The long route to first marriage? Cross-cohort differences in the relationship between work history and partnership formation for British men

Extended abstract

In recent decades in Britain there have been major changes in the stability and risks of men's employment careers. There have also been changes and increased diversity in partnership formation and dissolution, growing rates of cohabitation, and demonstration of links between the diverse employment and partnership statuses. Current employment status has been shown to be related to transitions between partnership states just as partnership status has been found to be a predictor of transitions between jobs. However, most previous research has examined the effect of careers on partnership formation and dissolution using only fairly crude and simple measures of employment status (e.g. currently employed).

This paper aims to investigate the influence of the past work histories of individuals on their partnership formation in terms of both employment and occupational trajectories and in a way that unfolds over time and over the life-course. The availability of a full record of both partnership and work histories in British birth cohort studies makes it possible to carry out a dynamic investigation of the relationships between employment and occupational trajectories and the route to first marriage, and see how they have been changing across cohorts. By comparing birth cohorts of men born in 1958 and 1970, this study is able to explore men's decisions to start and cease premarital cohabitations and their decisions of getting married; also, how these decisions relate to their work histories. I examine whether uncertainty or success in men's work careers influence their propensities for marriage or cohabitation, whether men's career mobility and their partnership decisions are interrelated and whether there are differences in these relationships across cohorts.

Main research questions

The paper addresses the following research questions:

(1) Do men's early work-life trajectories affect the chances that unpartnered men marry or cohabit, or, if cohabiting, the probability that they convert their relationships into marriage?

(2) Are the relationships between work histories and first partnership formation changing in their nature across cohorts and are they influenced by changes in the economic climate?

Theoretical considerations

On theoretical concerns, the paper addresses two specific hypotheses which have been influential in the field but which, so far, lack any decisive confirmation or disconfirmation.

(1) *The role specialization hypothesis.* Men with poor employment prospects are argued to be unable to fulfil the conventional role of breadwinner, and will be disadvantaged, therefore, in finding marriage partners or, if married, be more likely to separate. Research results so far have been mixed in regard to these expectations.

(2) *The uncertainty hypothesis*. This suggests that declining rates of marriage and rising rates of cohabitation reflect changes in the economic situation of young men - notably greater instability in employment and greater risks of downward occupational mobility. Cohabitation rather than marriage may represent a way of coping with such uncertainty. Correspondingly, the chances of cohabitation being converted into marriage may be positively associated with improvements in men's employment prospects. Again, attempts to test this hypothesis have up to now produced rather mixed results. Findings from the US have tended to be supportive, but those from Europe less consistently so.

Data

Two British birth cohort study datasets are available for secondary data analysis and provide the data necessary to address the research questions: (1) the 1958 *National Child Development Study (NCDS);* and (2) the 1970 *British Cohort Study (BCS70)*. The NCDS consisted of around 17000 children born in Great Britain in one week in 1958. Data collections took place at birth and at ages 7, 11, 16, 23, 33, 42, 46, and 50. The BCS70 consisted of around 17000 children born in Great Britain in one week in 1970. Data were collected at birth and at ages 6, 10, 16, 26, 30, 34, and 38.

Each survey provides the data necessary for addressing the research questions from their detailed information of all jobs (timing in months, detailed occupational codes, part-time/full-time employment) and non-employment spells (timing in months, unemployed, other inactivity status) of cohort members', and all their partnerships (whether marriage or cohabitation, with start and end dates in century months). The studies are also unique in the range of information they include on the explanatory variables that may influence both work and partnership trajectories: e.g. different aspects of social origin, cognitive abilities in childhood, personality features, behavioural and emotional problems in childhood, educational attainment and qualifications and child-birth history.

Further, in this paper work-life histories are not simple measures of employment statuses (employed, non-employed at a point in time) but they consist of a range of time-varying and accumulating measures. Also, men's occupational histories are measured by a recently developed occupational scale which reflects one of the main criteria of occupational 'success', i.e. occupational earnings.

Analytical strategy

Competing risks event history models are used in the analyses. These models examine: (1) the effects of early work-life trajectories - e.g. unemployment, upward or downward occupational earnings mobility - on the probabilities of first partnership formation, distinguishing here between transition to either marriage or cohabitation; (2) whether subsequent work-life trajectories, controlling for earlier

experience, affect men's chances for converting cohabitation into marriage as opposed to remaining in cohabitation or splitting up.

A well-known feature of event-history data is that events of the same type - e.g. premarital cohabitation - may be experienced by an individual more than once. Repeated events lead to a two-level hierarchical structure, where events are nested within individuals. The duration between events for the same individual may be correlated, since there may be unobserved individual-specific factors that affect the hazard of the occurrence of each event. To allow for the dependence between repeated events for the same individual, statistical models are used in which unobserved characteristics are represented by random effects.