Family Formation Trajectories and Cohort Change among Sexual Minorities

Extended abstract
European Population Conference 2022

Ariane Ophir, Diederik Boertien, and Sergi Vidal
Centre for Demographic Studies (CED)

Background

The pathways to family formation are diverse, dynamic, and encompass multiple demographic individual “events” that span the life course. Although family demographers are increasingly paying more attention to the formation and stability of same-sex unions, evidence on the family dynamics of sexual minority groups across the life course and over time is limited. In this paper, we use sequence analysis to investigate how family formation dynamics (i.e., partnering and parenthood) evolve over the life course of sexual minorities and how the diversity of family trajectories has changed across birth cohorts.

The possibilities for sexual minorities to pursue family-related goals continue to be unequal and limited but have changed dramatically over the last decades. Changes in attitudes, laws, norms and reproductive technologies have reduced some barriers that sexual minorities face while forming unions, marrying, and becoming parents (Reczek 2020). However, we know very little about cohort change in partnering and parenthood experiences and the sequence in which different groups of sexual minorities form their families.

Most demographic research on family formation outcomes among sexual minority groups focuses on a single outcome during a specific life stage (Joyner, Manning and Bogle 2017; Kalmijn, Loeve and Manting 2007; Lau 2012; Ruiz-Vallejo and Boertien 2021). This limitation overlooks the cumulative trajectory of family dynamics over the life course. Furthermore, research on parenthood is often limited to estimates based on co-residence with children (Kolk and Andersson 2020), i.e., limited to partnered people. This limitation hinders the generalizability to the general sexual minority population and overlooks spells of childlessness and/or singlehood as part of family trajectories. Lastly, we know little about the diversity of family trajectories among sexual minorities groups over time.

Sequencing partnerships and parenthood relationships over the life course provides a holistic account of familial experiences by documenting the occurrence, order, timing, and duration of multiple family-formation events and the spells in between. Consequently, this novel approach contributes to our knowledge about family dynamics among sexual minorities as a process that spans the life course and accounts for diverse pathways that also include the experiences of those
who did not partner or became parents. Moreover, sequence analysis allows us to identify multiple pathways and investigate the heterogeneity within and between different birth cohorts.

In sum, this paper will answer the following questions:

1. What are the family formation trajectories of sexual minorities?
2. Have these trajectories changed across birth cohorts?
3. What individual characteristics are associated with the different trajectories?

Data and measures

We use data from the Understanding Society (2009-2019) survey, a representative household panel survey of the British population. This dataset is one of the very few large-scale datasets that collects information from various birth cohorts on sexual identity as well as partnering and parenting histories.

First, we classify respondents based on sexuality. In waves 3, 5, 7, and 9, the survey asked all respondents: “Which of the following options best describes how you think of yourself?” with the answer options Heterosexual or Straight, Gay or Lesbian, Bisexual, Other, Prefer Not to Say, and Don’t Know. We use the last wave with non-missing information and restrict the analysis to three mutually exclusive groups: bisexual (n = 223), gay/lesbian (n = 342), and heterosexual/straight (n = 31,485).

To sequence family formation trajectories, we focus on the occurrence of two main events – partnership and parenthood – and their timing. We measure partnership using the marital and cohabitation history file containing information about the starting and ending date of (current and past) marriages and cohabiting relationships of at least three months. We exclude respondents who had not reached age 40 by their last interview and respondents whose relationship history is not available. To measure parenthood, respondents were asked whether they were ever the parent of an adopted, biological, or stepchild. For biological children, the survey collects the year of birth. In contrast, for adopted and non-biological children, the survey collects the year the respondent started living with the child (if applicable). The starting date of parenthood is defined accordingly.

Analytical strategy

We will use sequence analysis where an individual’s family sequence concatenates observations of one of four different family states: 1) childless and unpartnered, 2) childless and partnered, 3) parent and partnered, and 4) parent and unpartnered for each year from age 16 to age 40. This

---

1 An additional analysis will include comparing the family trajectories until age 35 to include those born in the 1980s to explore if the patterns across birth cohorts are robust
 operational definition enables us to assess (several) partnership episodes and the transition into parenthood, as well as their timing and sequencing within an individual’s family trajectory.

