

Committed to independence?

An exploratory study of living apart together in contemporary Sweden

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Extended abstract

Rationale

Sweden is among the countries with highest share of single households in Europe. Living without a partner beyond young adulthood has often been associated with vulnerability regarding health, socio-economic position, access to social support, etc. As revealed by more recent research however, a non-negligible proportion of such “partnerless” individuals are in committed relationships (Carter & Duncan, 2018; Liefbroer et al. 2015). Living-apart-together relationships are less institutionalized even compared to non-marital cohabitation, with respect to the legal position of the partners, such as their rights and obligations towards each-other with respect to care, break-up or death (Duncan et al., 2012; Lyssens-Danneboom, et al. 2013), to name a few important issues. Nevertheless, previous research shows that LAT is often a preferred option as it provides a high level of autonomy, social and financial independence, and room for gender egalitarian arrangements for the partners involved (Connidis et al., 2017; Lewin, 2018). Hence, concerns about vulnerability for individuals in this type of partnership may be exaggerated. In this paper, we seek to explore the main characteristics of people living-apart-together (the LATs) in the Swedish population, to have a better understanding of their eventual vulnerability, given lack of relevant studies based on recent large-scale data for Sweden.

Previous research

Based on previous research on LAT, five groups of factors can help us to answer the question of who chooses or is constrained to this type of partnership. The first group is the demographic characteristics, such as gender (e.g. women opting for LAT as to avoid an increase of domestic duties given gendered division of labor [Ghazanfaraeeon Karlsson & Borell, 2002]), age (the meaning of LAT may differ by life-course stage [Pasteels et al., 2017]), childhood family type, region of residence, own family experiences and health (Carter & Duncan, 2018). Socio-economic factors including education, labor force attachment and economic situation constitute the second group (Ermisch & Seidler, 2009). The third group contains cultural factors. It was shown that LATs often express more post-materialistic value orientation (Inglehart, 1977), are more individualistic, work-oriented, secularized than their married counterparts (Liefbroer et al., 2015). They value personal autonomy, independence and gender equality highly (Upton-Davis, 2012), and appreciate that LAT facilitates contacts with children / grandchildren (Connidis et al., 2017). Events, such as the members of the couple temporarily working at different locations may strengthen the preference for LAT (Levin, 2004), as do policies and legal regulations on social benefits and in-kind support provided to single persons or lone parents but not co-resident couples (Lewin 2018). The choice of LAT may also be motivated by an urge to protect property and/or inheritance for one's offspring from previous partnership (de Jong Gierveld, 2002; Connidis et al. 2017).

Data and methods

In our analyses we rely on data extracted from the Swedish Generations and Gender Survey (GGG) first wave, conducted in 2012-2013, with Statistics Sweden in charge of the field work. Given a starting sample of 18,000 individuals and a response rate of 53.8%, a total of 9,688 respondents, both women and men aged 18-79 years are included in the Swedish GGG in which phone interviews have been complemented with register data. 6,830 respondents have filled in a follow-up postal/on-line questionnaire including questions about attitudes, values, social norms, etc. The latter information will be used in a later stage of our research. Here we analyze the information from phone interviews and registers.

In our analytical sample we include women and men aged 30 and older, as challenges of labor-market establishment interfering with partnership formation are likely to have been overcome by then, notwithstanding patterns of delayed family formation. Thus, we excluded respondents younger than 30, and those with missing information i) on partnership status at the interview, ii) in partnership- or childbearing histories, iii) on long-term illness, iv) educational attainment, v) labor force attachment at the interview. Sexual preference (for different- or same-sex partner) has not been taken into account. Our working sample thus consists of 7,708 individuals, 3,729 men and 3,979 women. Partnership at the interview is our dependent variable. We distinguish between respondents living in a co-residential partnership (5,887), in a LAT-relationship (515) and alone, i.e. not having a partner (1,306). Multinomial logistic regression is our tool of analysis.

Results and discussion

The descriptive statistics (Table 1) reveal some interesting differences across the partnership statuses. We find an overrepresentation of women among the singles, who also have a somewhat older age-structure than the other groups. With respect to previous family experience, the LATs stand out with nearly 60% of them having experience of a co-residential union with children before their current relationship. LATs also show the smallest share without any previous family experience. About 40% of LATs and somewhat more among singles have long-term illness compared to less than one-third of the co-resident group. However, nearly as large share of LATs as the co-resident group have tertiary education, with the lowest proportion seen among people without a partner. The latter group also has much higher share of respondents without labor-market attachment. The proportion of those in difficult economic situation is about double among singles and LATs than in the co-resident group, however more than half of LATs have good economy.

