

Couples between co-residence and living apart together: multi-residence of partners and part-time couples. The case of France

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Abstract

With the increasing diversity of family situations, more people now “usually” live in more than one dwelling. In two previous papers, we estimated the proportion of people living in two dwellings in Australia and France, and the transition probabilities into and out from multi-residence, at the individual level.

The aim of this paper is to identify not only cohabiting couples and living-apart-together couples, but also “part-time-cohabiting couples”, where partners are partly living together, one or both of them commuting between different households. We base our paper on a large-scale survey, the EU-SILC in France, where people are followed annually. We use the three first waves, which took place in 2004, 2005 and 2006.

The significance of “part-time cohabiting couple” and living-apart-together situations heavily depends on whether they are long-lasting or transitory. We describe the transitions between the different couple situations, in order to better understand their dynamics.

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Long abstract

Background

Conjugal situations are thus becoming more diverse: despite most couples are married and living together, unmarried cohabitation and living-apart-together couples are becoming more common, in France as well in many European and American countries (see e.g. Régnier-Loilier at al., 2009; Strohm et al., 2009, for recent references).

Family transitions and situations are becoming less and less easy to identify. The processes of union formation and dissolution take time, and during that period people may live “more or less” as a couple, e.g. spending together a few days and nights per week, while keeping one household each. The distinction between categories such as living as a couple (in one or two dwellings), living apart together or having a stable relationship is sometimes difficult to make. Nevertheless, most studies are based on mutually exclusive categories, defined at a specific point in time: cohabiting couples (married or not), Living-apart-together (LAT, married or not), single (with or without an intimate relationship). One noticeable exception is Knab (2004), who studies fragile families in the United States of America, and finds that 15% of the respondents live in a “part-time cohabitation”. Despite the sample is not representative (young parents in 20 large cities), the results show that the frontier between LAT and co-residence is not straightforward.

The most common rule in surveys and censuses is to impose one single residence to the individuals. An individual can only be at one place at a time, but when the observation window is larger than one day (or one night), it is possible to “live” in more than one dwelling. In some cases, the information on people having two addresses is known, but specific rules are then defined in order to use the information on one “main address” only (Haskey, 2005).

As a matter of fact, multi-residence is not uncommon: some 3% of adults and children in France, and 4% in Italy, are identified as living in more than one “usual residence” (Toulemon and Pennec, 2008; Sabbadini, 2005; Fraboni, 2006). These situations have been

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identified as “commuting between households” (Saraceno 1994). The family situations related to commuting between households are very diverse and very different according to age. Among adults, the main reasons for commuting are related to studies or work-related constraints. Many of the commuters are living as a couple, so that “part-time-cohabiting couples” (PTC) exist, even if they are less frequent than LAT couples. According to the French GGS 2005 survey, 10.2% of French men and 11.4% of women living as a couple or “having a stable, intimate relationship with someone [they] are not living with” are living apart together (Régnier et al, 2009). Comparatively, 3.2% of men and 2.0% of women in the same situation are commuting between two homes, and living as a couple in the residence the survey takes place (Toulemon and Pennec, 2009). Assuming the same probability of inclusion of commuters in all their “usual dwellings”, taking into account the bias due to double counting of commuters, and estimating the proportion of couples who commute together, this means that 3 to 9% of couples are “part-time cohabiting couples”, depending on the proportion of couples with both partners “commuting” to separate households or together between two common households.

Aims of the study

Two previous studies have been conducted on the French EU-SILC survey, based on individual information (Toulemon and Pennec, 2008; 2009; see below). The first paper presented the prevalence of multi-residence among children and adults, showing that many children with separated parents were commuting between both parental homes. Thus, many one-parent families or stepfamilies are only part-time. Furthermore, as commuting children are likely to be counted twice in the survey (in both parents’ homes), their number is overestimated in most surveys. The EU-SILC is a longitudinal survey, and the second paper deals with the stability of multi-residence, showing that in most cases commuting is a transitory state: half of the commuters at the first wave were not commuting anymore one year later, at the second wave. The mean duration of an episode of multi-residence is around 1.4 years (from 0.8 to 1.8 years, depending on the assumptions made on the homogeneity of the group of commuters).

The aim of the study is twofold. First, estimate the prevalence of commuting not only at the individual level, but at the couple’s level, in order to estimate the proportion of couples with one or both partners (separately) commuting. More generally, producing a typology of couples identifying permanently cohabiting couples (married or not, in one or two dwellings), part-time cohabiting couples and couple living-apart-together¹.

The second aim of the paper is to describe the stability of different couple situations and couples transitions into and out from partial or complete co-residence. Part-time cohabiting couples, as well as LAT, are probably transitory in most cases. On the one hand, union formation (and dissolution) may be lasting processes leading to PTC; on the other hand, many of these situations are due to external constraints (Régnier et al., 2009) which can be transitory.

¹ If the data allow for it, we will also try to identify Living together apart couples (LTA), pairs of individuals living in the same household but who have only marginal connections to each other, even if one of the partner declares themselves as living in a couple (Cross-Barnet, Cherlin, and Burton 2008). Due to consistency checks during the fieldwork data collection process, the fact to live as a couple with someone in the household is made symmetrical, so we will only be able to identify parents who do not declare themselves as living in couple, despite they live together with one or more children in the same household. The frontier between LAT and steady relationship (with romantic love and/or sexual relations) is another important distinction (Levin, 2004), but we will not deal with this topic.

Data

The *Enquête sur les ressources et les conditions de vie* is the French edition of the EU Survey on Income and Living conditions (EU-SILC, see Eurostat 2007, and Toulemon and Pennek, 2009, for additional details and references). The survey is conducted by the French National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies, *Institut National de la Statistique et des Études Économiques* (INSEE). The first wave took place in 2004, and a follow-up is conducted yearly. The sample size in 2004 is around 9,000 households (25,000 individuals). The survey is made of two different forms, the household form and the individual one. This latter is filled by every person of the household aged 16 and over. For this paper we will use the three first waves, which were conducted in 2004, 2005, and 2006, at the household level, in order to use couples as our unit of observation.

In addition to the dwelling, the household unit is defined as a group of people sharing daily expenses, so that several households can be present in the same dwelling, and some members of a household may live in another dwelling. For each member of the household, a first question is asked whether the person lives only in the dwelling or also in another one:

- Does <first name> live here...
 - o 0. No (member of the household living elsewhere, in another dwelling)
 - o 1. (Almost) all year
 - o 2. During the weekend or holidays => How many days per year?
 - o 3. During the working days => How many days per week?
 - o 4. Some months in the year => How many months since last year?
 - o 5. Less often => How many days per year?

For people living only in the dwelling where the interview takes place (answer '1'), the question is asked again:

- Does <first name> live also elsewhere from time to time?

The others are asked:

- Does <first name> live also elsewhere?

For those persons living also elsewhere, a set of specific questions are asked:

- How much time spent in another dwelling?
- Is one of the other dwellings a communal establishment?
- How many other dwellings (private households) the person is living in?

The SILC survey also includes very precise questions about couples, parents, and family links. The question on conjugal situation includes partners living elsewhere:

- Does <first name> currently live as a couple?
 - o 1. Yes, with a partner who lives in this dwelling
 - o 2. Yes, with a partner who lives in another dwelling
 - o 3. No

Hopefully, we will also have access to a dataset merging several surveys including the same questions at the household level, as these questions are part of a standard household questionnaire.

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