

Country Context and the Relative Stability of Same-sex Unions: Insights from the case of Colombia

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Short abstract

The relative stability of same-sex unions as compared to different-sex unions differs across countries. In principle, one would expect the stability of same-sex and different-sex unions to be similar in contexts that are favorable to same-sex couples, but existing evidence is not easily squared with this expectation. The current study helps understanding this puzzle by providing evidence on a context that has relatively high levels of disapproval toward same-sex marriage: Colombia.

Data from the DHS provides retrospective information on 45,188 first unions, including 781 same-sex unions. Same-sex unions are less stable than different-sex marriages, but more stable than different-sex cohabiting unions. The latter result likely reflects the fact that different-sex cohabiting couples are particularly unstable in Colombia rather than that same-sex unions are particularly stable. Based on these results, we make a case for cross-nationally comparing general union stability rather than splitting the analysis by marital status.

Context and the relative stability of same-sex unions: Insights from the case of Colombia

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Extended Abstract:

Are the unions of same-sex couples less stable than those of different-sex couples? This question has been the focus of much recent research and the answer depends on the country and comparison group chosen. Even though same-sex cohabiting unions are found to be less stable than different-sex marriages (Joyner et al., 2017), evidence is less clear once comparing to different-sex cohabiting unions. In the United States there is no notable difference in the stability of same-sex and different-sex cohabiting unions (Manning et al., 2016), whereas same-sex unions are less stable in countries such as the Netherlands (Kalmijn et al., 2007) and the United Kingdom (Lau, 2012).

The mechanisms normally held responsible for a lower stability of same-sex unions include stigma, less common investments within same-sex unions (e.g. children), and the larger availability of alternative partners for same-sex partners (i.e. single people) (Lau, 2012). Given declining institutional discrimination (Trandafir, 2015), ever more approving attitudes toward same-sex couples (Rosenfeld, 2017), and increasing access to parenthood for same-sex couples (Gates, 2015), one would expect the relative stability of same-sex unions, as compared to different-sex unions, to have increased over time. Evidence so far, however, is surprisingly mixed.

Lau (2012) finds no changes over time in the stability of same-sex unions across two British birth cohorts. He suggested that older cohorts might have been a particular selection of same-sex couples who disclosed their relationship status and might have been very determined to make things work. In a recent study Kolk and Andersson (2018) find convergence of divorce rates across groups of married individuals in Sweden. It is possible that increases in stability among same-sex couples only become visible after an initial period where selection into same-sex unions drives trends in their relative stability.

In this paper, we study the context of Colombia to provide evidence from a relatively unfavorable context for same-sex couples. Despite legalizing same-sex marriage in 2016, a Gallup poll from June 2018 still indicated that 56% of the population is against same-sex marriage.¹ At the same time, disapproval was still at 66% in February 2011. If changes in attitudes drive the stability of same-sex couples, we would expect same-sex couples to have become more stable over time in Colombia. If this argument does not apply in contexts where the kind of individuals who enter (and disclose) same-sex

¹ <https://www.elpais.com.co/especiales/encuesta-gallup-125-junio-2018.pdf>

unions are still highly selective (Lau, 2012), reductions in stigma might not (yet) have led to more stable unions of same-sex couples in Colombia.

Similar to variation over time in the relative stability of same-sex unions, it is not straightforward to make sense of the cross-national differences documented in the literature. Currently, the only study where the stability of same-sex unions appeared similar to that of different-sex cohabiting unions is based on United States data from 2008 (Manning et al., 2016). In comparison, in the Netherlands, same-sex cohabiting unions appeared less stable as compared to different-sex cohabiting unions during the 1990s (Kalmijn et al., 2007) and a similar result was found in Great Britain (Lau, 2012).

A major obstacle toward comparing these results is that same-sex unions are normally compared to either different-sex marriages or to cohabiting unions. A complication with such numbers is that the meaning of cohabitation differs across countries (Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004). Whereas cohabitation might be very similar to marriage in some countries, selection into cohabitation might be very strong in other countries where cohabitation is still often considered a ‘second best’ option. In such countries, separation-prone individuals might be disproportionately likely to decide to cohabit rather than marry. This implies, for instance, that same-sex couples in the United States might be as stable as cohabiting different-sex unions because different-sex cohabiting unions are particularly unstable in the United States rather than that same-sex unions are particularly stable. In other words, cohabiting unions are a ‘moving target’.