Next, we turn to the findings of the multinomial models (Table 2). We see no clear age-pattern for LAT vis-à-vis co-residence, except for the oldest age-group, that is people in their seventies, who are more likely to opt for LAT than for a co-residential union. Also, Figure 1 shows that the probability of co-residence declines by age, whereas the elderly are more likely to LAT than people in their thirties when we control for other factors in our model. Compared to respondents who lived in a childless union prior to their current relationship, those with children from a previous co-residential union are much more likely to LAT than to co-reside. The opposite is true for respondents with no former family experience. Having a long-term illness increases the probability to be in a LAT relationship compared to co-residential union. LAT (rather than co-residence) is also more common among people with economic difficulties. However, individuals who live-apart-together appear to have better economic situation than singles, possibly related to them being more highly educated compared to the latter group. Having higher socio-economic status brings along better prospects at the partner market. The interaction between gender and family experience indicates that single mothers (with children from previous co-residential union) find LAT particularly appealing, which can be interpreted as an expression of preference. On the other hand, this could also be the result of constraints in terms of the partner not wanting to commit to co-residence when children from a previous union are involved. Figure 2 confirms this gendered pattern. For both men and women having children increases the probability for LAT, but this effect is more pronounced for lone mothers. In contrast, men without any former family experience or having lived in a childless co-residential union have higher probability to live-apart-together than their female counterparts.

Somewhat surprisingly, we do not find an educational gradient regarding preference for LAT, neither seem labor-market attachment or region of residence matter. Other models, not shown here, suggest no association between LAT and growing up in a non-intact family because of parental divorce or separation, the latter often featured as main context of the reproduction of vulnerability (Amato & Cheadle 2005; Feldhaus & Heintz-Martin, 2015). But this does not seem to apply to LATs in Sweden. Taken our findings together, concerns about vulnerability for LATs appear to be exaggerated. At the same time, the high preference for this living arrangement among childless men, single mothers and the elderly points to the importance of flexibility and independence linked to LAT, not entirely ruling out constraints though when this type of partnership is chosen.

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Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the variables in the analysis.

	Coresidence with partner (N = 5887)	Living alone not LAT (N = 1306)	LAT (N = 515)	Total (N = 7708)
gender				
male	2917 (49.5%)	565 (43.3%)	247 (48.0%)	3729 (48.4%)
female	2970 (50.5%)	741 (56.7%)	268 (52.0%)	3979 (51.6%)
age-group				
30-39	1204 (20.5%)	208 (15.9%)	82 (15.9%)	1494 (19.4%)
40-49	1424 (24.2%)	262 (20.1%)	130 (25.2%)	1816 (23.6%)
50-59	1258 (21.4%)	258 (19.8%)	127 (24.7%)	1643 (21.3%)
60-69	1319 (22.4%)	327 (25.0%)	108 (21.0%)	1754 (22.8%)
70+	682 (11.6%)	251 (19.2%)	68 (13.2%)	1001 (13.0%)
family experience				
childless union	1263 (21.5%)	394 (30.2%)	130 (25.2%)	1787 (23.2%)
full family	1012 (17.2%)	629 (48.2%)	307 (59.6%)	1948 (25.3%)
no experience	3612 (61.4%)	283 (21.7%)	78 (15.1%)	3973 (51.5%)
region of residence				
non-metropolitan	3767 (64.0%)	785 (60.1%)	320 (62.1%)	4872 (63.2%)
metropolitan	1383 (23.5%)	332 (25.4%)	116 (22.5%)	1831 (23.8%)
unknown	737 (12.5%)	189 (14.5%)	79 (15.3%)	1005 (13.0%)
long-term illness				
no	4033 (68.5%)	737 (56.4%)	312 (60.6%)	5082 (65.9%)
yes	1854 (31.5%)	569 (43.6%)	203 (39.4%)	2626 (34.1%)
educational attainment				
less than tertiary	3657 (62.1%)	919 (70.4%)	340 (66.0%)	4916 (63.8%)
tertiary	2230 (37.9%)	387 (29.6%)	175 (34.0%)	2792 (36.2%)
labour-force attachment				
employed	4060 (69.0%)	707 (54.1%)	348 (67.6%)	5115 (66.4%)
unemployed	98 (1.7%)	50 (3.8%)	13 (2.5%)	161 (2.1%)
not in paid work	1729 (29.4%)	549 (42.0%)	154 (29.9%)	2432 (31.6%)
economic situation				
difficult	587 (10.0%)	307 (23.5%)	103 (20.0%)	997 (12.9%)
comfortable	3915 (66.5%)	602 (46.1%)	278 (54.0%)	4795 (62.2%)
unknown	1385 (23.5%)	397 (30.4%)	134 (26.0%)	1916 (24.9%)

Table 2. Living arrangements of individuals aged 30 and above in Sweden. Multinomial logit models, relative risk ratios.

