in the effect of living in an urban area on entry into same and other-sex unions. Uurban residence is negatively associated with entry into marriage (Lichter, LeClere & McLaughlin, 1991). But urban residence is expected to be positively associated with forming same-sex unions because lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals are disproportionately concentrated in urban areas (Carpenter & Gates, 2007).

METHODS

Data

I use data from two birth cohort studies from Great Britain: the National Child Development Study (NCDS) and the 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS). The NCDS is a prospective cohort study of all individuals born in Great Britain in one week in March, 1958, as well as individuals who permanently immigrated to Britain up to age 16. The two most recent waves were conducted at ages 33 and 41 (n = 11,419) and contain information about current and past co-residential unions since age 16. These histories contain information about the partner's sex, whether the cohort member was married to the partner, and the start and end date of the relationship. After accounting for death and permanent emigration, 70.3% of NCDS target sample was successfully re-interviewed in the most recent wave (Center for Longitudinal Studies, 2004).

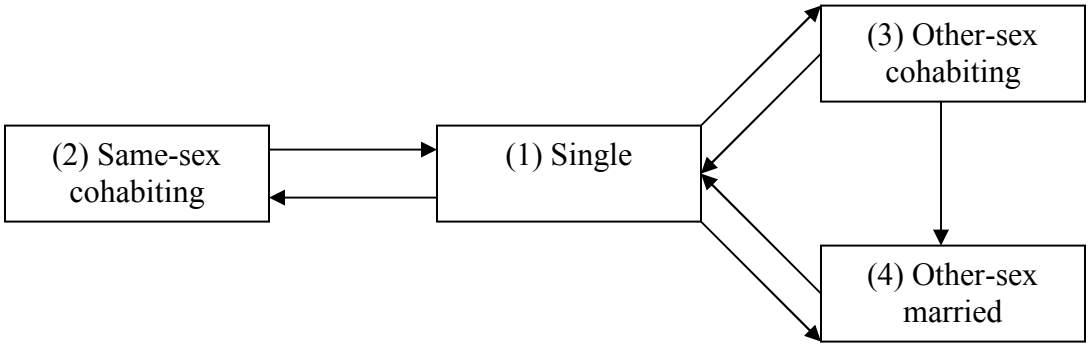
Like the NCDS, the BCS is a prospective cohort study of all individuals born in Great Britain in one week in April, 1970, as well as individuals who permanently immigrated to Britain up to age 16. BCS interviews at ages 29 and 34 (n = 11,924). The BCS also contains retrospective histories of co-residential unions, worded exactly the same as NCDS questions, from ages 16-34. In-person interviews for both cohort studies were conducted using a mixture of CAPI and CASI techniques by the National Centre for Social Research. More information about the NCDS and BCS, including detailed information about response rates, can be found at http://www.cls.ioe.ac.uk/default.asp.

Analysis plan

I will conduct two analyses. The first analysis uses multistate life tables to describe individuals' movements among four states: single, same-sex cohabiting, other-sex cohabiting, and other-sex married for each month between ages 16-34[2]. For parsimony, I restrict my attention to transitions depicted in Figure 1 below. These life tables will provide valuable descriptive information about the rates of formation and dissolution of same and other-sex unions, including whether the timing of entry into same-sex unions differs from entry into other-sex cohabitation or marriage. I will also calculate the average duration of same and other-sex cohabiting unions and other-sex marriages. I will create separate life tables for each cohort, allowing me to explore inter-cohort change in the duration of same and other-sex unions. Finally, I will also estimate these life tables separately by gender to examine gender differences in transition rates.

[2] Although the NCDS (1958 cohort) also contains relationship histories from age 35-41, I exclude these data because the BCS (1970 cohort) only contains histories up to age 34.

Figure 1: Multistate Representation of Same-sex and Other-sex Relationships



The second analysis seeks to explain the factors associated with moving into and out of various relationships. I will conduct a discrete-time event history analysis with competing risks, where the events are defined as making the transitions depicted in Figure 1. Because individuals may have several spells of co-residential relationships, I will allow for repeated events and adjust the sample for clustering accordingly. I define the onset of risk of entering a relationship at age 16, which is when the residential histories in the data begin. I include a set of fixed and time-varying sociodemographic characteristics as independent variables, including gender, education, family background characteristics, urban versus rural residence, employment, earnings, religiosity, and ethnic background. I combine data from both cohorts and include a variable indicating cohort membership to show inter-cohort differences in the rates of union formation and dissolution. I will be able to explore changes in the effect of sociodemographic characteristics on union formation and dissolution over time by interacting the cohort membership variable with sociodemographic characteristics.

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