

A Demographic Analysis of Registered Partnerships (legal same-sex unions): The Case of Norway

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Abstract. In 1993, Norway became the second country in the world to introduce registered partnerships. As with same-sex marriages, registered partnerships give the same rights and duties as marriages for opposite sex couples, with a few exceptions. The present article describes this 'new' demographic event based on Norwegian experiences. Compared to the number of new cases each year of opposite-sex marriages, registered partnerships amount to less than 1%. Gay partnerships are more common than lesbian partnerships, but the proportion of female partnerships has increased since the law came into force. In one out of five partnerships, one or both partners have been previously married to a person of the opposite sex. At the time they entered into the partnership, 24% of the women and 13% of the men had at least one child. When examining the registered partnerships entered into in Norway between 1993 and 2001 we estimated the probability of divorce to be 16% after six years. We also carried out a multivariate analysis of the divorce risk and found that the divorce risk for female partnerships is double that of the risk for male partnerships. Another high risk group is partnerships between a Norwegian and a person from a non-Nordic country.

Key words: divorce, Norway, proportional hazards regression, registered partnership, same-sex marriage

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Résumé. En 1993, la Norvège a été le deuxième pays au monde à introduire les partenariats enregistrés. Comme pour les mariages homosexuels, les partenariats enregistrés donnent, à quelques exceptions près, les mêmes droits et devoirs que ceux découlant des mariages hétérosexuels. Cet article décrit ce "nouvel" événement démographique en s'appuyant sur l'expérience norvégienne. Chaque année, le nombre de partenariats enregistrés s'élève à moins

de 1% du nombre de mariages hétérosexuels. Les partenariats masculins sont plus fréquents que les unions lesbiennes, mais la proportion de partenariats féminins a augmenté depuis les premières années d'entrée en vigueur de la loi. Dans un cas sur 5, l'un des partenaires ou les deux ont été préalablement mariés à une personne du sexe opposé. Au moment où ils concluent le partenariat, 24% des femmes et 13% des hommes ont au moins un enfant. En prenant en compte les partenariats enregistrés entre 1993 et 2001, le risque de divorce est estimé à 16% après 6 ans. Une analyse multivariée montre un risque de divorce double pour les unions féminines comparé à celui des unions masculines. Les couples associant un(e) Norvégien(ne) et une personne originaire d'un pays non nordique ont également un risque élevé de séparation.

Mots clés: partenariat enregistré, mariage homosexuel, divorce, Norvège, régression à risques proportionnels

1. Introduction

During recent decades, legal recognition of same-sex unions has been intensely debated and strongly fought for in several countries. In 2004, particular attention was paid when local authorities in the USA and France began authorising same-sex marriages, although such unions were not approved by law. In the end, these marriages were not considered legally valid, but the ceremonies undoubtedly had a symbolic effect. To date, seven countries have given same-sex couples legal rights to a *registered partnership* or *marriage*.¹ Registered partnership was invented in Denmark, and all the Nordic countries use that term. As with a same-sex marriage, a registered partnership has, with few exceptions, all the consequences of an opposite-sex marriage. There are only minor differences between the various laws in the Nordic countries.

From a demographic point of view, registered partnerships as well as same-sex marriages represent a new family type. Although the legal consequences of entering a registered partnership or a same-sex marriage may differ slightly from country to country, we think that the two phenomena may be treated as demographically similar events. So far, current statistics and analyses have been scarce. This article helps provide more knowledge on this new demographic event. In view of the extensive attention given to registered partnerships and same-sex marriages both before and after their legalisation, we may ask how many same-sex couples have actually taken the opportunity to legalise their relationship. We will also analyse some characteristics of people who have entered into a registered partnership, such as their age and the age difference between the partners in these cohabitations. Finally, we will analyse the duration of these cohabitations and present a multivariate analysis of the divorce risk in registered partnerships. We will look at the number of divorces during the first years and check whether the divorce risk is the same for male as for female couples.

Our study is based on Norwegian data. Norway seems to be a suitable case to study for three reasons: first, as early as 1993, Norway became the second country in the world to introduce registered partnerships, a fact which gives us the opportunity to study the development over some years. Second, the Norwegian population statistics provide us with fairly comprehensive information, i.e. concerning former civil status and the number of children among those entering into partnerships. Third, Scandinavia has often been seen as a forerunner when it comes to family change. This contention does, at least, hold true for legal recognition of same-sex marriages.

2. Background: the legislation of same-sex unions

Although several countries have given some legal recognition of same-sex couples, many of these regulations have so few legal consequences that they may not be regarded as corresponding to opposite-sex marriages. A well known and highly debated case is France. After several years of intense discussions, same-sex and opposite-sex couples were given the same admission to contract a 'Pacte Civil de Solidarité' (Civil Solidarity Pact) (PACS). However, the French law contains very few rights and obligations. As expressed by Martin and Théry (2001, p. 152): "By signing a Pacs, one party can consider himself or herself as 'almost married' and the other as 'almost in a free union'."

In some countries, same-sex marriages are legalised at state level, not at federal level. In 2000, Vermont was the first state in the USA to give legal recognition to what they call *civil union* for same-sex couples. Proposals for constitutional amendments to prohibit same-sex marriages nation-wide, are evidence that there is considerable opposition in the USA.

