

The interplay between socio-economic background and unmarried parental cohabitation: The case of France and Britain

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The increasing proportion of births within cohabitation across most of Europe and the United States suggests that cohabitation is becoming a common setting for childbearing and childrearing (Kennedy and Bumpass 2008, Kiernan 2004, Leridon 1990, Perelli-Harris et al 2010, Toulemon 1997). As cohabitation has increased, researchers have asked to what extent cohabitation is now “indistinguishable from marriage” or an “alternative to marriage” (Heuveline and Timberlake 2004, Kiernan 2004). Childbearing within cohabitation has been taken as an indicator that cohabiting unmarried relationships have become more marriage like (Musick 2007, Kiernan 2004). Most studies on childbearing within cohabitation focus particularly on fertility behaviour and instability (e.g. Heuveline and Timberlake 2004, Heuveline, Timberlake, and Furstenberg 2003, Le Goff 2002, Kiernan 2004, Perelli-Harris et al 2010, Perelli-Harris et al 2012), and whether these differ according to the marital status of the parents. These studies find that with respect to reproductive behaviour, cohabitation is taking some of the forms and functions of marriage. A second strand of literature has focused on outcomes for children, and whether living with two married parents is “better” for children than living with two unmarried parents (for reviews see Amato and Keith 1991a, Amato and Keith 1991b, Amato 2000, Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan 2004). Bound up in this literature, which largely comes from Anglophone countries, is that, at least in the UK and US, unmarried parenthood is strongly correlated with socio-economic disadvantage, and trying to get to the “real” effect of marriage or cohabitation on children has become a key preoccupation of this strand of work (see Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan, 2004 or Steele, Sigle-Rushton and Kravdal, 2008 for a discussion), controlling out for differences in socio-economic background as “confounders”.

Cohabiting and married couples are similar in a number of ways: in European countries, cohabiting fathers often have the same rights as married fathers. Unmarried fathers are usually able to establish paternity and gain joint custody of their children (Perelli-Harris and Sanchez Gassen 2012). In addition, many taboos associated with unmarried parenthood are disappearing; surveys from across Europe and the United States show greater acceptance of non-marital

parenthood (Kiernan 2004). This may point to the hypothesis that marriage may be increasingly irrelevant to parenting a child within a cohabiting union.

On the other hand, most studies show that cohabitators and married couples are different. Individuals who have ever cohabited typically have less traditional family oriented attitudes (Lesthaeghe 2010). Studies show that cross-nationally, cohabitators have higher risks of dissolution than married couples (Kiernan 2004). Studies in the U.S. show that cohabiting women are more likely than married women to be unhappy or dissatisfied with their current situation (Brown 2000; Brown 2003), and cohabiting women suffer higher rates of violence and abuse (Kenney and McLanahan 2006).

The context to these differences is, as shown in the literature of family structure and child well-being, a pervasive interplay between family structure and socio-economic background. Studies from the US and the UK show that cohabiting parents are significantly socio-economically more disadvantaged than their married counterparts (Panico et al. 2010, Kiernan and Mensah 2010). As Ní Bhrolcháin (2001) argues about the relationship between parental divorce and child outcomes, it is precisely this background individual-level variation that is at issue, and research should put focus on the ‘who?’ rather than just taking stock of demographic events and behaviours. Similar arguments could be put forward about parenting within a married or unmarried partnership. Therefore, we argue that research seeking to establish whether cohabitation is an alternative to marriage in the context of parenthood should not consider family structure and behaviours in isolation of its socio-economic context. This context can in turn be affected by structural variables, such as differences in social and welfare policies. Comparing countries with different socio-economic and family policies could therefore be informative.

In this paper we explore whether the interplay between socio-economic background and childbearing within a cohabiting relationship is as marked in France as it is in the UK. France and the UK make an interesting comparison from this point of view. While both have relatively high levels of children born outside marriage, welfare and family policy differs across the two countries. Both British and French policies focus on employment for families on low incomes to protect them from poverty (Eydoux and Letablier, 2009), but in the UK this is not supported by help with childcare, a policy emphasis in France (Fagnani, 2002). The French social system aims to compensate *all* families for the cost of raising children, irrespective of their socio-economic

profile or family status (Thévenon, 2009), while in the UK public aid concentrates on the poorest to maintain their standard of living at the threshold of poverty (Thévenon, 2011). Furthermore, unmarried (cohabiting) parents have long been recognized under French law, with no legal difference in the rights and duties of parents towards their children according to their marital status. The introduction a decade ago of the *Pacte civil de solidarité* (Pacs), a contract open to same-sex and different-sex couples, introduced a new category of parents in France.

In France, about 37% of first births, and 28% of second births, in 1985-2000 occurred in cohabiting unions (Perelli-Harris, 2013), some of the highest levels in Europe. These figures exclude Pacs. France started to experience an increase in cohabitation in the 1980s, and by 1995-99 more than 90% of first unions had started with cohabitation (Koeppen 2010). By contrast, 18% of first births and 16% of second births occurred in cohabiting unions in the UK during 1991-2006 period (Perelli-Harris, 2013).

The aim of this paper is to map out the socio-economic and living conditions of parents in France and the UK and interpret results with a comparative lens. As cohabitation is often a step within the life course (many cohabitators go on to marry, and many married couples were initially cohabitators), we use large datasets (the ONS Longitudinal Study in England and Wales, and the *Enquête Famille et Logement* in France) that allow us to look at parents at different stages in the life course. We aim to do so by running analyses separately for parents with a first birth only to parents with more than one child. Age of entry into parenthood will also be explored as a potential stratifying variable.

Data

The Office for National Statistics Longitudinal Study (LS) is a record linkage study of a sample of the population of England and Wales, based on linkage of census records for individuals. The sample comprises people born on one of four selected dates of birth and therefore makes up about 1% of the total population. The sample was initiated at the time of the 1971 Census, and the four dates were used to update the sample at the 1981, 1991 and 2001 Censuses and in routine event registrations. Linkage to the 2011 Census is under way and the data will be available imminently. The LS now includes records for over 950,000 study members. It includes all Census questions, such as information socio-demographic characteristics, housing, educational qualifications and

occupational and social class. Births to LS members are linked via the vital registration system. A range of small area statistics is available on the dataset, including deprivation measures for the ward of residence.

The 2011 round of the *Enquête Famille et logements* (EFL) is large-scale family and housing survey, which covers a nationally representative sample of 360,000 individuals aged 18 and over. It aims at describing family housing situations and relationships both within the household and beyond, as family members may reside in several different households. The survey is part of the French census, and includes all the census information, which is very similar to variables collected in the ONS LS.

Early results

While the data for the LS 2011 Census linkage is not currently available (expected availability data for researchers is the end of November 2013), early results therefore focus on the 197 768 individuals identified as parents in the EFL dataset. Focusing initially on parents aged 30-39, we can see that the highest proportion of professional and managerial fathers are those within couples who transitioned from a Pacs to a marriage (39% of this group fell within this occupational class), followed by those who were currently in a Pacs (27%) and those who married directly (19%). Similar trends were observed for women, and when other socio-economic markers were (educational qualifications, and living in social housing). Similar analyses were run for the 20-29 age group, with similar trends, although the gap between Pacs-then-married and those currently in a Pacs was smaller.

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