



Psychological distress of marital and cohabitation breakups



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ABSTRACT

Using data from a large survey, the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS), this paper explores the extent to which marital and cohabiting unions differ with respect to the short-term effects of union dissolution on mental health. We compare married individuals who divorced or separated with cohabitators whose first union ended and test the hypothesis that married individuals experience larger negative effects. Results show that initial differences are not statistically significant once the presence of children is controlled for, suggesting that the presence of children is a particularly significant source of increased psychological distress in union dissolutions. However, parenthood does not explain serious psychological distress, which appears to be associated with enduring traits (the personality trait neuroticism).

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1. Introduction

There is an extensive literature about the formation of different union types and its life course consequences. One particularly significant area of research is union dissolution and considerable work has focused specifically on divorce. The limitation here is quite clear given the significant rise in cohabiting relationships that, in some cases replace traditional marriages and in other cases serve as a trial ground for subsequent marriages. Yet, we know little of whether such relationships have similar dissolution dynamics and whether the social and psychological consequences of cohabitation dissolution are similar or different from that of marriage. Using data from the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS), the present paper contributes to the literature by comparing the consequences of marital and cohabitation dissolution.

The outcome studied is the change in mental health surrounding union breakup, where mental health is measured by an indicator of psychological distress, the 12-item general health questionnaire (GHQ-12). Since the ‘stress model’ became widely accepted in the divorce literature back in the 1970s, psychological distress has become one of the key outcomes of interest of marital dissolution (Kitson, 2006; Amato, 2000). As the partner is most probably the major source of social support (Pearlin et al., 1981), breaking up is twice as hurtful: it simultaneously brings distress and the loss of the person on whom the individual used to rely on in face of distressing situations. However, as Amato’s (2010) recent review on research on divorce concludes, the extent to which individuals’ adaptation to separation differs according to whether the partners are legally married or not is largely unknown. Here we address this issue by comparing the change in mental health round separation of married individuals and cohabitators. Consequently we only analyse separated individuals. The specific time frame is the period from the interview before the last with respect to union dissolution to the first interview after separation. As we

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consider a narrow time-window, the expression ‘psychological distress of union dissolution’ used throughout the paper refers to the observed changes in psychological distress which we attribute to union dissolution. In other words, we are interested in direct effects and not in the effects of stressors that arise as consequences of separation – such as economic hardship, for example.

Given the rising trend of cohabitation, focusing exclusively on marital dissolution results in an increasingly partial picture of what happens when unions dissolve. Cohabitation has been increasing dramatically over recent decades across most Western countries. In the UK the number of cohabiting couple families climbed from 1.4 million in 1996 to 2.3 million in 2006 corresponding to an increase from 9% to 14% of all family types (Office for National Statistics, 2007). In the US the number of unmarried couples cohabiting more than doubled from 1990 to 2009 (Simmons and O’Connell, 2003; Kreider, 2010) and just between 2009 and 2010 there was a 13% increase with the number of cohabiting couples reaching 7.5 million (Kreider, 2010).¹ Moreover, there is an increasing likelihood that first cohabiting unions end rather than convert into marriage (Murphy, 2000). In this context, gaining insight about how the dissolution of *first* cohabiting unions compares with that of first marriages is particularly relevant.

There is an ongoing debate in sociology and demography about the extent to which the benefits of being in a partnership are specific to marriages, or whether they also exist in cohabitations. Using this debate as a starting point, we discuss why we may observe a difference in the psychological distress of union dissolution between married individuals and cohabitators. One explanation for this difference is that the end of a union brings the loss of the benefits of being in a partnership, which might differ for marital and cohabiting unions. Another explanation for that difference between married people and cohabitators is that it results from factors other than union type. We then elaborate on the role of two potential confounders, education and parenthood, and how these might simultaneously be associated with union type and ‘reaction’ to union dissolution. We also discuss why we deem particularly important to control for psychological distress before union dissolution and personality traits when analysing *changes* in mental health. If, after controlling for these factors, the difference in the psychological distress of breakup between married individuals and cohabitators is substantially reduced, that would be evidence that it is not the type of union in itself which matters the most.

2. Background

It is well established that on average divorce has negative consequences although their intensity is contingent upon the characteristics of the marriage and the transition. What is not yet established is whether the effects of breaking up a cohabiting union differ with respect to those of a marital disruption. To address this issue, it is important to understand what originates those effects.

The resources perspective posits that the detrimental effects of union dissolution derive from losing access to valuable resources once provided by the union (Williams and Umberson, 2004; Soons et al., 2009). Research from a variety of disciplines suggests the existence of such marriage benefits in a host of domains, from economic benefits such as insurance, economies of scale and specialization to a health ‘marital protection’ (Waite and Gallagher, 2000; Ross et al., 1990; Espinosa and Evans, 2008). As for the source of these marital benefits, the literature suggests they come from living with someone rather than alone, social support and economic well-being (Ross et al., 1990). It is likely for the consequences of breaking up a cohabiting union to differ with respect to those of a marital disruption if these aspects also differ by union type.

If one of the most important benefits of living with someone is that it provides a ‘stabilizing sense of security, belonging and direction’ (Ross et al., 1990: 1062), living with a spouse might be different from co-habiting with a partner. Despite the growing individualization of personal life (Cherlin, 2004), some individuals might still attach a specific valued social role to being someone’s spouse. Moreover, insofar as cohabitation is characterized by a larger degree of individualization, cohabiting unions might also be expected to show less social control, regulation of behaviour and income pooling (Reis et al., 2002; Heimdal and Houseknecht, 2003). We may also expect breakup to be less costly for cohabitators if ‘enforceable trust’ leads married individuals to invest more in their relationship than cohabitators do (Cherlin, 2004).

On the other hand, it is clear that many other benefits of living with someone may occur independently of the type of union therefore existing in both marriages and cohabiting unions. As far as emotional support is concerned substantial differences between marital and cohabiting unions do not seem very likely. Soons et al. (2009) show that even steady dating increases subjective well-being. Moreover, as alternatives to marriage are becoming increasingly more common, the meaning and rewards of marriage may have changed (Cherlin, 2005) and the differences between different union types may grow smaller also in terms of the benefits they provide (Seltzer, 2000; Musick and Bumpass, 2006). This suggests that some partnership benefits are not exclusive of marriages and, consequently, the realization of its loss might bring about psychological distress. By the same token, even in cases where cohabitation was a ‘just’ a trial marriage (rather than an alternative to marriage) breakup might anyway be felt as a failure.

Ultimately, hypotheses about whether the consequences of union dissolution differ between those married and those cohabiting crucially depend on the extent to which the benefits of being in a partnership are specific to marriages or whether they exist also in cohabitations. In their influential book *The case for marriage*, Waite and Gallagher (2000) argue that marriage is a social institution that should not be confounded with cohabitation which they see as a private relationship

¹ This might be partly due to the more precarious economic situation of these couples (Kreider, 2010).

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