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The similarity of marriage and cohabitation in question: New family forms in Switzerland

Introduction

Since the beginning of the sixties, most developed countries experience an increasing diversity in family forms, especially a rise in cohabitations and out-of-wedlock births. Albeit a north-south gradient is observed: cohabitation is widespread in Northern countries as well as childbearing within cohabitation whereas in the Southern countries cohabitation is much less prevalent as well as childbearing within cohabitation (Le Goff, Sauvain-Dugerdil, Rossier, & Coenen-Huther, 2005).

In Switzerland, the pattern of cohabitation and childbearing within cohabitation appears to be contrasted compared to other countries. If an increase of cohabitation is observed since the seventies (Gabadinho, 1998; Le Goff, et al., 2005) until recently, non-marital unions remained a prelude to marriage. In the early 1990s, 80% of two-partners cohabitation began within a non-marital union (Gabadinho, 1998). But after a period of cohabitation, couples got married before having their first child. Cohabitation was a stage in the life course before having children (Le Goff & Ryser, 2010).

In the context of the nineties and 2000s where the rate of out-of-wedlock children in Switzerland was smaller compared to other European countries, results based on the Swiss Household Panel demonstrated that childbearing within cohabitation had to be considered as an avant-garde family style that exhibits more equal division of tasks within the household (Ryser, & Le Goff, 2015). According to these results, childbearing within cohabitation was more in line with the second demographic transition as opposed to other countries where childbearing within cohabitation is a phenomenon driven by poor economic circumstances where people fail to marry due to unfavorable economic situations which is discussed as a pattern of disadvantage (Perelli-Harris & Gerber, 2011).

If Switzerland still displays a low rate of out-of-wedlock children compared to other European countries, this rate has regularly increased by roughly 1% every year since 1995, reaching nearly 22 % in 2014 (Federal Statistical Office, 2015). If a quarter of children are born to unmarried parents, we cannot longer consider out-of-wedlock births to be rare in Switzerland. Thus, to what extent married individuals and cohabitant individual are still different? Are cohabiting unions slightly becoming an alternative to marriage in the Swiss context?

Several research demonstrated that marital status has an implication for subjective well-being -SWB (e.g. Diener, Gohm, Suh, & Oishi, 2000; Ryser & Le Goff, 2015); values, opinions, and attitudes (Clarkberg, Stolzenberg, & Waite, 1995; Ryser & Le Goff, 2015); and relationship stability and conjugal quality (Brown, 2004; Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin, 1991; Cherlin, 2004; Jose, O'Leary, & Moyer, 2010; van der Lippe, Voorpostel, & Hewitt, 2014). The aim of the present paper is then to

investigate to what extent these differences still hold were the proportion of childbearing within cohabitation reach a quarter of the births in Switzerland.

Research question

Based on the data from the Swiss “Family and Generation survey 2013” this article aims to investigate to what extent individuals who marry or cohabit still present different opinions and attitudes toward different aspects of life such as family attitudes, gender opinion and family organization. One of the strength of this article is to consider the heterogeneity of cohabitation, i.e, cohabitation in the process of union formation or cohabitation after a divorce or a separation. The heterogeneity of cohabitation has been discussed (e.g. Hiekel & Castro-Martín, 2014; Wiik, Bernhardt, & Noack, 2009), but most empirical studies treated all kinds of cohabitation equally, ignoring the heterogeneity of their features in relation to family life-course positions, the existence of one or more children or cohabitation after a marriage dissolution. Three different groups will here be distinguishing: first a group of individuals who declared being married, second a group of individuals who declared being cohabitant and third, a group of individuals who declared being divorced and having a new conjugal relationship with a partner living in the household. To what extent these three different groups based on their marital status differs according SWB levels, family attitudes/opinions, work life balance and gendered attitudes?

Data, Sample and Method

Data used come from the Swiss “Family and Generation survey 2013” – FGS 2013 - a cross-sectional survey realized in 2013 by the Swiss federal office of statistics. Most of the questions originate from the questionnaire of the GGP (Gender and Generation Program) and from the Family and Fertility Survey (FFS) which was realized in Switzerland in 1994. The Swiss FGS 2013 is based on a close-ended questionnaire translated into the three main languages spoken in Switzerland (German, Italian, and French) which gather data on the forms and life situations of families and relations between the generations. The survey was divided into two questionnaires. First, a computer assisted telephone interview allowed to collect socio-demographic information and retrospective information on unions and fertility. Second, a postal survey (paper and pencil) and a web survey, both realized just after the CATI interview, allowed collecting more sensitive information, like religion, contraception, attitudes, opinions and values on families. The survey recorded information of a total of 17’289 persons aged 17 to 80, living in Switzerland from which 5’949 answered to the postal survey and 9’012 answered the online questionnaire. For the purpose of our research, we selected individuals according to their civil status who live with a partner. We retained for our investigations individuals who declared living in a cohabiting union, being married and individuals declaring being in a cohabiting union after a marriage for whom we have information about their affective dimensions of SWB levels, on family attitudes/opinions, work life balance and gendered attitudes. The preliminary selected sample is composed of 6’758 individuals.

Independent Explanatory Variable

Marital status was captured using declared cohabitation status. We distinguished between individuals who declared being married, individuals who declare cohabiting and individuals who declared cohabiting after a divorce. Descriptive results demonstrate that the rate of unmarried parents was quite low, which reflects that childbearing within cohabitation concern early adopters of a behavior in Switzerland.

