

Preferring cohabitation

Pirjo Paajanen and

Anneli Miettinen

The Family Federation of Finland, The Population Research Institute

In Finland, the number of cohabiting couples has been growing since the 1970s. When we look at families by type, we notice that in 1970 only 0.6 percent of all families were cohabiting couples with children and 1.7 percent cohabiting couples without children. Today as many as 7.9 percent of families are cohabiting couples with children and 12.7 percent cohabiting couples without children. Consequently, cohabiting couples make up one-fifth of all families in Finland. Cohabitation is the form of family life chosen by young couples without children, but today more than a half of first born babies are born to unmarried mothers, mostly to cohabiting couples. (Statistics Finland 2006.) The development in Finland and in the other Nordic countries has led to a situation, where cohabitation resembles considerably marriage and that it is already an institutionalized form of family formation (Heuveline & Timberlane 2004).

Many cohabiting couples marry eventually. In this study, we try to find out if cohabiting and married couples differ from each other according to age, education or socioeconomic status, and number of children. Comparing the data from 1997 and from 2007, we examine if the differences between married persons and cohabiters have disappeared. And have these differences or similarities changed in ten years (from 1997 to 2007)? Moreover, we examine what kinds of reasons are important to cohabiting men and women to marry or to stay in cohabitation and if some reasons to marry or to stay in a cohabiting union have changed over the ten years.

We use data from a survey conducted in 1997 and in 2007. The data for this study come mostly from the Family Survey 2007, but partly also from the Family Survey 1997. Both were mail surveys conducted in spring 1997 and 2007. A simple random sample of women and men aged 20 – 59 living in Finland (excluding the Swedish-speaking Province of Åland) was drawn from the population register by the Population Register Centre. The sample size was 2 000 in 1997 and 3 000 in 2007. With two repeated rounds in 1997 and three in 2007, the response rates achieved were 47 percent in 1997 and 52 in 2007. For this study, the sample was restricted

only to women and men living in a partnership (cohabiting or married) 2007 N=1 143 and 1997 N=619. The main analytical tool used in this study is logistic regression analysis.

When we compared married and cohabiting persons in the 2007 and 1997 data, we found out that the cohabiters were younger and more often childless, students, and unemployed. Married persons were more often parents of two or more children and their socioeconomic status was more often upper and lower white-collar. According to education there were no statistically significant differences between married and cohabiting persons in either data.

When we compare cohabiting persons according to education in the 2007 and 1997 we notice that there were no differences, but among married persons in the 1997 data there were more persons with upper secondary education and fewer people with tertiary education. According to socioeconomic status, we noticed that in 1997 among cohabiting persons there were more unemployed than in 2007 and among married persons more lower white-collar and less upper white-collar workers than in 2007. According to age and number of children, there was no statistically significant difference between 2007 and 1997 among cohabiting persons, neither among married persons.

Most of cohabiting persons, 59.5 percent in 2007 and 50.0 percent in 1997 were not going to marry in the near future. The most important reason not to marry was that "There is no (special) reason to marry" (76.8%), unfortunately this reason was not in the list of reasons given in 1997. Also "Marriage is an old-fashioned way of living" (20.3 %) and "I don't believe in lasting (stability) of marriage" (15.5%) were important reasons not to marry in 2007. In 1997 the most important reasons were "Marriage is an old-fashioned way of living" (31.0%), "In cohabitation equality realizes in a better way" (23.0%), "I don't believe in lasting (stability) of marriage" (18.4%) and "In cohabitation it is easier to get rid of the relationship" (18.4%). Ten years ago cohabitation seems to have been a more political or an alternative way of living, but today a normal stage of relationship.