At present, legislation on same-sex couples is rapidly being altered in numerous countries.²

The term 'registered partnership' is a new linguistic creation, which is used in all the Nordic countries. In all these countries, separate acts on registered partnerships have been passed and are thus not a part of the Marriage Act. In the Nordic countries, registered partnership is only available for same-sex couples.

It was hardly a coincidence that the Nordic countries did not want to incorporate same-sex couples into the Marriage Act. One reason was purely pragmatic, as it was easier to introduce a new law than to alter the existing one. Another argument presented in the debate before the Norwegian law was passed, was a fear that modifying the existing marriage code might be perceived as a threat towards marriage as a social institution and its unique position in society. Tactically, it seemed more sensible to propose a new term, i.e. registered partnership, and a separate act. The Netherlands and Belgium have chosen a different procedure. In these countries, the rules authorising

same-sex marriages were incorporated into the existing marriage law in 2001 and 2003, respectively.

Registered partnerships and *same-sex marriages* give the same rights and duties as marriages for opposite-sex couples, with a few exceptions (Waaldijk, 2003). To some degree they are not completely equal to marriage. There are exceptions in one or more of the following issues: the opportunity to jointly adopt children, to have medically assisted insemination, to solemnise the partnership and requiring residency before entering into the partnership. Such exceptions are debated and some exceptions have been cancelled since the law was first passed.

In Norway, a partnership is formalised by a civil ceremony, much like the ceremony for heterosexual couples who prefer a civil ceremony to a church wedding. Couples who enter into partnerships will often make an announcement in their local newspaper, and many of them invite family and friends to a large-scale party, very similar to a traditional wedding party. Registered partnerships have received and still receive quite a lot of general attention in the media. Several couples with and without children have been interviewed on the radio, on television, and in newspapers and magazines.

The procedure for dissolving a registered partnership is the same as for dissolving a marriage. According to the Norwegian law, the main rule is that one or both partners must apply for a separation licence from the county governor and can file for divorce after they have been separated for a minimum of one year. During the period of separation, they are technically still registered partners, and cannot therefore enter into a new partnership or marriage during this period.

In Norway, there is still strong public interest and debate surrounding the law on registered partnerships. Few want to abolish the opportunity to enter into a registered partnership, but amendments such as introducing the opportunity to adopt are controversial.³ Denmark is traditionally seen as a morally more liberal country than Norway, and the resistance to legal recognition of same-sex couples seems to be weaker in Denmark than in Norway. A Danish study stressed that few politicians wanted to take on the burden of opposing the bill on registered partnerships in public (Søland, 1998). An analysis of the proceedings and debate prior to the Norwegian law being passed also indicated that the politicians had more accepting attitudes than the population at large (Halvorsen, 1999; Størksen, 2000). Opinion polls suggested that although a considerable proportion was indifferent, “there never seems to have been a general majority in favour of the Act” (Halvorsen, 1998, p. 213).

Today *registered partner*, *separated partner*, *divorced partner* and *surviving partner* are all alternatives of the official civil status in Norway. The juridical acceptance of a registered partnership will, however, only be valid in countries with corresponding rules.

3. Previous research

3.1. SOME METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES OF LESBIAN AND GAY STUDIES

Lesbian and gay studies represent a typical cross-disciplinary research field, mostly focusing on the lives, identities, and struggle for recognition of homosexuals. This is also a research field where much work has been produced outside the universities and some will say “Lesbian and gay studies still hover on the borders of full respectability” (Weeks, 2000, p. 1). Demographic approaches, such as focusing on the prevalence of same-sex couples and the duration and the break-up risk of these relationships, are rare. Additionally, small samples, and even the absence of representative samples, make it difficult to generalise results from many of the studies, which, after all, have been conducted. Self-recruited samples, often based on snowball methods, are common, and respondents are often recruited from organisations of gays and lesbians or from readers of particular magazines.

The arrival of AIDS increased the demand for epidemiological studies based on representative samples. More recently, legislative changes and the growing societal recognition of same-sex partnerships seem to have increased the interest in more reliable figures, describing prevalence as well as incidence of same-sex couples. In recent years, studies have been carried out using census data as well as large-scale surveys (see, for instance, Black et al., 2000, 2002; Badgett, 2001; Jepsen and Jepsen, 2002). Due to the limited size of the target group, surveys based on representative sampling procedures, will, in most cases, reveal relatively few respondents having experience from same-sex relationships of a certain duration. Attempts to solve this problem have been made by pooling two or more surveys in order to get larger samples (see, for instance, Badgett, 1995).

The question of homosexual behaviour is also a sensitive topic for large-scale surveys, and there is obviously a considerable risk of underestimation. Increased openness and acceptance of homosexuality in general, including public debates, as we have seen in the fight for legal recognition of same-sex marriages, may render more acceptability to questions which were considered unthinkable only a few years ago.