Dependent Variables

Extending previous research (Ryser, & le Goff, 2015), we focus on differences on affective dimensions of SWB levels, on family attitudes/opinions, work life balance and gendered attitudes.

Affective well-being. Two domains of affective well-being, the positive and negative affect have been considered in our analyses. The positive affect composed of two items recoded into 4 categories. The negative affects composed of four items also recoded into 4 categories. Higher scores mean respectively higher positive and negative affect.

Family attitudes and opinions: four indicators assess the attitudes and opinions toward family. One indicator assess to what extent having children is central to have a happy life for both men and women where higher scores mean more traditional perspective on family. A second indicator assesses to what extent men and women tend to value traditional perspective on family (heterosexual parents, obedience toward the parents...) where higher scores mean less traditional perspective on family. A third indicator assesses the extent to which children could suffer from working parents where higher scores mean less traditional perspective on family. Finally a last indicator assesses the degree to which individuals value traditional intergenerational support; higher scores on that indicator mean more traditional perspective on intergenerational support.

Work life balance is measured with an indicator composed of four items which assess to what extent it is difficult to manage the family and professional domain. Higher scores mean more problematic work life balance.

Gendered attitudes: a *Master status* (Krüger & Levy, 2001) indicator measures the degree to which individual promote traditional values toward the family and the professional spheres. This indicator is constructed based on 5 items recoded, higher scores meaning higher traditionalism.

Sociodemographic and Control Variables

All these dependent variables are ordinal. We then estimated ordinal logistic regressions in order to evaluate differences according to the status on each dependent covariate. We controlled these regressions by several variables. *Education.* To measure each individual's level of education, we established a categorical variable that accounted for the highest level of education achieved by individuals. It distinguished between low levels (e.g., incomplete compulsory school, compulsory school, elementary vocational training, domestic science course, one-year commerce school, and general training school), middle levels (e.g., apprenticeship, technical or vocational school, full-time vocational school, vocational high school with a master's certificate, and federal certificate), and high levels (e.g., vocational high school, university, and academic high school). *Occupation.* We distinguished between full-time employment, different part-time employment, looking for a job, being a housewife, and being in training for a job. *Income.* One indicators account for the monthly net individual income. *Number of children.* We distinguish between the number of children living in the household and the number of children younger than 13 living in the household. *Age.* To determine any differences in the ages of married or cohabitant women, we controlled for age groups.

Results

Insofar as the dependent variables are ordinal variables whose values are distributed on three categories, we based our analyses on ordinal regressions. Based on ordinal regression first preliminary results presented in Table 1 tend to indicate that cohabiting and married individuals did differ in some dimensions.

First, concerning the affective dimension of the subjective well-being, under the control of a set of sociodemographic variables (education, occupation, income, number of children age), individuals who cohabit after a divorce have a higher probability to present barely less positive affects compared to the married group. In addition, the two groups of cohabitants are more likely to present more negative affect than the group of the married ones.

Second concerning the family attitudes and opinions some differences appeared on that dimension. Concerning the importance of children for a happy life, the cohabitant individuals present less traditional opinions compared to the married ones. In addition, it appears that both groups of cohabitant present less traditionalist perspective on family compared to the married one. Finally, there is no difference on the indicator assessing whether child suffers from working parents and assessing traditional attitudes toward intergenerational support; the three groups do not differ according to these two dimensions.

Third concerning work life balance, the group of cohabitant individuals after a divorce tends to present more problematic work life balance compared to the married one.

Fourth, cohabitant individuals and individuals who cohabit after a divorce have a lower probability to be in a more traditional group concerning the master status indicator compared to the married group. It means that compare to married individuals, both groups of cohabitant individuals are less traditional compared to the married ones.

Table 1. Estimated coefficients of ordinal regression according to the marital status (controlled by socio-demographic variables - provisory results)

		Cohabitation	After a divorce
Affective SWB	Positiv affect	-0.123	-.201+
	Negativ affect	0.259**	0.432***
Family attitudes/ opinions	Happy life with child/en	-.183*	0.082
	Intergenerational support	0.133	0.094
	Traditional perspective on family	.487***	.305***
	Child suffers with working parents	0.11	-0.055
Work life balance	0.016	.241***	
Master status	-0.217**	-0.219**	

Note. Under control of age, sex, level of education, occupation, income, number of children.

+ $p < 0.1$; * $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Conclusion

Preliminary results tend to indicate that there are differences between cohabitant individuals, cohabitant individuals after a divorce and married individuals on the affective dimensions of SWB

levels, on family attitudes/opinions, work life balance and gendered attitudes. In Switzerland marriage and cohabitation are still different on some dimensions. These differences still appear despite the recent extension of out-of-wedlock births, the high rate of divorces (41 % in 2014 according to the Swiss statistics) and new relationships after marriage dissolution.

The three groups do not differ according the attitudes toward traditional intergenerational support whether the child suffers of having working parents. But they differ according the affective dimension of subjective well-being, work life balance and gendered attitudes.

Based on the institutionalization hypothesis developed by Soons Kalminj (2009) we argue that the differences between marriage and cohabitation may be rooted in the Swiss legal system. In Switzerland there is always a lag between family practices and institutional support that is dependent from the marital status and based on a traditional perspective on families. This gap between the practice and the legal dimension may lead to an higher vulnerability of the group of individuals who cohabit because Swiss institutions do not give the same rights to married and cohabiting parents (Perelli-Harris & Sánchez Gassen, 2012). In this context, cohabitation is not valued by Swiss institution and we suggest that lead to a more complex life and work family balance which may undermine the subjective well-being of cohabiting individual.

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