Wanting a Child without a Firm Commitment to the Partner: Interpretations and Implications of a Common Behaviour Pattern among Norwegian Cohabitants

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Abstract. Further knowledge of combined birth and marriage intentions among cohabiting couples will improve our understanding of the nature of consensual unions and be important from a policy perspective. According to Norwegian surveys from 1988 and 1996, about 1/3 of the births to cohabiting couples are mistimed. Among the remainder, between 1/2 and 3/4 are to couples who at least have no intention to marry within the next couple of years. The most radical estimate, based on the most recent survey, is that there are three equally large categories of births to cohabiting couples: mistimed births, intended births to couples planning marriage, and intended births to couples with no marriage plans whatever. The 1996 survey also revealed that a clear majority of these couples who appear to want a child without planning marriage, explain this attitude partly by the less easy dissolution of a marriage. In other words, their consensual union is indeed considered different from marriage in terms of commitment and stability and they may have concerns about the quality of the relationship. There were weak indications that cohabitants with an intended birth in the absence of marriage plans were less likely than others to consider a parental break-up to be very deleterious for the child.

Résumé. Des connaissances plus approfondies sur les intentions combinées de naissance et de mariage des couples cohabitants, améliorerait notre compréhension des unions consensuelles. C’est là un objectif négligé, mais important, dans les recherches sur les familles et non moindre dans une optique politique. Selon des enquêtes norvégiennes de 1988 à 1996, environ un tiers des naissances de couples cohabitants sont non désirées. Parmi les autres, entre la moitié et les trois quarts des naissances surviennent dans des couples sans intention de se marier dans les deux ans à venir. Des enquêtes plus récentes montrent qu’il y a trois grandes catégories de naissances de couples cohabitants d’effectif équivalent: naissances non désirées, naissances désirées des couples prévoyant un mariage, et naissances désirées de couples n’en prévoyant pas. L’enquête de 1996 révèle aussi qu’une nette majorité de ces couples qui désirent un enfant sans le mariage craignent que celui-ci rende la dissolution de l’union plus difficile. Cela indique la différence entre union consensuelle et mariage en terme d’engagement et de stabilité et signale le souci au sujet de la qualité de l’union. Il y a de légères indications selon lesquelles les cohabitants avec une naissance désirée sans mariage sont moins susceptibles que les autres de considérer qu’une séparation soit très nuisible pour l’enfant.
1. Introduction

Dramatic changes in family behaviour have taken place in a variety of industrialized countries during recent decades, but nowhere has the drift away from the formal marriage been more pronounced than in the Nordic countries. Their position as forerunners is most clearly seen with respect to out-of-wedlock fertility and informal cohabitation (Monnier and Guibert-Lantoine, 1996). For example, more than 45% of Norwegian babies are now born out-of-wedlock, up from 30% in the late 1980s and 10% in the mid-1970s (Statistics Norway, 1996). A large majority of these births are to couples living in consensual unions. This behaviour appears to be widely accepted. In a nationally representative sample of 28-year old women in 1988, as many as 60% reported that a ‘consensual union is just as acceptable as marriage even when the couple have a child’ (unpublished calculations from data described below). Even among women who themselves had chosen a more traditional pathway towards parenthood, and were married when they became pregnant with their first child, the proportion was as high as 43%. As yet, the soaring out-of-wedlock fertility has not provoked much political concern. In a government report on population trends and policies that was presented as part of the preparations for the ICPD conference in Cairo, the issue was barely touched (United Nations, 1993).

The above-mentioned government report, as well as some of the media discussion, seems to reflect a notion that consensual unions are almost as stable as marriages. While few would doubt that informal cohabitation among young childless adults tends to be short-lasting, often ending in a break-up rather than marriage, it is perhaps less obvious that cohabitants who have had a child together face a particularly high disruption rate. However, recent empirical research has demonstrated quite convincingly that the large excess fragility is not restricted to the childless cohabitants. For example, Hoem and Hoem (1992) found in Swedish data from 1981 that a cohabiting couple with at least one child had a dissolution rate more than twice as high as an otherwise equal married couple. This excess appears to have been reduced during the 1980s (Duvander, 1996). Using data from the late 1980s, also some Norwegian studies have shown, more or less explicitly, that break-ups occur relatively often among currently cohabiting parents, and among parents who were cohabiting when they had their first child (Blom et al., 1993; Jensen, 1996).

In light of this fragility and the possibly harmful effects of a parental split-up on children’s well-being (e.g. Amato, 1991; Cherlin et al., 1995), the increasing proportion of births in consensual unions is a highly important research issue – not least from a policy perspective. A thorough discussion about needs for and possibilities for influencing the first steps of family-building in order to protect children, should it ever be initiated, requires a much better empirical platform and theoretical understanding than currently exist. This study is one step in the establishment of such knowledge.