As a family type, same-sex marriages and registered partnerships are classical demographic events, which in principle are well suited for statistics and analysis, in the same way as opposite-sex marriages. To make comparisons of rates for same-sex marriages, we need an estimate for the risk population, i.e. the number of homosexuals. More recent research shows, however, that sexual orientation is not a ‘once and for all’ fact for all individuals, but may vary in strength and even change over the life course. A famous Norwegian female athlete who divorced her same-sex partner and shortly after cohabited and got pregnant with a male partner, put it this way “I am not a lesbian or bisexual, I am just myself”. She is, in other words, a

typical example of what is called queer theory, a theory where sexual identity is not seen as fixed, but may be more fluid and alternating.

Given the assumption that sexual identity may alternate from time to time and over the life course, the question concerning the number of homosexuals is difficult to answer and may even be seen as irrelevant. Studies show that the number of homosexuals may vary depending on the wording of questions and the issue studied, such as self-identity as gay and lesbian, homosexual practice at least once in a lifetime, the sex of the majority of partners and so on. The fact that estimates of gays and lesbians depend on which criteria are being used, was already evident in Kinsey's famous report. In fact, Kinsey himself argued strongly against the idea that people can easily be divided in two classes, homosexuals and heterosexuals. In exploring male homosexuals in the population, he gave several estimates ranging from 4% to 37%, depending on whether the criterion was exclusively homosexual throughout a life or at least some overt homosexual experience. About 10% were more or less exclusively homosexuals for at least 3 years (Kinsey et al., 1948, pp. 650–651). Notwithstanding, Kinsey's sampling procedure also had its weakness.

According to several authors, the strong belief in 10% homosexuals expressed by lay persons as well as among professionals, is a misinterpretation of what Kinsey in fact meant and said (Lauman et al., 1994; Pedersen and Kristiansen, 2003). Recent surveys based on representative samples, conclude 10% is an overestimation. The estimations from these surveys are that about 4–9% of men and about 4% of women had at least one same-sex partner during their life (Spira et al., 1993; Lauman et al., 1994; Black et al., 2000).

Considering these results, a precise risk population for estimating rates for same-sex couples is beyond reach. Neither can we take for granted that the figures from one society will be valid in another society.

3.2. LESBIAN AND GAY COUPLES

Our study does not contain information on all same-sex couples living together: only those who have taken a further step, and entered into a registered partnership are included. Given that registered partnerships and same-sex marriages have only existed for a short time, characteristics of these types of unions are still rather unexplored, and we have not seen studies that look at the divorce risk in the way this article does.

In recent years, however, studies have been conducted of same-sex couples living in consensual unions based on census data and large-scale surveys. Considering our knowledge of the differences between opposite-sex couples being married or cohabiting, it seems reasonable to assume that same-sex couples living in consensual unions will not necessarily be representative of those who have married or entered into a registered partnership. In the

absence of comparable data on same-sex marriages, a look at some demographic characteristics of persons living in same-sex cohabitation may, however, be of interest.

Generally, studies of homosexual practice as well as homosexual identity find that men are in the majority. With regard to same-sex couples, Canadian Census data show that 55% were male couples compared to 51% in the USA (Turcotte et al., 2003). In the Norwegian Census 2001, the proportion of male couples was 49%.

US Census data indicate that having children living in the household is fairly common for female couples, but rare for male couples; 22% and 5% respectively (Black et al., 2000). In the Canadian Census 2001, 15% of the lesbian couples and 3% of the gay couples were registered with children in the household (Turcotte et al., 2003). To be previously married is fairly common both for women and men living in same-sex consensual unions. Of those living in same-sex consensual unions, 20% of gays and 30% of lesbians were previously married. Most of the children living in households with same-sex couples were probably born while the mother, or more seldom the father, lived in an opposite-sex relationship (Black et al., 2000).

Same-sex couples are more inclined to live in metropolitan areas than in other areas (Black et al., 2000; Turcotte et al., 2003). In Canada, the proportion of same-sex couples was three times higher in metropolitan areas than elsewhere in the country. In the USA as well as in Canada, the concentration in the metropolitan areas seems to be stronger for male than for female couples.

The inclination to choose a partner with characteristics similar to oneself is confirmed in several studies of opposite-sex couples. There is, in other words, a positive assortative mating. Whether same-sex couples practice positive assortative mating is questionable. Considering the smaller pool of partners who are accessible for lesbians and gays, it has been supposed that the partners will be less similar. However, considering some typical demographic variables, an overall level of positive assortative mating also seems to be present for same-sex couples (Jepsen and Jepsen, 2002).

To our knowledge, studies of dissolution risks in same-sex consensual unions are without exception based on small and non-representative samples. These studies provide a valuable insight into couple dynamics and typical problems in gay versus lesbian relationships (see for instance Kurdek, 2003). It seems impossible, however, to draw conclusions from these studies on the dissolution risk in same-sex consensual unions in general, and more specifically on the behaviour of female and male couples.

4. Data and methods

The present analysis is based on data from the Central Population Register (CPR) in Norway. Every demographic event (birth, death, marriage,

registered partnership, divorce, change of address, etc.) is recorded in this register. Based on some decades of use for a variety of statistical and analytical purposes, our evaluation of the CPR is that it covers both stock and flow data reasonably well.

Our data comprise 1293 registered partnerships contracted from August 1993 to the end of 2001. At the end of 2001, 118 of these partnerships had ended in divorce and 212 couples had obtained a legal separation licence.⁴ Forty partnerships had ended because one of the partners died, of which 85% were male couples.

