Children and the Stability of Cohabiting Couples

Pascale Beaupré and Pierre Turcotte

Over the past thirty years, Canadian families have undergone many significant changes. For one thing, marriage no longer appears to be the sole way to enter conjugal life and to start a family. Indeed, a growing number of Canadians are now bearing children outside of formal marriage: the percentage of out-of-wedlock amongst all births in Canada has risen from 13 % in 1980 to 30 % in 1994 (Dumas et Bélanger, 1997: 155). In Quebec, 65 % of the first births are to cohabiting parents. (Duchesne, 2002). In many industrialized countries, the overwhelming majority of unwed parents are living together when their child is born: in 2000, out-of-wedlock childbearing accounted for 66 % in Iceland, 55 % in Sweden, and 33 % in the United States.

The increase in nonmarital childbearing is closely related to the delay (and decline) in marriage, which as occurred over the past century. Postponement of marriages, the pursuit of higher education and career development (especially among non-married women) have exposed women to greater risk of non marital births than in earlier years. Delays in marriage have been accompanied by increases in cohabitation: the 2001 General Social Survey (GSS) showed that close to 1.2 million couples were living in a common-law relationship, up 20 % from 1995 (Statistics Canada, 2002a). Recent generations have seen a change: more than 40 % of Canadian women who entered their first union between ages 30-39 chose cohabitation, compared to 27 % of those who did so while they were aged 40-49 (Statistics Canada, 2002b).

Although the link between cohabitation and nonmarital fertility is less well understood, it is clear that changes in nonmarital fertility have been affected significantly by ongoing trends in cohabitation. As childbearing in cohabitation becomes more common, it is increasingly important to evaluate the stability of cohabiting unions for children. Although the rapid growth in the rate of nonmarital partnerships has been extensively documented, little research attention has been paid to the formation of these relationships, and even less attention to their stability. Research on union disruption has shown that cohabiting relationships are less stable than marriages, prompting public concern about the impact on single parenthood (Le Bourdais & Marcil-Gratton, 1996; Hall & Zhao, 1995; DeMaris & Rao, 1992). Should the trends observed in 2001 continue, Canadian women aged 40 to 59 who started their conjugal life

through a common-law relationship are expected to be twice as likely (60 %) to see their unions end in separation as of women who married beforehand (Statistics Canada, 2002b).

Prior research on marital stability indicates that children reduce the risk of marital disruption. Do children stabilize cohabitation relationships as well? On one hand, if cohabitation is akin to marriage, then children could similarly create stability for cohabiting couples. But on the other hand, children could be a destabilizing factor suggesting that cohabitation is not a long-term environment for family childrearing.

Several theoretical perspectives argue that children create relationship stability (Coleman, 1988; Becker, Landes & Michael, 1977). According to Becker's theory, children represent *marital-specific capital*. Children born to a couple are a product of the marriage, therefore children are theorized to stabilize marriage because their value is greatest within marriage and children represent a "cost" to divorce. The concept of marital-specific capital can be extended to cohabiting unions. In this way, we may expect that children born during cohabitation will have similarly positive effect on the stability of cohabiting unions as they do for marriages.

Conversely, children may have a negative effect on stability of cohabitation. Unlike marriage, cohabitation is not perceived as an "institution" because it lacks common meaning (Nock, 1995). Cohabiting and married couples differ on many domains, such as relationship quality (some have definite plans to marry while view their union as short term), fertility intentions, and treatment under the law.

The average duration of cohabitating unions is quite short and childbearing and childrearing can be seen as more central functions within marriage than within cohabitation. Thus, couples who give birth to a child during cohabitation may be selected on certain traits and attitudes, such as non traditional values, and as a consequence, be more willing to accept separation in case of conflict (Axinn & Thornton, 1992). Hence, childbirth within cohabitation may possibly place strain/pressure on the relationship and result in increased likelihood of dissolution. Moreover, childbearing during cohabitation is often unplanned. Two-fifths of cohabiting women report that childbearing during cohabitation was unplanned (Musick, 1999). One can assume that an unanticipated event, such as birth, could have a negative effect on the stability of a union.