Due to its so-called ‘dual nuptiality’ system, Colombia is a good case to illustrate how the meaning of cohabitation is important for the interpretation of results (Castro-Martin, 2002). Non-marital cohabitation has a long history in South America and has been more concentrated among the lower strata of society, possibly due to the resources needed to overcome complications to getting married (Castro-Martín et al. 2011; Esteve et al. 2012; Rodriguez-Vignoli 2005). Consensual unions have been found to be dramatically less stable compared to marital unions, (Castro-Martín et al. 2011), and Colombia is no exception (Ruiz-Vallejo, 2018).

As same-sex couples could not marry in the observation period considered here, union type is not relevant for same-sex unions. Given the high levels of stigma present in Colombia, we expect same-sex unions to be less stable than different-sex unions *overall* (i.e. different-sex marriages and cohabiting unions pooled), but possibly more stable than different-sex cohabiting unions (which might be particularly disadvantaged).

Data and Method

The data employed comes from the Encuesta Nacional de Demografía y Salud de (ENDS), a representative survey of the Colombian population which took place in 2015 as part of the Demographic and Health Surveys (Profamilia, y Ministerio de Salud y Protección Social, 2017). We use data from retrospective union histories on the first

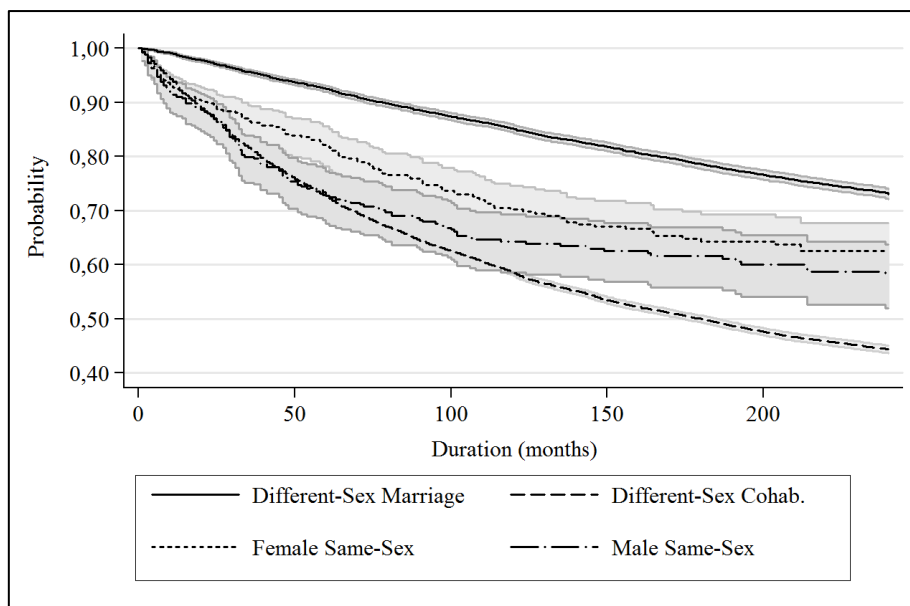
unions of 24,823 women aged 15-49 and 20,365 men aged 15-59; 781 of these first unions consisted of individuals of the same sex.

The sex-composition of unions is determined based on the reported sex of past or current partners of respondents. Respondents were asked about the last 5 cohabiting and marital unions they experienced. For each union they were asked about various characteristics of (former) partners including their sex. Previous studies on same-sex couples have noted that the measurement of same-sex couples is prone to error (Cheng & Powell, 2015). Our identification of same-sex unions is based on direct indications of the sex of partners, rather than that the sex-composition of unions is compiled from a household roster, as done for the US Census. Even though this method is likely to be less error-prone, we cannot exclude the influence of miscoding entirely. In future robustness checks we will therefore perform analysis on a subsample of respondents for whom we also have information on sexual orientation.

Preliminary Results

Figure 1 shows the survival of four types of unions: different-sex marriages, different-sex cohabiting unions, male same-sex unions, and female same-sex unions.² It becomes clear that different-sex marriages are the most likely to stay intact of all union-types. Same-sex cohabiting unions are more stable than different-sex unions, and these differences become statistically significant after 10 years of duration for men and after 3 years for women. Even though men’s same-sex unions are less stable than same-sex unions of women, these differences are not statistically significant at the 95% level.

