

## **PAA 2006 Abstract**

### **Socio-Economic Change and First Union Formation in Canada**

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#### **Introduction**

In this paper we examine an important stage of the life course: the transition to adulthood. This is a time when youth leave home, start further education beyond high school, start first jobs, and begin conjugal relationships (Furstenberg, Rumbaut and Settersten 2005). The transition of interest for the current work involves movement into conjugal relationships, with a special emphasis on the role of socioeconomic differences. Not all youth decide to live together, or to marry, or remain single on an equal basis. British data for example showed cohabitation to be more common among individuals whose fathers had professional occupations (Ermisch and Francesconi 1996), while marriage was more common for individuals with fathers in manual labour occupations (Berrington and Diamond 2000).

Individuals own socioeconomic attributes also affect conjugal status. For instance, Canadian research shows that higher educated individuals were more likely to live common-law than those with less than a high school diploma (Milan 2003; Turcotte and Goldscheider 1998). However, a recent study in the United States forecasts that women with higher education will eventually marry at higher rates than they have in past decades when women's education was inversely related to marriage (Goldstein and Kenney 2001). Economic circumstances are also important. For instance, research suggests that economically unstable men and women are more likely to cohabit than marry (Clarkberg 1999). However, it is not that lower income individuals do not want to get married; they may postpone marriage until a later date due to lack economic security (Cherlin 2004). For example, Manning and Smock (2002) found that cohabiting women with higher incomes are likely to have higher expectations for marriage than women with lower incomes. Other research suggests that conjugal status, especially the propensity to cohabit, is related to occupation and career development, at least at the beginning stages of a career (Oppenheimer 2003).

## **Research Questions**

The current paper aims to build upon this past literature showing a link between union formation and socioeconomic circumstance. We address two relationships: (1) the link between socioeconomic status of origin (measured by parental occupation and education) and the frequency and pace that youth choose to marry, cohabit or remain single; and (2) the effect that an individual's own education, income, and employment status has on the likelihood of being in a cohabiting union, a marriage, or remaining single, as well as the pace at which they enter each of these states. By addressing these questions this paper can help shed some light on the link between socioeconomic resources and choosing to live in a common-law union versus getting married versus staying single.

Given the changes in conjugal life in the recent decades towards a greater acceptance of cohabitation, either as a precursor to, or in replace of, marriage, knowing how socioeconomic factors affects the likelihood of cohabiting or marrying becomes important. Xie, Raymo, Goyette and Thornton (2003) offer the suggestion that if cohabitation is viewed as an alternative to marriage then economic resources should positively influence the likelihood of cohabiting, which is akin to the relationship with marriage--at least for men. However, if cohabitation is viewed as a precursor to marriage, then economic resources may either increase or decrease the propensity to cohabit. The direction of the effect depends on whether the couple is explicitly postponing getting married until they are more economically stable, in other words, they would marry if they had sufficient resources.

Moreover, we use data from Canada which allows for an interesting opportunity to compare our findings on socioeconomic resources and union formation with those from the United States (see for example Xie et al. 2003). Cohabitation is a much more normative family form in Canada (especially in the province of Quebec) than the United States with many Canadians now viewing cohabitation as a replacement of marriage (see Le Bourdais and Lapierre-Adamcyk 2004), and so we may expect to find a different effect of economic resources on union formation than that shown in the United States.

## **Data and Variables**

In this paper we use a new Canadian longitudinal data set, the Youth in Transition Survey (or YITS). The YITS is designed to provide policy relevant data on transitions from school to work, factors affecting transitions between educational attainment, training and work, as well as

transitions into conjugal life. It is representative of the Canadian population and has two target samples that will be followed every two years: (1) a cohort of individuals who were 18 to 20 years old on December 31st, 1999, and (2) a cohort of students who were age 15 on December 31st, 1999. We plan on using the 18 to 20 year old cohort since our interests are on conjugal relationship formation which is more common and normative amongst this older sample. There have been two cycles: Cycle 1 was carried out in 2000 when the youth were age 18 to 20, and Cycle 2 was carried out in 2002 when they were age 20 to 22. The initial sample in 2000 contained over 22,000 young adults (see Bowlby and McMullen 2002).

The YITS is very rich in educational and work history information. It contains data on when individuals graduated from high school, whether they went on to post-secondary education, and also specific periods of employment (including start and end dates of jobs) and educational attendance (see Bowlby and McMullen 2002; Lambert, Zeman, Allen, and Bussière 2004; Tomkowicz and Bushnik 2003; Zeman, Knighton, and Bussière 2004 for examples of recent research). The YITS also contains useful data on current marital status as well as the start date of this relationship. The longitudinal design also allows us to determine marital status continuity and change across two time points. We can, for instance, assess whether individuals who were cohabiting in 2000 remained in that common-law relationship by 2002, whether they married their partner, or whether they separated and formed another partnership.

This data set also contains very detailed information on income, especially from different sources (e.g. from wages and salaries, from unemployment insurance, as well as from other forms of social assistance). It is important to note as well that we know the education level, employment status and income history of their conjugal partner in 2002. Knowing both partners' economic resources allows for a more direct test of the relative importance of each for conjugal status (Smock and Manning 1997). Lastly, the YITS has beneficial background information on family of origin including parental education and occupation, family structure during high school, and attitudes and behaviours of the respondent in high school. There are also standard socio-demographic measures such as age, gender, ethnicity, place of birth and citizenship status, presence of children, province of residence, and language use. These latter two measures are very important controls since cohabitation is much more prevalent among young Quebecers than youth from the rest of Canada.

## **Conclusion**

The transition to adulthood is an important stage in the life course. Young adults today however do not enter adulthood as linearly as in the past. The typical path of leaving home, finishing school, starting work, getting married and having children no longer holds. A more typical pattern now involves education, work and conjugal status transitions occurring simultaneously. In this paper our goal is to unpack these pathways for young Canadians entering adulthood, paying particular attention to the role of socioeconomic circumstances on conjugal decisions. Through our rich longitudinal data we can shed some light on how socioeconomic factors affect the likelihood of cohabitation and marriage, and whether cohabitation is indeed 'replacing' marriage, or whether it is simply seen as a link in the marital chain.

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