The data from the CPR provide information on the date for the start and the possible cessation of each partnership, and the way in which the possible cessation took place. The year of birth, sex, civil status, municipality, citizenship and all children (dates of birth) are recorded for each partner.

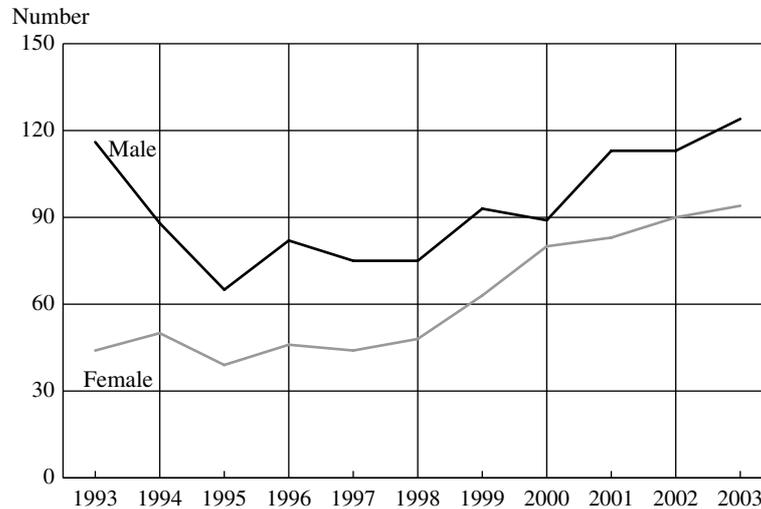
The following variables have been defined for the analysis; *Age*, which is the mean age of the two partners at the time they entered into the registered partnership. *Age difference*, which is the age difference between the two partners in the couple. *Sex* of the couple, which in this presentation will sometimes be referred to as gays and lesbians rather than men and women. *Civil status*, which since the registered partnership law came into force, also includes registered partner. *Municipality*, defined as living in the capital city if at least one of the two was settled there. *Citizenship* is used as a proxy variable for national origin at the time of partnership formation. *Children*, which includes all the children of each partner.

In addition, we have constructed a variable called *pioneer*, which means that the partnership was contracted within the first 12 months of the law coming into force.

For the analysis of the data, we have used Kaplan–Meier plots and proportional hazards regression (Cox–regression) models. All the variables are fixed at what they were at the start of the registered partnership. Time is measured from entering into the partnership until divorce or censoring. Censoring occurs if one of the partners dies, if the couple moves abroad or else at January 1st 2002. The analysis was conducted using the S-PLUS software package.

5. Registered partnership trends in Norway

Norway had more new partnerships shortly after the law was passed than in the subsequent seven years. The same pattern was seen in Denmark and Sweden. In recent years, there has been a slight increase in the number of partnerships contracted (Figure 1). Compared to the total number of inhabitants, registered partnerships seem to be slightly more widespread in Denmark than in Norway and far less than in the Netherlands (Festy, 2001; Waaldijk, 2001; Digoix et al., 2004).



Source: Population Statistics. Unpublished figures.

Figure 1. Registered partnerships contracted in Norway, 1993–2003.

The number of lesbian partners has increased evenly every year (Figure 1). The high number of male couples in the year the law came into force was followed by a drop the first 2 years but has later increased. This means that the proportion of lesbian couples has increased from 27% to 43% in 2003. The same development in the sex ratios has been observed in Denmark and Sweden.

The couples we have defined as pioneers, i.e. those who entered into partnerships within the first 12 months, deviate in different ways from the subsequent partners (Table 1). With a mean age of 39.8 years, compared to 37.1 years of age for the other partners, the pioneers were significantly older. It is reasonable to assume that many of the pioneers had waited for a long time to legalise their relationship, which may have resulted in an older and also accumulated group. The average age difference between the youngest and the oldest partner is 7.0 years, with no significant difference between the pioneer partners and those who entered into partnerships later.

In six out of ten partnerships entered into in the first year, one or both of the partners were settled in the capital. This dominance has, however, weakened since then (Table 1). The proportion of partners living in the other large cities and their surroundings is, however, disproportionately large.

In 19% of the partnerships, one or both partners had previously been married. In partnerships between one unmarried and one previously married person, the previously married person is the older of the two in seven out of ten cases. To be previously married was somewhat more common among the pioneers than in the subsequent cohorts. Information on previous civil status

Table 1. Pioneers compared with subsequent partnerships

Characteristics at the time of entering into the union	Pioneers (August 1993–July 1994)	Partnerships contracted August 1994–December 2001	All
Average age in years	39.8	37.1	37.6
Average age difference in the partnerships in years	6.5	7.1	7.0
Percentage one or both living in the capital	60	54	55
Percentage one or both previously married	22	18	19
Percentage lesbian couples	27	41	38
Percentage cross-national partnerships	28	33	32

is, however, missing for a fairly large share of the partners, most of them foreigners.

Nearly one third of the registered partnerships are between a Norwegian and a person with another citizenship. For marriages, with the exception of those where both were foreigners, nearly one fifth were cross-national unions during the same period. The proportion of cross national partnerships has been relatively stable from year to year. The foreign partners are mostly from the USA, Sweden and Thailand. These three countries are responsible for about a quarter of the cross-national partnerships.

