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# THE DEMOGRAPHICS OF SAME-SEX MARRIAGES IN NORWAY AND SWEDEN\*

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*The present study investigates the demographics of same-sex marriages—that is, registered partnerships—in Norway and Sweden. We give an overview of the demographic characteristics of the spouses of these partnerships, study patterns of their divorce risks, and compare the dynamics of same-sex couples with those of heterosexual marriages. We use longitudinal information from the population registers of the two countries that cover all persons in partnerships. Our demographic analyses include information on characteristics such as age, sex, geographic background, experience of previous opposite-sex marriage, parenthood, and educational attainment of the partners involved. The results show that in many respects, the distributions of married populations on these characteristics differ by the sex composition of the couples. Patterns in divorce risks are rather similar in same-sex and opposite-sex marriages, but divorce-risk levels are considerably higher in same-sex marriages. The divorce risk for female partnerships is double that for male partnerships.*

**T**he issue of granting legal recognition to same-sex couples is high on the political agenda in many countries. Where this family type is not legally recognized, the debate is intensifying. In many European states, the recognition of same-sex couples is already well established, and the discussion more often concerns various amendments to existing rules. The first country to introduce legal recognition of same-sex unions was Denmark in 1989, and the term *registered partnership* was invented for that purpose. In all Nordic countries today, same-sex couples have the legal right to registered partnership, a civil status that, in practice, does not deviate much from the concept of marriage. Norway was the second country to introduce this family type in 1993, followed by Sweden in 1995. In 2001, the Netherlands became the first country in the world to amend its marriage act to grant same-sex couples a marriage status equal to that of opposite-sex couples. Belgium followed in 2003, and Spain and Canada approved same-sex marriage in 2005. By that time, several other countries in Europe, like France and Germany, had given legal recognition to same-sex unions in one form or another or were about to do so. In some countries, such as the United States, same-sex couples have been given benefits in some states.

In terms of innovation in family-demographic behavior, the Scandinavian countries are often singled out as forerunners, with other countries tending to follow suit. Whether this statement is generally true is debatable, but it certainly seems to be true in the case of same-sex partnerships. Consequently, it is worthwhile to examine the Nordic experience of same-sex family life. Several studies have examined various political and legal aspects of the introduction of same-sex partnerships in Europe.<sup>1</sup> Knowledge about the demographic behavior related

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1. For a discussion on the passage of partnership legislation in Denmark, see Søland (1998). Nielsen (1990) provided further evidence of legal aspects of the new family type. Noack (2000) discussed the introduction of

to this new family type, however, is still sparse. The purpose of our study is to gain insights into the demographics of same-sex marriages.

We provide an overview of the demographic characteristics and patterns in divorce risks of couples in registered partnerships in Norway and Sweden. The analysis is based on information from Norwegian and Swedish population registers. We have linked information on various demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the same individuals from different administrative registers. The study is an extension of previous work based on Norwegian data in which we found, for example, that the majority of same-sex partnerships were male and that the fraction of cross-national partnerships was fairly high (Noack 2000); we also found that lesbian couples had a considerably higher divorce risk than male couples (Noack, Fekjær, and Seierstad 2002; Noack, Seierstad, and Weedon-Fekjær 2005). In the present study, we provide an elaborate comparison of these data from Norway with similar data on partnerships in neighboring Sweden. In addition, we incorporate data on divorce risks of heterosexual married couples. This allows us to study how patterns and levels in divorce risks differ between same-sex and opposite-sex married couples and between gay and lesbian same-sex marriages. To date, divorce-risk patterns have not been compared this thoroughly because the legalization of same-sex partnerships is a recent development, and the time available for observation has been brief in most settings. In our study, we compare information on the demographic behavior of well-defined total populations of married same-sex couples with that of a comparably defined population of opposite-sex couples. This comparison provides new insights into the family dynamics of same-sex couples and of couples in general.

### **FAMILY DYNAMICS OF GAYS AND LESBIANS: PREVIOUS RESEARCH**

During the past four decades, family patterns in many countries have become increasingly diverse. Although same-sex marriages are rare and are far from being accepted in most countries, their legalization neatly fits this development. The increasing diversity is often regarded as part of a larger cultural change, implying an increase in freedom as well as an obligation for individuals to decide how to organize their lives in an individualized society (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995). Another factor that may have paved the way for same-sex marriages is the increasing separation of reproduction and sexuality in favor of a more "plastic sexuality," in Giddens's (1992) terminology. Sexuality has naturally always been separated from reproduction in homosexual relations, and this separation is becoming increasingly dominant in heterosexual relationships. Thus, the disparity between homosexual and heterosexual relationships is diminishing. The increasing acceptance and legal legitimacy of homosexuality may be the most important change regarding sexuality in the past two to three decades, or as Giddens (1992:33) expressed it, ". . . sexual diversity, although still regarded by many hostile groups as perversion, has moved out of Freud's case-history notebooks into the everyday social world." Moxnes (1993), a Norwegian sociologist, has argued that same-sex marriages have become legalized not so much because homosexuality has become more accepted, but because marriage has become an increasingly empty institution that is no longer seen as a mandatory entrance to adult life, sexual life, and parenthood.

