

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Arland Thornton, William G. Axinn, and Yu Xie, *Marriage and Cohabitation*. Population and Development Series. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007, 412 pp. \$US 40.00 hardcover (978-0-226-79866-0)

This book is about the choice between marriage and cohabitation as alternative ways of entering into a first union in American society, and about the transformation of existing cohabitations into marriage. The authors stress that their intention is to focus on “the ways in which the marriage and cohabitation decisions of young people are influenced by their personal circumstances, experiences, attitudes, and the larger family system,” rather than on “the social, economic, cultural, religious, technical, and political forces that have changed the ways in which Americans organize their personal and intimate lives” or on the consequences of these changes, that is “the effects of the transformation of marriage and intimate relationships in the lives of individual women and men, for children, and for the larger society.”

The book is structured like a large journal article and mainly reports results from quantitative analyses. The primary source of data is the Inter-generational Panel Study of Parents and Children, “a long-term study ... that began in 1962 with the selection of a sample of white couples in the Detroit Metropolitan area who had just given birth to their first, second, or fourth child in the summer of 1961.” The original sample included 1,113 mothers, who were interviewed eight times over a 31 year period; their children were interviewed three times between ages 18 and 31. Turning cohabitation into marriage is treated as a simple change of state; entering into marriage or cohabitation is treated in classical competing risks fashion, building regression equations that implement the logic of a multiple decrement table. In both cases, the authors’ use of the logit model to estimate the effects of their independent variables is typical of event history analysis: they model monthly log odds, (i.e., the log of the ratio of those changing state in a given month to the number still at risk and not having changed state at the end the month) as dependent on some function of age and other independent variables. Age is specified as a series of linear splines. Ongoing discussions on the best way to account for the interdependence of processes in competing risks models do not provide any clear guidance on how to deal with the problem when

using linear models; it would be hard to criticize the authors for relying on classical methods. They decompose total effects into direct and indirect effects by applying the technique used in multiple regression for the same purpose. Work in this area has stressed that what holds in multiple regression does not hold for logit models, and there are alternatives probably better suited for what they were attempting, although it is unclear whether using more appropriate decomposition techniques would have changed any of their conclusions.

Substantive conclusions won't come as a surprise to anyone familiar with the literature on marriage and cohabitation in the US. Young people enter into cohabitation in one of three ways: as a prelude to marriage, just to be together for a while, and to stay together without being married. Young people who initiate dating or going steady early cohabit or marry at a younger age. Values are transmitted from parents to children and some effects seem to span three generations. Children whose mothers married at a young age tend to do the same. Children whose parents have a higher level of education or greater financial resources tend to start their first union later. Higher school grades are related to marriage, lower grades to cohabitation. Religiosity, rather than religious affiliation, is related to marriage.

Unfortunately, the book disappoints, because the authors fail to address two central methodological questions. First, what kind of knowledge can you derive from a sample of a single birth cohort further restricted to a portion of the variability of the relevant determinants when you are studying something age related that is changing deeply over the period you are studying it? Second, how do you do that? Rather than recognize that they were facing a thrilling research challenge, the authors simply treat it as a sampling problem: their sample does not allow for generalization outside of the subpopulation from which it was drawn. But the problem is not sampling: the data offered a unique occasion for the detailed analysis of the life experience of a single cohort entering into adulthood at a time society was changing drastically. The authors eschewed this completely. Why they did so is an intriguing question.

Surely it is not for lack of interest for the history of marriage and the family — they devote an entire chapter to it — or for failing to see that marriage and the family are changing in the US: on the contrary, the acute consciousness of this change seems to be the main driving force behind their effort. Possibly their awkward conception of the history of family impaired their vision. The book starts with the following: "Throughout history, the family has been a central — some would argue *the* central — institution in human society." This not accurate, especially when the family is later defined as the conjugal family. Scholarly his-

torical work in the relevant areas (family, religion, law) shows that this assertion is nothing but an ideological view derived from some defining moments in the historical experience of Western societies. The rise in cohabitation is just one aspect of the crumbling of the very peculiar thing marriage had become in the Western world. The authors seem so obsessed with individual determinants that they overlook obvious elements of the American institutional setting. Western marriage is deeply rooted in religion, especially in countries, like the US, where religious marriage still has civil effects and is the normal and common way of getting married; this likely is why religiosity is one of the best predictors of the choice of marriage over cohabitation amongst Americans. American public schools do not provide religious education, which is likely why religiosity is transmitted through family and from one generation to the next. The frustrated reader is left with the impression that a great opportunity for doing something truly original has been missed.

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