Compared to the cross-national partnerships, the Norwegian–Norwegian couples are older and the age difference between the partners is smaller (Table 2). Most remarkable is the difference in the proportion of lesbian couples, 47% in the Norwegian–Norwegian partnerships and 21% in the cross-national partnerships.

The Norwegian press has from time to time given the impression that there is a baby boom among lesbian and gay couples. This assertion is not confirmed by our data. Until the end of 2001, only 24 persons (20 women and 4 men) have had ‘registered partner’ as their civil status when they became biological parents. This amounts to 0.9% of all who had entered into a partnership.

Although the number of those who have become parents while living in a registered partnership is small, many more of the partners had children born before they entered into a partnership. In 8% of the registered partnerships, one or both partners were parents at the start of the union. However, the proportion who live with children is smaller. In some cases, the children are

Table 2. Norwegian–Norwegian couples compared with cross-national couples

Characteristics at the time of entering into the union	Norwegian–Norwegian couples	Cross-national couples
Average age in years	39.1	34.7
Average age difference in the partnerships in years	5.9	9.2
Percentage one or both living in the capital	53	59*
Percentage lesbian couples	47	21

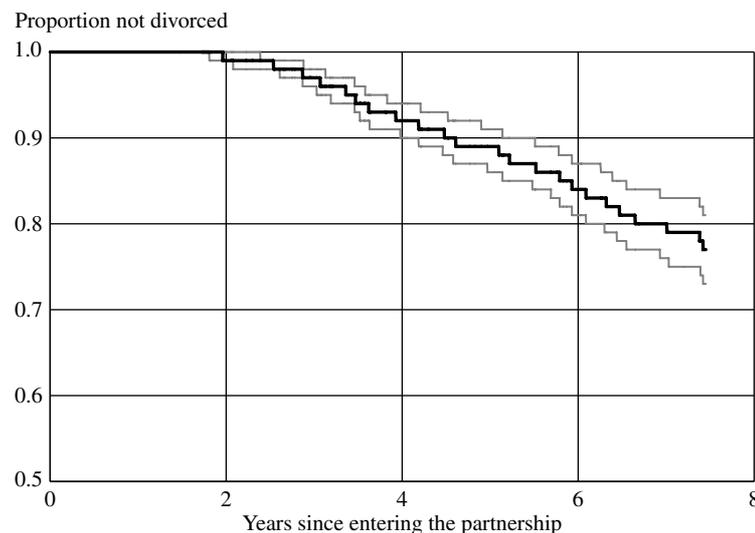
*13% unknown.

grown up, in other cases they live with the other parent. In 2003, a total of 76 children (0–17 years) were living in partnership families.

6. The divorce risk in registered partnerships

6.1. UNIVARIATE ANALYSIS

Until now, we have looked at the characteristics of those who have chosen to enter into a registered partnership. In the remainder of the paper we use Cox regression to estimate what these characteristics might mean to the risk of divorce. As in marriages, divorces in registered partnerships rarely occur within the first two years after entering into partnership (Figure 2). Those



¹The thin, light grey lines represent a 95% confidence interval.

Figure 2. Probability that the registered partnership still lasts by duration.

who decide to divorce so quickly will normally have moved away from each other at the latest one year after the union was entered into. From the second year, the amount of divorces steadily increases. Many of the couples have most probably been living together for a long time before they entered into a registered partnership, but we have no way of knowing the total duration of the relationship.

The probability that the partnership has ended in a divorce is estimated to be 8% after 4 years and 16% after 6 years. There is no sign of a typical year of crisis.

There were large variations in divorce risks between the different groups of partners. For one thing, it seemed that the pioneer couples, those who entered into partnerships within the first 12 months of the law coming into force, had a lower probability of divorce than couples from later years. High age at the time of entering into a partnership, in this analysis measured by the couple's average age, also gave more stable relationships compared to those with a lower average age.

To explore the effect of citizenship at the start of the partnership, we looked at three different groups. The first group consisted of partnerships between two Norwegians or between a Norwegian and a Nordic citizen, the second group was composed of partnerships between a Norwegian and a citizen from Europe or North America⁵, and the third group contained partnerships between a Norwegian and a citizen of a third world country. The partnerships in the first group were clearly more stable than in the two non-Nordic groups. From Figure 3, it could be construed that there also was

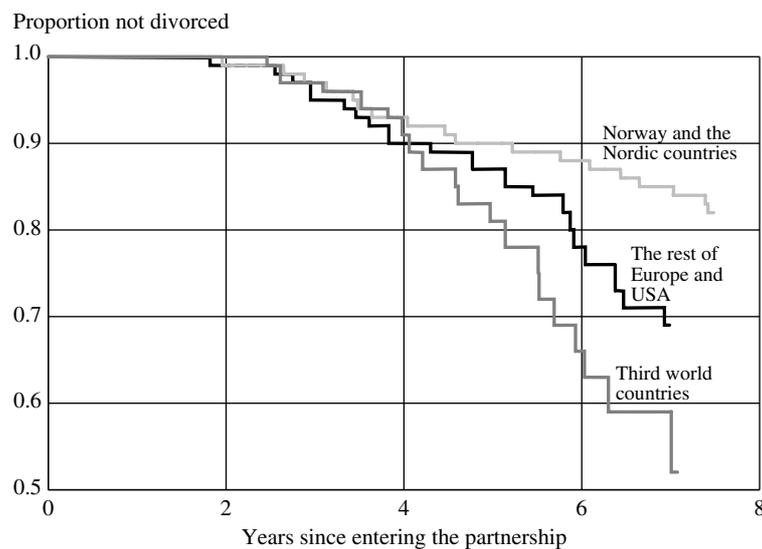


Figure 3. Probability that the registered partnership still lasts by duration and citizenship.

a difference between the two non Nordic-groups, but this difference did not turn out to be significant in our analysis.

