

# **The association between cohabitators' marriage intentions and marital behavior in Norway and Sweden**

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## **Introduction and previous research**

In Norway and Sweden, living together without being married is more widespread than in most other countries. Cohabitation has been a well-established phenomenon for several decades and is nearly completely socially acceptable. Today, about 90% of first partnerships are cohabitations (Duvander, 1999; Wiik, 2008) and more than half of all first births are born in consensual unions (Statistics Norway, 2009a; Statistics Sweden, 2008). Also, cohabiting couples have gradually been given many of the same rights and obligations as married couples, and the most marriage-like cohabitators are nearly equalized with those married in public law areas like social security and taxes (Björnberg, 2001; Noack, 2001). Nonetheless, according to official statistics for 45-year olds, as few as 37% of men and 28% of the women in Sweden have never been married. The corresponding figures for Norway are 27% for men and 19% for women (Statistics Norway, 2009b; Statistics Sweden, 2008). Survey data also show that a majority of young cohabitators expect to get married eventually (Lyngstad & Noack, 2005).

There may, however, be discrepancies between marriage expectations and subsequent behavior, as found in several studies (e.g., Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005). In the present paper we use a unique combination of Norwegian and Swedish survey data and register-based follow-up data five years after the surveys were taken to assess the correspondence between cohabitators' marriage intentions and actual behavior. In particular, we

aim to investigate which cohabitators are most likely to follow up their intentions and make the transition from cohabitation to marriage within the follow-up period. Methodologically, the follow-up approach taken allows us to make strong claims about how powerful marriage intentions are as predictors of future marital behavior.

Some preliminary analysis has been made for Norway (see below). Adding Sweden enables us to check the hypothesis that marriage in Sweden, where informal cohabitation started to become common earlier than in Norway, has become less mandatory among cohabiting couples. This is being reflected in a lower percentage with concrete marriage intentions and can also be expected to show up in a slower transition from cohabitation to marriage. Using Swedish data also has the advantage that it is possible to control for partnership break-ups, as one possible reason that marriage plans don't materialize obviously is the circumstances that the couple has separated.

### **Data and method**

In preliminary analyses we have used data from the Norwegian *New Families Survey* from 2003, and we present those results below. For the proposed conference paper we will add data from the Swedish survey of *Family and Working Life in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, likewise from 2003. They are both nationally representative postal surveys conducted by Statistics Norway and Statistics Sweden, respectively. The surveys include questions about respondents' plans, expectation, and attitudes regarding family and working life. In addition, data on respondents' education was taken from administrative registers.

The Norwegian sample consists of men aged 23 to 47 and women aged 20 to 44 years who have at least one Norwegian-born parent ( $N = 6,317$ ), whereas the Swedish data set comprise a representative sample of individuals with two Swedish-born parents who were 22, 26, 30, or 34 years old at the time of the survey ( $N = 2,273$ ). Overall response rates were 63.3 % in

Norway and 70.7 % in Sweden. In the present analysis we are interested in individuals aged 25 to 35 who were living as cohabitators at the time of the interview. After excluding respondents younger than 25 ( $n = 1,317$ , 15.3%) and Norwegian respondents older than 35 ( $n = 2,683$ , 31.2%), as well as married respondents ( $n = 1,326$ ) and those without a co-residential partner ( $n = 1,667$ , 19.4%), our combined data set will comprise 1,597 cohabitators.

Marriage intentions were captured by asking cohabiting respondents whether or not they were planning to marry their current partners. For cohabitators with marriage plans the response categories were: “yes, within the next two years,” or “yes, at some later time.” Cohabitators who plan to marry within the next two years were defined as having concrete marriage intentions. Thus, we separate between cohabitators with intent to marry within the next two years (1), those who intend to marry their partners eventually (2), and cohabitators without such intentions (3).

Using an ID number system, the survey data on marriage intentions were linked to marital histories from administrative registers that cover the subsequent period. Although we do not have the ID number of respondent’s partners, we do have their month and year of birth. If the birth date of the spouse is the same, we assume that respondents have married the partner they were cohabiting at time of the survey.

This follow-up approach implies that we can ignore typical problems that plague panel studies such as non-response in a follow-up survey. Similarly, retrospective union histories often have their flaws. For instance, Hayford and Morgan (2008) showed that retrospective cohabitation histories tend to underestimate the rates of cohabitation in distant periods relative to rates estimated closer to the date of survey. We employ discrete time event history analysis to estimate the occurrence and timing of an eventual marriage among the cohabitators.

In addition to data on marriage intentions, the following variables were included from the survey data:

- *University educated partner*: Partner has completed any university level education (1=yes, 0=no).
- *High income partner*: Partner's income in 2002 > 350' Kroner (1=yes, 0=no).
- *Home ownership*: R and partner own home together (1=yes, 0=no).
- *Relationship satisfaction*: R is very satisfied with union (1=yes, 0=no). 68% of those with marriage plans were satisfied with their relationships.
- *Engaged*: R and partner is engaged (1=yes, 0=no). 54% of the cohabitators with marriage plans were engaged.
- *Most friends married*: Majority of R's friends are married (1=yes, 0=no).