Figure 1. Kaplan-Meier survival estimates of unions at given durations



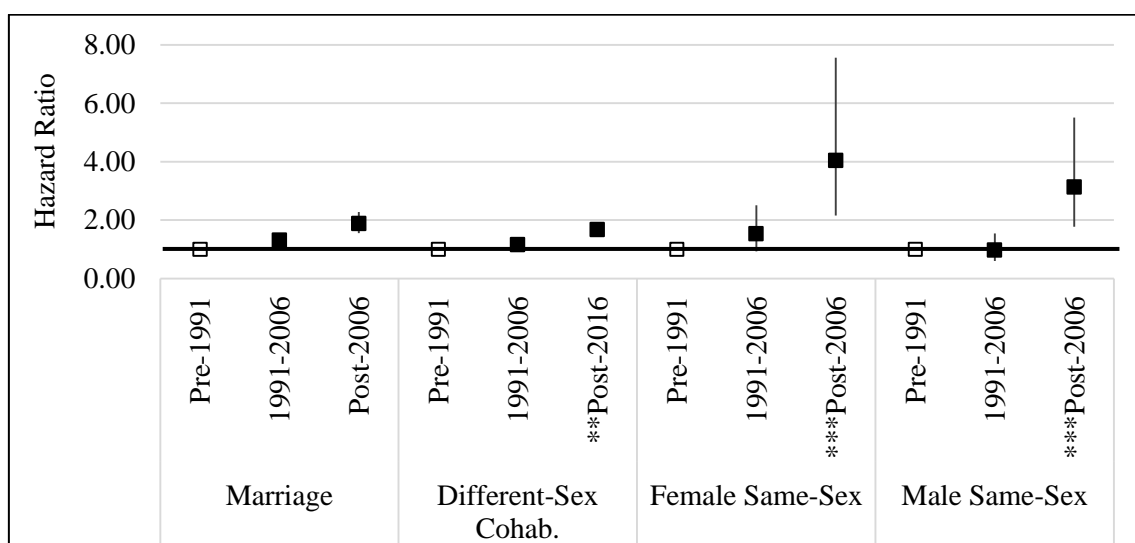
Note. Grey regions indicate 95% confidence intervals. First unions only. N = 51,525

² This variable is time-varying for unions that started as cohabiting but transitioned to marriage eventually. Robustness checks will be run where union status is time-constant for all unions.

The observation that same-sex unions are more stable than different-sex cohabiting unions has to be seen in the light of the very high instability of cohabiting unions in Colombia. The numbers therefore likely indicate a very high instability of different-sex cohabiting unions, rather than a high stability of same-sex unions. This result illustrates that comparing to different-sex cohabiting unions complicates the cross-national interpretation of results. We therefore suggest that future research (also) provides comparable estimates of overall union stability among different-sex couples by pooling marriages and cohabiting unions. Such numbers are provided in the final version of the paper, and indicate that same-sex unions are relatively similar in their stability compared to different-sex unions in Colombia. Given the unfavorable context for same-sex couples in Colombia, this can be regarded as a surprising result.

In a second step of the analysis, we aim to understand this result better by estimating how the stability of unions changed across cohorts. Figure 2 displays the hazard ratio of the variable union cohort for four sub-samples (unions formed before 1991 are the reference category). Even though the stability of unions decreased for all union types, these changes were most pronounced for same-sex unions. In fact, in most recent cohorts overall union-stability of same-sex unions is significantly lower than different-sex unions (i.e. marriages and cohabiting unions pooled; not shown). We propose two possible explanations for this surprising result: A) older cohorts of same-sex couples were a very select group of individuals that might have been particularly stable (Lau, 2012; Manning et al., 2016). B) The likelihood that same-sex couples are erroneously coded as such was higher in older cohorts (as the absolute number of same-sex couples was smaller). Such measurement error can drive down effect sizes. In the final version of the paper, we aim to distinguish between both explanations by using additional data on the sexual orientation of a subsample of respondents to detect possible miscodes.

Figure 2. Hazard ratio of separation for different union cohorts among four sub-samples



Note. Thick black line indicates hazard ratio of 1. Whiskers indicate 95% confidence intervals; ** difference with pre-1991 cohort statistically significant at the 95% level; *** statistically significant at the 99% level. N = 51,525

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