The difference between the groups only becomes clear after the partnership has lasted four years. After such a long time, partners with foreign citizenship will normally be guaranteed residency in Norway, even if they divorce. As with marriages, it could be questioned whether such cross-national partnerships give room for pro forma partnerships, i.e. partnerships contracted to ensure the other party residency in Norway. Our analysis gives no evidence of this. If that was the case, we would have expected a very clear increase in the number of divorces just after four years, but there is no such sign (Figure 3).

Gay and lesbian relationships are often described as quite different in nature. For this reason, we decided to look at how the divorce risk depended on the sex of the couple. As already discussed, there were very few divorces during the first years, and the divorce risk was almost the same for female and male partnerships. However, after 3 years, there was an increasing difference (Figure 4). Six years after a partnership was entered into, the probability of divorce among the lesbian couples was estimated to be about 21%, in contrast to the 13% among gay couples.

A comparison between partnerships from the capital and partnership couples from other parts of the country showed no significant difference.⁶ However, the groups were too small to analyse this phenomenon properly.

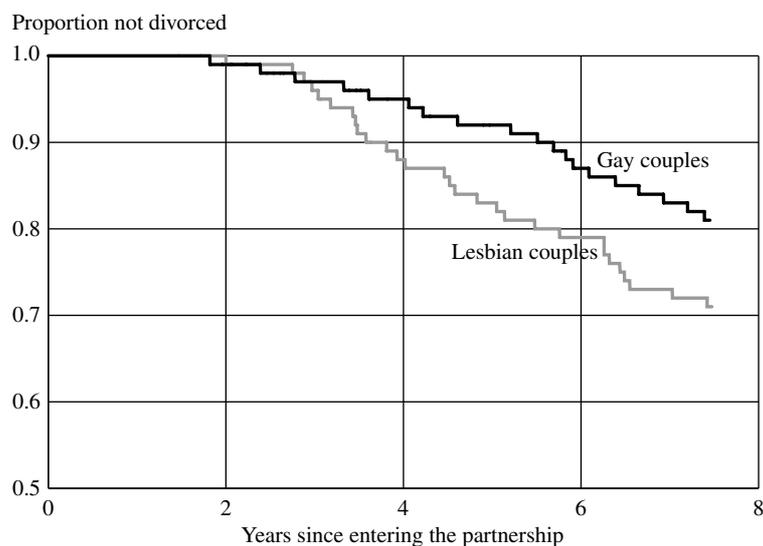


Figure 4. Probability that the registered partnership still lasts by duration and sex of the couple.

The age difference between the youngest and oldest partner showed no significant influence on the divorce risk.

6.2. MULTIVARIATE ANALYSIS

Finally, we wanted to see if the effect of the different variables changed when we included all of them in the same model. We have carried out two analyses. The first analysis contains all partnerships registered between 1993 and 2001. Male couples where both partners were Nordic citizens at the start of the partnership are used as a reference group (Table 3). The other is an analysis where only the couples consisting of two Norwegian citizens at the time of the union formation are included (Table 4). In this analysis, the reference group is a male couple.

In our first analysis, of all partnerships, we found that controlled for other variables: average age, sex, citizenship and average age difference significantly influenced the divorce risk (Table 3).⁷ We found that the lesbian partners' risk was estimated to be 1.58 times the risk of the gay partners.

The difference between gay and lesbian partners is even higher among the Norwegian–Norwegian partners (Table 4). The lesbian partners' risk of divorce was estimated to be 2.17 times the risk of the gay partners in the Norwegian–Norwegian case. Here we find no significant effect of average age difference, but average age still seems to be important.

Table 3. Relative risk of divorce. All partnerships included in the analysis

Variable	Effect	95% confidence interval	P-value
Average age (on 10 years scale)	0.36	(0.26–0.49)	< 0.0001
Women	1.58	(1.28–1.94)	< 0.0001
Europe and USA	1.22	(0.93–1.59)	0.16
Third world countries	1.24	(1.03–1.49)	0.03
Unknown country	1.03	(0.86–1.24)	0.72
Average age difference (on 10 years scale)	1.04	(1.01–1.08)	0.004
Non-significant variables*:			
Not from the capital	0.99	(0.82–1.20)	0.93
Municipality unknown	0.36	(0.0–35.5)	0.66
Non-pioneers	1.02	(0.79–1.20)	0.83
Earlier married	1.27	(0.99–1.63)	0.06
Unknown/Other	1.06	(0.88–1.28)	0.53
Young children	1.13	(0.83–1.55)	0.45
Old children	1.14	(0.87–1.49)	0.33
Unknown	0.47	(0.32–0.68)	< 0.001

*Each variable added to a model consisting of the significant variables.