To examine the relevant trajectory patterns among sexual minorities (RQ1), we deploy sequence analysis and cluster analysis and establish a typology of underlying family life course pathways. First, we use Optimal Matching algorithms to compute pairwise similarities across all pairs of the above-mentioned sequences in our sample. Second, we group the sequences using hierarchical cluster techniques (Ward link) on the resulting matrix of distances. The outcome of the analysis is a typology of internally consistent groups (or clusters) of sequences. The decision on the number of groups is based on empirical fit measures (using cluster stopping rules) as well as theoretically derived expectations about potential life course pathways. We will discuss relevant features of the typology such as the key properties of each pathway (e.g., occurrence, timing, and ordering of episodes, complexity, etc.) and population distributions across pathways.

To examine cross-cohort stability and change in family life courses among sexual minorities (RQ2), we will perform cross-cohort comparisons on our sequential data. We will compare the population distributions across trajectory pathways of the above-mentioned typology, to show evidence about the specific patterns that have lost/gained importance across cohorts. Finally, to identify the individual characteristics that are associated with specific family pathways among sexual minorities (RQ3) we will use multinomial regression analysis for the probability of cluster assignment. The main independent variable we will explore is gender. The experience of partnering and particularly of parenthood, varies significantly between women and men across sexualities. We will also explore sequence analysis by gender. Other characteristics will include education, ethnicity, childhood family structure, and region/country of birth.

**Preliminary descriptive results**

Table 1 shows summary statistics of the prevalence and timing of partnering and parenthood events by birth cohort and sexuality. Starting with partnering, Table 1 shows that people identifying as gay or lesbian are the least likely to partner before age 40 compared with bisexuals and heterosexuals, but this share increased over time. The average age at first union has also increased for people identifying as heterosexuals and gay or lesbian, but for younger cohorts, age at first union is overall similar. Finally, although people identifying as gay or lesbian were less likely to partner before age 40, they had, on average, a higher number of unions.

Shifting to parenthood, Table 1 shows stark differences between groups and changes across birth cohorts in the prevalence of parenthood. The vast majority of heterosexual (84-87%) individuals are a parent before age 40, which was mostly stable across birth cohorts. However, among bisexuals, there has been an increase, wherein most people who have identified as bisexuals were parents by age 40 (56-73%). In contrast, the cross-cohort change among gay or lesbian-identified people has been minor (with a U-shaped pattern) but consistently scientifically lower than

---

2 As a first step, parenthood will include both biological and non-biological parenthood. If sample size allows, we will also explore a more detailed definition of parenthood as part of the family trajectory.
bisexuals and heterosexuals (22-26%). In other words, most gay or lesbian identifying people born before 1980 were not parents by age 40. For biological parenthood, this share has declined over time.

The preliminary results suggest that family trajectories are different among sexual minorities groups and have changed over time. However, the descriptive results also indicate that singlehood continues to be a prominent component of sexual minorities’ pathways to family formation.

Table 1. Partnering and parenthood before age 40 by cohort and sexuality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Bisexual</th>
<th>Gay/Lesbian</th>
<th>Heterosexual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Partnership</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ever partnered before 40</td>
<td>%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Born &lt;1960</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Born in 1960s</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Born in 1970s</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average age at first union formation (before age 40)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Born &lt;1960</td>
<td>24.2</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>23.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Born in 1960s</td>
<td>23.7</td>
<td>25.8</td>
<td>24.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Born in 1970s</td>
<td>24.3</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>25.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average number of unions among those ever in a union</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Born &lt;1960</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Born in 1960s</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Born in 1970s</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parenthood</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent of adopted/biological/step child before age 40</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Born &lt;1960</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Born in 1960s</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Born in 1970s</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent of biological child before age 40</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Born &lt;1960</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Born in 1960s</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Born in 1970s</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average age at becoming adopted/biological/step parent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Born &lt;1960</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Born in 1960s</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Born in 1970s</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References