	LAT vs co-residence	LAT vs single
gender (ref.cat.: male)		
female	0.72	0.64*
age-group (ref.cat.: 30-39)		
40-49	0.88	1.10
50-59	0.93	0.99
60-69	0.85	0.76
70 and above	1.57*	0.79
family experience (ref. cat: childless union)		
full family [previous union and child]	2.05***	1.41
no experience	0.24***	0.85
region of residence (ref. cat.: non-metropolitan)		
metropolitan	0.89	0.82
unknown	1.26	1.07
long-term illness (ref.cat.: no)		
yes	1.24*	0.97
educational attainment (ref.cat.: other)		
tertiary	1.04	1.18
labour-force attachment (ref.cat.: employed)		
unemployed	1.39	0.61
not in paid work	0.95	0.71*
economic situation (ref.cat.: difficult)		
comfortable	0.52***	1.40*
unknown	0.63***	0.90
gender * family experience		
female & full experience	1.94**	1.31
female & no family experience	0.60	0.92
constant	0.19***	0.43***
Statistics		
N = 7708		
aic: 9103.9		
bic: 9354.1		

*** p < .001; ** p < .01; * p ≤ .05

Figure 1. Probabilities to live as LAT, single (Alone) and in co-residential union (Cohabiting), by age-groups

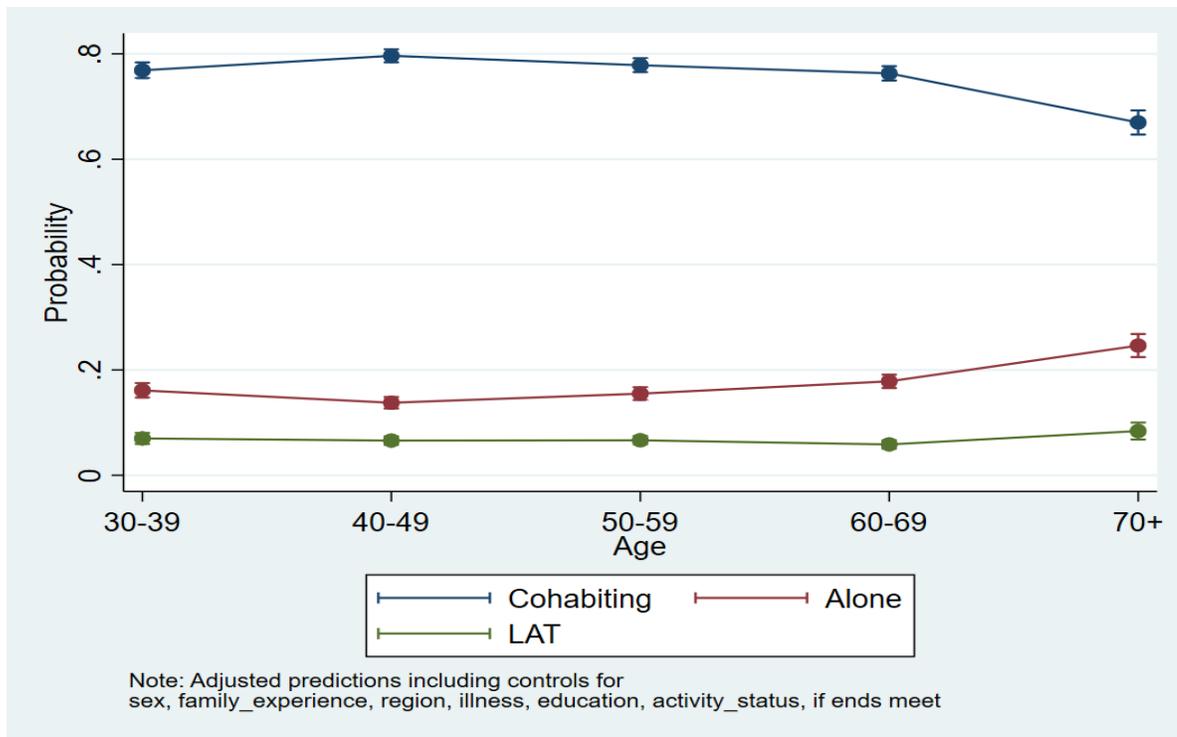


Figure 2. Women and men as LATs, by previous family experiences

