COMPARATIVE COUPLE STABILITY:
SAME-SEX AND MALE-FEMALE UNIONS IN EUROPE

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Extended abstract submitted for consideration for presentation at the 2019 meetings of the Population Association of America

Abstract

Findings on the stability of same-sex unions compared to male-female unions vary among regions of the world. Studies in Scandinavia and Great Britain tend to find that same-sex unions are less stable than their male-female counterparts, whereas studies in the United States tend to find that same-sex and male-female couples experience similar dissolution rates. To the author's knowledge, no study has addressed dissolution rates of same-sex couples in continental Europe. This study uses the Generations and Gender Surveys (GGS) to examine dissolution rates in eight continental European countries, pooled, and seeks to situate the findings among those from other countries and regions. Preliminary discrete time event history analyses are conducted to calculate the hazard of dissolution between survey waves. Additional analyses will use retrospective relationship histories. Preliminary findings indicate that coresident same-sex couples experience the same dissolution rates as male-female unions, controlling for the marital status of the union.

Introduction

Research on same-sex union stability in Europe has focused on couples in Norway and Sweden (Wiik, Seierstad, and Noack 2014, Andersson et al. 2006), and, to a lesser extent, in Great Britain (Lau 2012). Such studies find that same-sex couples are less stable compared to their male-female couple peers, though specific findings differ on the comparative stability of male-male couples or female-female couples relative to each other as well as relative to male-female couples. Additionally, the findings from research on couples in Europe contrast with the findings from research on couples in the United States. In the U.S. context, same-sex couples experience the same risk of dissolution as their male-female counterparts. The present study seeks to use an underutilized dataset to explore couple stability in continental Europe, and place it in the context of findings from Scandinavia, Great Britain, and the United States.

Wiik et al. (2014) use administrative level data in Norway to compare same-sex and male-female couples with legal status. It is important to note that while same-sex unions were granted legal status in 1993 in Norway, it was not called marriage until 2009, though the legal differences between the two were few. Wiik et al. (2014) examine the rates of union dissolution for same-sex and male-female couples during the 1993 to 2010 period and find that same-sex couples have higher dissolution rates than male-female couples, with female-female unions experiencing higher dissolution rates than male-male couples. These findings support similar findings from a 2006 study using administrative level data in Norway and Sweden (Andersson et al. 2006), and indicate that the differentials in union dissolution rates have been stable across the period 1993 to 2010.

In the British context, Lau (2012) pooled samples from two birth cohort studies to examine the retrospective relationship histories of same-sex cohabiting couples compared to different-sex cohabiting and married couples. While all cohabiting couples were found to have higher dissolution rates than male-female married couples, same-sex cohabiting couples were found to have higher dissolution rates than male-female cohabiting couples. In contrast with

much of the other literature from other countries, male-male cohabiting couples were found to be less stable than female-female cohabiting couples, however the significance testing for the difference between male-male and female-female cohabiting couples yielded marginally statistically significant results, and as such this result is suggestive and must be interpreted with caution, as Lau (2012) notes.

In the U.S. context, Rosenfeld (2014) analyzes data from a representative sample of coupled individuals in the United States with an oversample of gay, lesbian, and bisexual identified individuals, gathered over four waves from 2009 to 2013, to study the same issue in the U.S. context. Using the *How Couples Meet and Stay Together* (HCMST) (Rosenfeld, Thomas, and Falcon 2015) data, he finds that same-sex and male-female couples have the same dissolution rates after accounting for entrance into formal unions, including domestic partnerships, civil unions, and formal marriage. However, when separating male-male and female-female couples, Rosenfeld finds that female-female unions have higher dissolution rates, while male-male dissolution rates are indistinguishable from their male-female couple counterparts. Similarly, Joyner, Manning, and Bogle (2017), using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health) to study young adults, find that female-female cohabiting couples are less stable than their male-male and male-female cohabiting peers, whose dissolution rates are indistinguishable from each other. In contrast, focusing on cohabitational unions in the United States, Manning, Brown, and Stykes (2016), using the Survey of Income and Program Participation to investigate the stability of same-sex and male-female cohabiting couples, as well as male-female married couples, indicate that same-sex and male-female cohabiting couples experience similar dissolution rates, and that both female-female and male-male cohabiting couples experience higher dissolution rates than male-female married couples. Same-sex married couples are not included in this study, and separate analyses for male-male and female-female cohabiting couples are not analyzed.

Same-sex union stability is still understudied, and the literature that does exist is not in agreement over the existence or direction of differentials in dissolution rates between same-sex and male-female couples. Additionally, results vary depending upon regional context, with research from Scandinavia indicating that male-male couples experience higher dissolution rates than male-female couples, and female-female couples experience higher dissolution rates than male-male couples (Wiik et al. 2014). One study from Great Britain suggests that male-male couples are less stable than male-female and female-female couples (Lau 2012), and research from the United States tends to indicate either that same-sex couples experience the same dissolution rates as male-female couples (Manning et al. 2016, Rosenfeld 2014) or that cohabitational same-sex unions are less stable than those of male-female couples (Joyner et al. 2017). This study seeks to contribute to the literature by exploring same-sex couple stability in the context of the European continent, and placing the findings in conversation with results from other regions of the world.