Table 4. Relative risk of divorce. Norwegian–Norwegian partnerships

Variable	Effect	95% confidence interval	P-value
Average age (on 10 years scale)	0.33	(0.22–0.49)	< 0.0001
Women	2.17	(1.31–3.60)	0.003
Non-significant variables*:			
Not from the capital	1.18	(0.52–1.40)	0.52
Non-pioneers	0.89	(0.96–1.08)	0.70
Average age difference (on 10 years scale)	1.02	(0.96–1.08)	0.50
Earlier married	1.75	(0.98–3.12)	0.06
Unknown/other	0.83	(0.11–6.05)	0.86
Young children	1.42	(0.64–3.13)	0.39
Old children	1.60	(0.54–4.72)	0.39

*Each variable added to a model consisting of the significant variables.

Among the Norwegian couples, there are almost 47% lesbian couples, whereas there are only 21% among the cross-national partnerships. The mean age difference of the Norwegian couples was only 6 years, compared to 9 years for the cross-national group. This might contribute to the fact that average age difference is not a significant variable in the second analysis.

Disproportionately many male couples and a high average age seem to have been decisive factors of the pioneer couples' lower rate of divorce. Controlling for these factors, we no longer find an independent, significant effect of being a pioneer.

In both cases, with and without the international partnerships, we tried to include earlier marriage history as an explanatory variable. For both types of analyses, there seemed to be an effect of being previously married, in the sense that it raised the probability of a divorce. However, the data is too limited to give significant results for this variable.

Finally, we have explored the effect of one or both partners having children when they entered into the partnership. However, the fact that the group of partners with children was small and the lack of information on children among the partners from other countries made it impossible to properly test the effect of this variable.

7. Summary and discussion

As a new family type and a new demographic event, the emergence of registered partnership fits neatly into the theories on individualisation and de-standardisation in family life (see for instance Corijn and Klijzing, 2001). Cultural changes and a decrease in normative controls of behaviour seem to

have given individuals greater freedom, but also a stronger obligation to independently decide how to organise their lives (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). In a parallel development, we have witnessed an increasing separation between reproduction and sexuality. Thus, the disparity between same-sex and opposite-sex relationships is diminished (Giddens, 1992). Some people may find it ironic that registered partnerships emerge in an era where marriage is losing ground. But it may also be seen as a logical consequence, as the deviant and discriminated group, the homosexuals, were only given the privilege to marry when marriage as a social institution had lost much of its importance in society (Moxnes, 1993).

A decade after the Norwegian law on registered partnerships was passed, the figures for 2003 showed 27 male and 21 female partnerships contracted per million inhabitants. This is less than one per cent of all marriages and registered partnerships contracted that year. The Norwegian figures are small compared to most other countries that have legalised same-sex marriages. An overview of homosexual practice in Western Europe shows, however, little difference between countries (Festy, 2001). This may indicate that the main reasons for the differences rather are to be found in external circumstances, such as less openness, or a variation in privileges and rights for married versus cohabiting couples.

In the last decade, many laws and regulations have been changed in order to treat married and cohabiting people more equally. Although same-sex cohabitants in many situations will be treated equally with married people and those living in a registered partnership, the equalisation has generally not gone so far as for opposite-sex cohabitants having children together. That means, that the pluses and minuses in being a registered partner rather than a mere cohabitant are more relevant than for many heterosexual couples choosing between cohabitation and marriage. If they enter into a registered partnership, some of their welfare benefits will be reduced, for instance, because they are regarded as a couple rather than two separate persons. In other circumstances, they may benefit from living in a registered partnership. Which alternative is most advantageous will depend on the situation at any given time and the degree of risk the person is willing to take. Altogether, a registered partnership may often emerge as a safer alternative in many ways.

We found that in about one fifth of the partnerships, one or both of the partners have previously been married. Our data do not, however, establish whether the change occurred because sexual identity had been suppressed or whether it changed.

Not unexpectedly, our study showed that cross-national unions are very common; nearly one third of the registered partnerships comprised a Norwegian and a foreigner. For most of these Norwegian-foreigner couples, Norway must have been the only alternative of entering into their partnership since most foreigners who enter into partnerships with Norwegians come

from countries where same-sex marriages have not been legalised. As with marriages, it could be questioned whether such cross-national partnerships give room for pro forma partnerships. If we look at the divorce patterns after 4 years, which for foreigners is the minimum duration of marriage to be assured legal residency in the country after a divorce, we do not see any short term change around 4 years.

The admission to medically assisted insemination, joint adoption and the well-being of children in same-sex marriages and registered partnerships are topics that have been highly debated in Norway, as in many other countries. We found that many of those entering into registered partnerships were parents, 24% and 13% of the women and the men, respectively. However, much lower proportions were living with children in the household. In 2003, about 0.85 per 10,000 of children under age 18 lived with mothers or fathers who were registered partners. Our estimations also indicate that few of these children have been born to mothers or fathers with 'registered partner' as their present civil status. Less than one per cent of the partners have become parents while living in a registered partnership. The baby boom among gays and lesbians that has sometimes been depicted in the media thus seems to be closer to a myth than fact.⁸

Taking into account that most of the partnerships have so far had a relatively short duration, it seems reasonable to assume that a larger share of the partners will become parents in the future. In a survey of the living conditions of gays and lesbians, about one third of the young childless said that they wanted children (Hegna et al., 1999). The proportion wanting to become parents, however, seems to be considerably smaller than in the population in general (Noack and Østby, 1996). Analyses of fertility intentions have also shown that these measures are far from accurate estimates of subsequent fertility, at least at the individual level (Noack and Østby, 2002).

