Attitudes to Divorce and Non-Marital Partnerships, and Individuals' Experience of Partnership Formation and Dissolution: Structural Equation Modelling of Reciprocal Associations.

Ann Berrington, *University of Southampton*
Peter W.F. Smith, *University of Southampton*
Patrick Sturgis, *University of Surrey*

Extended abstract

Background and rationale

There is much anticipation about the contribution that panel data, e.g. from the UNECE Gender and Generations Programme, could make to our understanding of demographic processes. This paper demonstrates the additional insight that panel data on attitudes and socio-demographic circumstances can provide to our understanding of the reciprocal relationships between individuals' demographic experiences and their attitudes about family life. Whilst previous empirical work has demonstrated the selection of individuals, for example into cohabitation, on the basis of attitudes, less work exists that documents the effect of partnership formation and dissolution on individual's attitudes about family life. Previous work that has considered both the adaptation and selection effects have considered them separately. For example, Axinn and Thornton (1992) examined firstly whether marriage and divorce attitudes predicted entry into cohabitation rather than marriage, and then in a separate analysis examined whether cohabitational experience affected attitudes towards divorce. Cunningham and Thornton (2005) focus on the adaptation effects looking at the impact of partnership transitions on attitudes towards divorce, with the selection effects modelled in a separate paper. A more elegant way of undertaking such analyses would be to examine these two processes simultaneously. Path models with latent variables can be used to identify the extent to which the data are consistent with a theoretical model of reciprocal relationships between family attitudes and demographic behaviour processes which are assumed to be operating continuously over time. For example, Moors (2003) used a log-linear path model with latent variables and two waves of a panel study to examine the effect of gender role attitudes on family formation. Moors used a log linear framework, arguing that his analysis included mainly multinomial variables and that "structural equation models are not designed – or at least are not very well suited - to include such variables" (Moors

2003, p. 204). However, as we demonstrate in this paper, recent advances in the MPlus software for structural equation modelling allow us to include binary, ordinal and multinomial variables in a straightforward way within one set of estimating equations. Hence we are able to directly compare the magnitude of the selection and adaptation effects within one model.

Data

Data from the 1998-2002 sweeps of the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) are used to examine the causes and consequences of attitudes to divorce and non-marital cohabitation. The BHPS is an annual panel and from 1998 onwards, the same series of questions on attitudes to marriage, cohabitation, and partnership dissolution (shown in Table 1) were collected on a biennial basis. Respondents are asked to say whether they "strongly agree", "agree", "neither agree nor disagree", "disagree", or "strongly disagree".

Table 1: Attitude questions

a) It is alright for people to live together even if they have no interest in considering marriage.
b) It is better to divorce than continue an unhappy marriage.
c) When there are children in the family, parents should stay together even if they don't get along.
d) It makes no difference to children whether their parents are married to each other or just living together.

Statements b and c refer to the acceptance of divorce and separation, the second of these specifying whether parents should stay together when there are children involved. Statement a relates to the acceptance of living together when no marriage is intended. Statement d questions whether it makes any difference to children whether their parents are married or not.

Longitudinal Method

A number of fixed background factors found in previous research to be important predictors of attitudes and/or partnership formation and dissolution are included as fixed covariates. Two separate analyses are undertaken. One focusing on unmarried people, with entry into marriage as the demographic event of interest, the other focusing on married people, with divorce (or separation) as the even of interest. Entry into marriage and divorce/separation are identified from the marital status as reported

in each annual panel wave. By using structural equation models (SEM) and the Mplus software we model the selection into marriage and divorce (say between 1998 and 2000) on the basis of the fixed covariates and the latent attitude (measured in 1998). Simultaneously we estimate the impact of experiencing a demographic event (namely marriage or divorce between 1998 and 2000) on the attitude as measured in the next panel wave (i.e. in 2000). Mplus moves beyond some traditional SEM packages in permitting us to combine a measurement model (of attitude) with a structural model that includes binary and ordinal endogenous variables. Entry into marriage and divorce are included as binary variables and are simultaneously both response and explanatory variables. Finally, the design of the BHPS means that individuals are clustered within households. We describe how Mplus can deal with this non-independence in an appropriate way.

Results and Discussion

We report our findings quantifying the relative size of the selection and adaptation effects and discuss the additional contribution that modelling these process simultaneously within SEM provide over the traditional approach. In doing so we hope that we can provide some ideas for future research based on forthcoming panel data from the Generations and Gender programme of surveys.

References

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