New patterns of family life call for new research topics, and recent years have witnessed an increase in research on lesbian and gay lifestyles and same-sex families. Although the literature on same-sex relationships is abundant, most of it does not allow for the deduction of any firm demographic hypotheses. Many studies are based on small samples

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registered partnerships in Norway, and Agell (1998) referred to the debate about the introduction of partnerships in Sweden. Martin and Théry (2001) discussed the introduction of another related family form in France, *Pacte de solidarité civile* (PACS), which is open for same-sex and opposite-sex couples alike. For an overview of the way in which same-sex marriage was paved in the Netherlands, see Waaldijk (2001).

and have provided interesting but often anecdotal information. Large-scale quantitative studies on same-sex relationships are rare, and many studies face serious problems related to sampling or representativeness. In recent years, demographers have increasingly recognized the need to deal with these problems. As a result, more-solid demographic studies have begun to appear.

### General Problems in Studying Gays and Lesbians

The lack of representative samples is the most fundamental problem in quantitative studies on gays and lesbians, which commonly rely on self-recruited samples from an unknown population. Respondents are, for example, recruited by snowball methods; from the readers of particular magazines; from members of organizations for gays and lesbians; or, more recently, from persons who are willing to respond to Internet questionnaires. Critics in the field (e.g., Patterson 2000) have also pointed out that much of the research on the family life of gays and lesbians is based on white, well-educated, middle-class Americans.

In addition to these sampling problems, the question of how to identify homosexuals has increasingly become the focus of debate. Should respondents be asked to identify themselves, or is it better to measure sexual practice instead, that is, to ask them about the number of lifetime same-sex partners, any such partner within a certain period, the sex of the majority of partners, and so on (Black et al. 2000)? According to large-scale population studies conducted in the United States, the proportion of men who had a male sex partner in the previous year is about 1%–3%, compared with 4%–9% who had at least one male partner during the life span (Lauman et al. 1994). The corresponding proportions of women who had a partner of the same sex are somewhat lower, well over 1% and about 4%, respectively. A different pattern has been reported in Norway, where the proportion of respondents aged 19–26 with a same-sex experience during the past 12 months, as well as during the life span, was slightly higher for women than for men (Pedersen and Kristiansen 2003:11).<sup>2</sup>

The view that individuals can be categorized as gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and heterosexuals has also met increasing criticism with the recognition that sexual identities may shift over time (Patterson 2000). So far, little research has documented such contentions. A recently published study of younger Norwegians, however, found some evidence of a confluent sexual culture and less attachment to fixed identity structures, more so among women than men (Pedersen and Kristiansen 2003).

Painting a statistical portrait of any gay and lesbian population by using traditional population surveys has also been considered difficult because of the limited size of the target groups. In addition, the underlying assumption of most demographic surveys is that the respondents are heterosexual, and respondents often are given no opportunity to report other types of family behavior (Hoem et al. 2000:87). The sensitive character of same-sex relations has probably also made it difficult to include it in questionnaires. Nevertheless, a number of existing data sources today allow for research on coresiding same-sex couples.

### Same-Sex Couples and Same-Sex Coresidence

Black et al. (2000) provided a critical review and comparison of three sources available for systematic studies of gay and lesbian populations in the United States: the General Social Survey, the National Health and Social Life Survey, and the 1990 U.S. census. Although documenting a number of measurement-error problems in the surveys and a considerable underreporting of same-sex couples in the census, they concluded that the data sets seem to allow for credible analyses of partnered gays and lesbians in the United States. Based on the census data, they

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2. These estimates for men and women are well below the frequently cited 10% benchmark of Kinsey's famous report. This 10% estimate, however, seems to be a misinterpretation of Kinsey's report (Lauman et al. 1994). Kinsey's study was based on information about lifetime homosexual activity and homosexual desire, resulting in different levels of estimates. Kinsey's sampling procedure also had weaknesses.

compared partnered gays and lesbians with the general population and found that lesbians and gays have attained a higher educational level than married and nonmarried heterosexual partnered women and men. Partnered gays, however, earn less than men living in opposite-sex marriages, whereas partnered lesbians earn more than married women. These results stem from comparisons between persons within similar age and educational categories and conform to a related study by Black et al. (2003) that also included nonpartnered individuals.<sup>3</sup> For further research on the economic lives of lesbians and gay men, see Badgett (1997, 2001).