The survey data were also supplemented with longitudinal register data on respondents' education (level and activity), income and place of residence.

- *University educated*: R has any university level education in year  $t$  (1=yes, 0=no).
- *In school*: Enrolled in school, year  $t$  (1=yes, 0=no).
- *High income*: R's income, year  $t-1$ . > 350' of 2002-Kroner (1=yes, 0=no).

### **Preliminary findings**

38% of the Norwegian cohabitators were planning to marry their partners. Of these, 15% had concrete marriage plans, i.e. planned to marry their partners within two years after the survey was taken, whereas the remaining 23% were planning to marry eventually.

As can be seen from Table 1, 27% of the cohabitators had married their partner by the end of the follow-up period. There are, however, major differences by whether or not the cohabitators had (concrete) marriage intentions at the time of the survey. As much as 63% of the cohabitators with intentions to marry within two years were actually married by the end of the follow-up period. The comparable figure for those with less concrete marriage plans was 29.

17% of cohabitators without any marriage intentions had married (see Table 1).

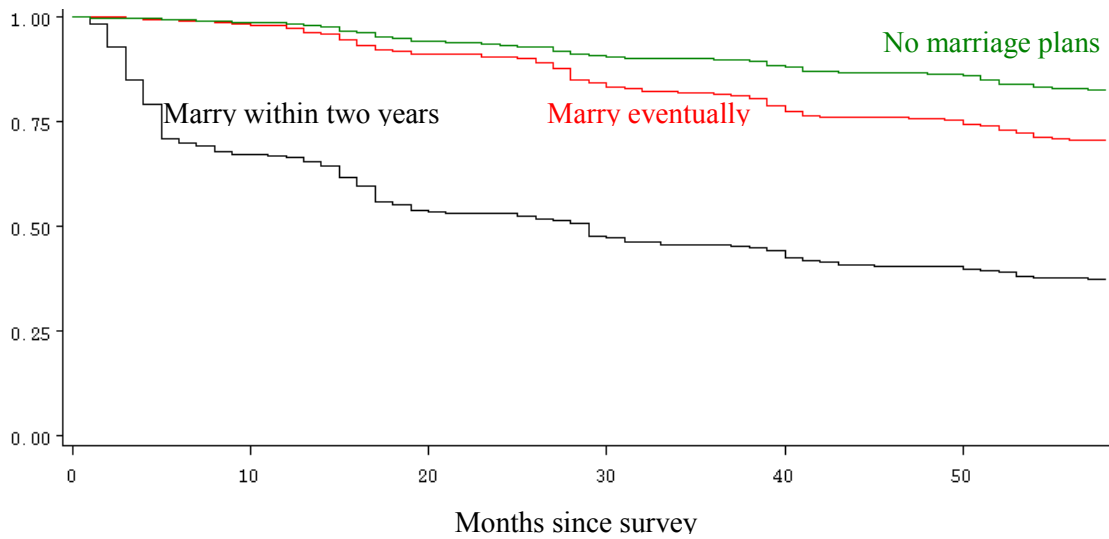
**Table 1** *Per cent married in 2008 by their marriage intentions in 2003. Norway.*

	<b>Concrete marriage plans</b>	<b>Marry eventually</b>	<b>No plans</b>	<b>All</b>
<b>Not married</b>	37	71	83	73
<b>Married</b>	63	29	17	27
<i>n</i>	256	395	1,036	1,687

There seems to be a fair amount of correspondence between cohabitators' marriage intentions and their actual behavior in Norway. This is at least true for cohabitators with concrete marriage intentions: About 50% of these cohabitators made the transition to marriage within two years (see Figure 1). We also note that there are clear seasonal variations and that there is a sharp increase in the number of marriages during spring. There are no major differences between cohabitators with intentions to marry within five years and cohabitators without marriage intentions.

Preliminary multivariate results for Norway show that there is a strong positive relation between having marriage plans at time of the survey and the transition to marriage, net of socioeconomic and sociodemographic variables. Moreover, university educated cohabitators (year  $t$ ) as well as those with a high income (>350.000 NOK in year  $t-1$ ) are more likely to marry in a given month than are their lower educated and "poorer" counterparts. The transition to marriage is also positively influenced by joint home ownership and having a high earning partner. We also find that cohabitators' whose partners were university educated are more likely to realize their intentions than those with lower educated partners. Cohabitators who are satisfied with their unions are more likely to realize their intentions than the less satisfied. Last, those who were engaged to their partners (54% of the cohabitators with marriage

**Figure 1** Kaplan-Meier plot of realization of marriage intentions by marriage intentions at survey. Norway.



plans) and those whose majority of friends were married are more likely to marry compared with the non-engaged and those with mostly single friends.

We find no significant interaction effects between marriage plans and other variables on marriage.

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