Methods

The Generations and Gender Survey (GGS) is a set of harmonized surveys across 19 countries in the first wave, with a second wave available for 13 countries. The GGS covers a broad range of topics including relationships, fertility, health, and income, among others. Wave 1 of the GGS took place between 2004 and 2011, with Wave 2 occurring three years later for a given country. Samples are constructed separately within each country, however samples are random and are constructed to be representative within a given country.

Two separate sets of analyses are proposed. The first includes only those countries in Europe with two waves of observations, and which have a subsample of individuals in same-sex relationships at Wave 1, yielding a total of eight countries: Austria, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Germany, France, Hungary, Netherlands, and Poland. The first set of analyses includes a modest subsample of 112 individuals in same-sex unions. The second set of analyses is based on

retrospective relationship histories, which includes a subsample of 276 reported same-sex unions.

For the first set of analyses, the author restricts the sample only to coupled individuals with responses to key questions in both Waves 1 and 2, and who are age 50 or under. The total analytic sample is 23,629 coupled individuals, of which 64 are males in same-sex unions, and 48 are females in same-sex unions. While the subsample in same-sex unions is only approximately 0.5% of the full analytic sample, this is only slightly below percentages of individuals reporting current same-sex relationships in other large-scale representative data sets (Fisher, Kalmijn, and Steinmetz 2016). The author constructs a variable measuring duration of cohabitation to serve as a measure of length of the relationship. Relationships are separated into cohabiting and formalized unions (marriage or civil union). Couples who indicate that they were living together at Wave 1 but no longer living together at Wave 2 are coded as having broken up between waves. Same-sex couples are identified using the series of questions on household members including the relationship of each household member to the head of household and the gender of each individual.

A second set of analyses will use retrospective relationship histories to study the same topic as above. The GGS includes detailed retrospective relationship histories including questions on timing of cohabitation, timing of marriage, and timing of union dissolution. Same-sex unions are identified with a devoted question asking whether (and which) reported historical relationships were same-sex. A total of 276 same-sex relationships are reported in the GGS, with 133 male-male and 143 female-female relationships reported. Among these, 26 male-male relationships and 25 female-female relationships transition to marriage during the course of the relationship.

Hazards of union dissolution are calculated using discrete time event history analysis with a complementary log-log link using the following model:

$$\lambda(t_j|\boldsymbol{X}_i) = 1 - [1 - \lambda_0(t_j)e^{(X_i\beta)}]$$

representing the hazard for individual i at time t_j where λ_0 is the baseline hazard, $\boldsymbol{X}$ is the range of covariates, and $\boldsymbol{\beta}$ is the vector of their associated coefficients.

It is important to note that Régnier-Loilier (2017) discusses the feasibility of using GGS data for studying topics related to same-sex couples. Same-sex relationship identification for unions current at Wave 1 depends on matching the sex of the respondent and the sex of the partner, rather than from a dedicated indicator stemming from a dedicated question in the questionnaire. He points out that a small amount of error in sex-coding for either the respondent or the partner can lead to a large number of false positive identifications of current same-sex relationships, which would affect findings. His analyses indicate that some error in sex-coding for respondents or their partners likely exists in the data set, as some error exists in any data set, and that this has a disproportionate effect on the same-sex couple subsample within the GGS, given the small size of the subsample. Régnier-Loilier suggests the use of other variables to corroborate the same-sex status of couples. The author will make efforts to identify potential corroborating variables to ensure that couples identified as same-sex are likely accurately identified. Analyses based on retrospective relationship histories are not prone to this same limitation given that same-sex historical relationships are identified by a dedicated question in the questionnaire rather than by matching sex of respondent and partner.

Conclusion

Preliminary models for relationships current at Wave 1 suggest that same-sex couples, whether male-male or female-female, have the same risk of union dissolution as their male-female counterparts, when looking in the continental European context and taking into account the marital status of the union (see Table 1). This holds true for both informal (cohabiting only) unions as well as marital unions. These findings suggest that the continental European context mimics the U.S. context more than it does the Scandinavian or the British contexts. Other

findings from Model 4 show that those who are in formalized unions have a lower risk of union dissolution, the presence of children in the household contributes to a lower risk of dissolution, those who begin their unions at the age of 30 or above have a lower risk of union dissolution, and the higher the level of education the lower the risk of union dissolution.

While the preliminary findings indicate that same-sex and male-female unions have the same risk of union dissolution, these findings do not take into account the possibility of falsely identified same-sex relationships. Using corroborating variables to narrow the identified subsample of same-sex unions may contribute to larger effect sizes by removing male-female couples from the same-sex pool. While effect sizes are already quite large (see, for example, the effect size for the interaction between male-male couple status and marital status at 4.045), an even larger effect size may be found to be significant, despite the smaller sample. These preliminary findings also do not take into account retrospective relationship histories, which will provide a subsample size of same-sex unions more than double the sample for the preliminary findings.

Additional work will be done to analyze the sample to better understand union dissolution risks of same-sex and male-female couples in the European context, and to place these findings in conversation with those from Norway, Sweden, Great Britain, and the United States.

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Table 1. Complementary log-log regression of union dissolution by length of cohabitation, hazard ratios.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Couple type (ref: Male-Female)				
Male-Male	1.042	0817	0.650	0.328
Female-Female	2.208 *	1.654	1.405	1.495
Married		0.452 ***	0.449 ***	0.462 ***
MM * Married			2.050	4.045
FF * Married			2.074	1.868
Children present (yes/no) (R)				0.859 *
Age at union (30+) (R)				1.212 *
Level of educ (R)				-.858 ***