

Fertility Plan Disagreement among Cohabiting Couples and Its Effect on Relationship Stability.

Klára Čapková

Faculty of Social Studies, Masaryk University

Extended abstract:

Does fertility plan disagreement lead to the dissolution of cohabitation? This paper aims to examine the effect of disagreement in short-term fertility plans of cohabiting couples on the dynamics of their partnership. It combines the research on fertility plan disagreements and realized fertility with the research on relationship stability and transitions.

Despite the rise and spread of cohabitation in Western societies over the past few decades, cohabitation is often perceived as a less stable, temporary form of union. Such beliefs remain, although for a rising number of couples it has become a long-lasting and sometimes permanent family setting, with rising proportions of children being born into and reared by cohabiting parents (Kiernan 2004). In recent cohorts cohabitation became a prevalent form of partnership, replacing marriage as first coresidential union to a large extent (Le Bourdais, Lapierre-Adamczyk 2004). In addition, the duration of cohabitation seems to be on the upswing (Kasearu, Kutsar 2011). Cohabitation covers a longer part of the time span when childbearing intentions and realized fertility usually take place. It becomes a crucial domain for partnership future prospects and childbearing negotiations. However, stability and position of cohabitation in the kinship system is highly dependent on the local circumstances and differs markedly among nations (Heuveline, Timberlake 2004; Kiernan 2002).

Among other relevant factors, consensus or disagreement about fertility plans in relation to timing and number of children might play an important role in the partnership. Fertility plans and potential disagreement not only determine the future realized fertility, but affect the development and changes in partnership and family arrangements (Sassler, Cunningham 2008). Fertility plans play an important role in stability, duration, and choice of the route out of cohabitation – cohabitation continuation, marriage, or union dissolution. Qu, Weston and Vaus (2009) showed that the transition into marriage was the most likely among couples who shared positive fertility plans, while the transition into partnership dissolution was most likely among couples who's fertility plans differed.

Family transitions are often associated with childbearing. A huge body of research shows that both birth of a child, and presence of children in marriage, have a positive effect,

and stabilize the marital union (Morgan, Rindfuss 1985; Steele et al 2005). Studies on cohabitation suggest however, that the effect of children in cohabitation is ambiguous. Despite the rising numbers of children born into cohabitation, for many couples cohabitation does not represent a proper setting for raising a family (Manning 2004). The fact that some 40% of children born into cohabitation are unwanted (Musick 2002), or in Kravdal's (1997) wording "mistimed", leads us to the notion that certain conditions have to be met for a positive effect of the birth of a child on family stability.

Taking the couples perspective into consideration, newborns can be unwanted by one or even both parents. Whereas children born as a result of positive fertility plans of both parents represent a "couple specific capital" (Manning 2004), children born in spite of parental planning are very likely to become a stress factor negatively affecting the stability of the family.

We use the first five waves of the Panel Analysis of Intimate Relationships and Family Dynamics (PAIRFAM), a longitudinal study of partnership and family dynamics launched in 2008. With three birth cohorts (1971-3, 1981-3, and 1991-3) and more than 12,000 persons surveyed annually, this study constitutes an extensive data source for an analysis of contemporary family behavior and family formation dynamics. We focus on childless cohabiting couples and follow them for more than five years.

The current study employs discrete time event history analysis. Based on the dataset modified into couple-months, the model is equivalent to a multinomial logistic regression. The model consists of two equations and the dependent variable comprises three categories: continuation of cohabitation, marriage entry, and union dissolution. Several models are estimated to assess the effects of (1) socio-demographic factors such as education, socio-economic status, labor market participation and birth cohort, (2) past partnership biography, relationship satisfaction and commitment, and (3) births and family size changes between the first and fifth wave of the study.

In order to assess the effect of fertility plans, we divided the couples into three types by fertility intentions (in the first wave of the study); couples with positive fertility plans, couples with negative fertility plans, and couples who had not agreed (different fertility plans). Couples were followed for five years; the realized fertility and transitions were observed. Our results document the stabilizing effect of both negative fertility plan agreement and disagreement on continuation of current cohabitation, compared to both marriage entry and potential dissolution. Whereas positive fertility plans favor the transition into marriage, both negative and different fertility plans of partners favor staying in the current cohabitation.

However, this pattern only applies to childless cohabiters' and couples, where at least one partner met his/her original goal. Once unplanned children are born, disagreeing couples and couples with no plans to become parents are highly prone to dissolution.

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