Although some empirical evidence shows that childbearing seems to inhibit the cohabitating couple from ending their relationship (Wu, 1995; Wu & Balakrishnan, 1995; Lillard & Waite, 1993), other research focusing on American cohabiting couples finds that children do not influence the stability of cohabiting unions (Manning & Smock, 1995). The considerable heterogeneity of nonmarital partners could be one explanation.

This paper evaluates the link between childbearing and union stability among two-parent families. Using retrospective data on family history collected by the 2001 GSS conducted in Canada, two central questions are addressed. First, how do births during cohabitation influence the stability of their parent's cohabiting union? Second, with the development of nonmarital cohabitation, is the arrival of a child starting to have similar effects on the stability of marital and nonmarital unions? Third, what are the socioeconomic determinants marital and nonmarital stability? Given the substantial proportion of first births occurring to cohabiting couples in Quebec, it seems relevant to compare the conjugal behaviours of Quebeckers from those of residents of other Canadian provinces.

This study uses a recent national survey on family history. The GSS is a representative sample of 24 310 men and women aged 15 years or over in 2001 living in Canada. The GSS collected detailed retrospective data on the conjugal (marriages and cohabiting unions), parental (children born and raised by respondents) and work (employment and job interruptions) histories. We use continuous time event history analysis techniques. General proportional hazard (Cox) models are used to study the process of union dissolution among two-parent families. The dependent variable in the models is the instantaneous rate of union dissolution experienced by women living in these families, and is expressed as a function of two components: a baseline function, which varies over time but is left unspecified, and the effects on this baseline hazard of a set of individual characteristics (some of which may change over time).

References

AXINN, W.G. & A. THORNTON. 1992. “The Relationship Between Cohabitation and Divorce: Selectivity or Causal Influence ?”, *Demography*, 29:357-374.

BECKER, G., LANDES, E. & R. MICHAEL. 1977. « An Economic Analysis of Marital Instability ». *Journal of Political Economy*, 85:1141-1187.

COLEMAN, J. 1988. “Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital”. *American Journal of Sociology*, 94 (supp): s95-s120.

DeMARIS, A. & V. RAO. 1992. “Premarital Cohabitation and Subsequent Marital Instability in the United States: A Reassessment”. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 54:178-190.

DUCHESNE, L. 2002. *La situation démographique au Québec*. Quebec : Institut de la statistique du Québec, 330 p.

DUMAS, J. & A. BÉLANGER. 1997. *Report on the Demographic Situation in Canada 1996*. Catalogue no 91-209E. Ottawa: Statistics Canada.

HALL, D.R. & J.Z. ZHAO. 1995. “Cohabitation and Divorce in Canada: Testing the Selectivity Hypothesis. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 57:421-427.

LE BOURDAIS, C. & N. MARCIL-GRATTON. 1996. Family Transformations across the Canadian/American Border: When the Laggard Becomes the Leader”. *Journal of Comparative Family*, 27:415-436.

LILLARD, L.A. & L.J. WAITE. 1993. « A Joint Model of Marital Childbearing and Marital Disruption ». *Demography*, 30:653-681.

MANNING, W. & P. SMOCK. 1995. “Why Marry ? Race and the Transition to Marriage among Cohabitors”. Demography, 32:509-520.

MUSICK, K. 1999. “Determinants of Planned and Unplanned Childbearing among Unmarried Women in the United States”. *Center for Demography and Ecology*. Working Paper 99-09, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

STATISTICS CANADA. 2002a. *The Daily*, October 22nd. Ottawa.

STATISTICS CANADA. 2002b. “Changing Conjugal Life in Canada”, July, Catalogue no. 89-576. Ottawa.

WU, Z. 1995. “The Stability of Cohabitation Relationships: The Role of Children”. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 57:231-236.