When examining the registered partnerships entered into in Norway from 1993 to 2001 we estimated the probability of divorce to be 16% after six years. However, the divorce pattern varies greatly between subgroups.

We found that lesbian partnerships had a 2.17 times higher risk of ending in divorce than gay partnerships. Comparisons between gay and lesbian relationships have been made and discussed in several studies. The idea that same-sex couples become marriage-like, in the sense that one of the partners takes on the traditional female role while the other partner takes on the male role, seems to be more or less outdated (Patterson, 2000). There seems to be general agreement that there are important differences between lesbian and gay couples but there is still a dispute about what these differences are. Earlier research gives no clear answer to the question of which are the most stable, the gay or the lesbian relationships.

While many previous studies on gays and lesbians are based on small and not very representative samples, our project avoids this problem since it

includes the whole population of registered partners, and not just a sample. When we conclude that gay partners stick together more than lesbian partners, we are therefore on quite safe ground. However, these findings will not necessarily hold true for lesbian and gay relationships in general. To be able to comment on that we would need to know more about those who choose to enter into a registered partnership, and those who choose to cohabit, or not to cohabit at all.

Another high risk group we found in our study was the group of partnerships between a Norwegian and a non-Nordic person. The estimated divorce risk was 1.2 times higher than in partnerships between two Norwegians or between one Norwegian and one from another Nordic country. Cultural differences are not necessarily the only reason why the non-Nordic partnerships end in divorce more often. The fact that one of the partners might not have a residence permit in Norway could mean that these couples have less time and opportunity to test out their relationship before they enter into the partnership compared to couples where both partners are already living in the country. As long as the possibility of entering into a registered partnership is limited to a small number of countries, most foreign partners will be compelled to have residence in Norway, at least as long as they want to live in a country where their partnership is valid as a way of living together. Unlike married couples in the same situation, they do not have the same freedom to consider where to settle.

We also found that high age difference was another risk factor for divorce. Entering into a registered partnership at a young age also had a negative effect. Such effects are also well known in opposite-sex divorce studies.

Those who choose to enter into a registered partnership are not necessarily representative of all couples in same-sex relationships. The behaviour of partners in a registered partnership is not necessarily similar to the behaviour of gays and lesbians living in a consensual union or those who are only lovers.

We have concluded that there are some quite considerable differences in the risk of divorce between different groups of partners. To do further analyses on what causes these differences, one would need other types of data in addition to what the registers can tell us. A demographic analysis can, however, be a starting point for formulating new hypotheses and carrying out more detailed analyses.

The maximal duration of time for the partnerships in our study is eight and a half years. It is not obvious whether the partners will behave in the same way that we have described, in the years to come. From studies on marriages, we know that the risk of divorce strongly decreases with time, and as the couple becomes older.

In the analysis, we have used the term 'pioneer couples' to refer to the partnership couples who entered into their registered partnership within the

first 12 months of the law coming into force. In a sense, it could be claimed that we have only been dealing with pioneer couples, i.e. partnerships entered into in the early days of the law. Many factors could change as more people live in registered partnerships.

In a follow-up study, we compare the experiences with registered partnerships both in Norway and Sweden (Andersson et al., 2004). So far, the similarities seem to be greater than the differences.

Notes

¹ Registered partnerships became possible in Denmark in 1989, followed by Norway (1993), Sweden (1995), Iceland (1996) and Finland (2002). The Netherlands introduced registered partnerships in 1998 and same-sex marriages in 2001. Belgium legalized same sex marriages in 2003.

² An updated overview is provided by Waaldijk (2003). The web site of the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) also is considered a reliable source for information (<http://www.ilga.org/index.asp>).

³ In Norway, only stepchild adoption is allowed for couples living in registered partnerships. This means the right to adopt a partner's child. Registered partners are not entitled to adopt jointly as married couples are. Since 2003, registered couples in Sweden have been entitled to adopt jointly. The traditional "donor" countries seem, however, to be restrictive to let same sex couples adopt children from their country.

⁴ As the main rule, partners have to register as being legally separated for a minimum period of one year before being granted a divorce.

⁵ The actual countries are the non-Nordic countries of Europe, USA, Canada and Australia.

⁶ Couples where at least one of the partners was living in the capital at the time of entering into the partnership.

⁷ Controlled variables were average age, average age difference, citizenship, earlier marriages, municipality and parenthood at the start of the partnership.

⁸ We do not, however, have any information on parenting in lesbian and gay cohabitations. Assuming that the proportion of children born in cohabitation is approximately the same as for heterosexuals, the number of children born in lesbian or gay unions (partnerships or cohabitations) may be more than doubled, but a figure still far from what we associate with the term "baby boom".

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