In addition, the 1990 U.S. census data indicate that 5% of male couples and nearly 22% of female couples have children living in the household (Black et al. 2000: table 6). More recent data from the 2000 census give higher fractions of same-sex couples with children: 22% and 33%, respectively (Simmons and O'Connell 2003). Although the media frequently focus on adoption and artificial insemination for lesbians and gays, Black et al. (2000) concluded that most of the children of partnered gays and lesbians recorded in the census probably were born while the parents lived in a previous opposite-sex marriage: 20% of partnered gays and 30% of partnered lesbians were previously married. The data also contain information on patterns of geographical settlement. Gay men seem to be concentrated in a selected number of urban areas, usually large cities, whereas lesbians are less concentrated and more often live in smaller metropolitan areas.

Conventional demographic data have also been used to study the matching behavior of same-sex couples. Based on the 1990 U.S. census, Jepsen and Jepsen (2002) found positive assortative mating in four types of couples: married and cohabiting opposite-sex couples and male and female same-sex couples. Same-sex couples were more alike in their labor-market characteristics than were opposite-sex couples, while the opposite was the case for various non-labor-market traits.

Although census data allow for the study of coresiding same-sex couples, these data are problematic because many respondents are reluctant to declare that they live with a same-sex partner, and same-sex coresidential individuals are not necessarily synonymous with gay and lesbian couples<sup>4</sup> (Badgett and Rogers 2003; Phua and Kaufman 1999). Similar problems with ambiguity in the data can arise in studies of heterosexual cohabitation (Baughman, Dickert-Conlin, and Houser 2002). In the Nordic countries, conventional censuses are no longer conducted, and census-type data are gathered instead from population registers. The last conventional Norwegian census, conducted in 2001, indicated that same-sex coresidential unions constituted around 0.3% of all coresiding couples in Norway (authors' own calculations). For the United States, the 2000 census indicated that the corresponding figure was around 1% (Simmons and O'Connell 2003: table 1). For Sweden, no such information is available because no census is carried out, and its population registers do not allow for the detection of all cohabitation.

### Family Dynamics in Same-Sex Marriages Versus Opposite-Sex Marriages

The main purpose of our study is to provide information on the family dynamics in same-sex marriages as it can be measured by partnership-dissolution risks. In this respect, no large body of previous research is available for us to draw on. Patterson's (2000) overview

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3. A related study that used a sample of young, highly educated workers in the Netherlands, however, showed only negligible effects of sexual orientation on earnings (Plug and Berkhout 2004).

4. For example, the German Mikrozensus, a recent large-scale data source that includes information on both same-sex and opposite-sex couples, includes information on coresidence and asks respondents to specify whether they consider themselves to be living in a "Gleichgeschlechtliche Lebensgemeinschaft" (same-sex union) or any other type of family. There are fewer self-identified same-sex couples than the total of coresiding same-sex couples. Eggen (2002) suggested that problems connected with self-identification result in underreporting and that any "true" level of same-sex cohabitation in Germany would lie somewhere between the numbers because of the two possible definitions. Similar observations have been made for U.S. census data. Researchers have noted that the willingness to identify oneself as a same-sex unmarried partner was considerably higher in the 2000 census than in the 1990 census (cf. Badgett and Rogers 2003).

of recent research on family relationships of gays and lesbians provides some information on the stability of gay and lesbian relationships. The study of relationship duration typically requires a panel design or highly reliable retrospective data. So far, such data have been hard to identify for an appropriate study of couple dynamics of gays and lesbians.<sup>5</sup> Patterson concluded, however, that it seems reasonable to believe that some of the problems in homosexual relationships have the same origins as problems experienced by opposite-sex couples; Kurdek's (2004) study of the relationship functioning of a sample of gay and lesbian cohabiting couples in the United States supports this assumption.

The literature on divorce of heterosexual married couples, by contrast, is abundant. Considering the impact of various demographic variables, studies of such couples indicate that pairing at a young age, a low socioeconomic status, low education, a considerable age difference between the spouses, and sociocultural differences are important risk factors for divorce (Clarke and Berrington 1999; Sayer and Bianchi 2000). For some of these factors, however, such as a high risk for spouses with little formal education and for those with manual-worker occupations, the elevated divorce risk might decrease with marriage duration (Jalovaara 2002). Recent findings on divorce risks in the Nordic countries suggest that some aspects of partner inequality in heterosexual marriages are related to marital stability. For example, in Finland and Sweden, divorce risks are lower when the husband earns more than the wife (Jalovaara 2003; Liu and Vikat 2004).

It is reasonable to expect conventional demographic determinants of divorce to be similar across different types of marriages. We may expect higher divorce risks in same-sex than in opposite-sex marriages if the former group feels less strongly affected by normative pressure to maintain a dysfunctional relationship. On the other hand, the symbolic meaning of partnership formation for a group that has just acquired the right to marry may be related to a higher commitment to this civil status and to lower divorce risks. We have little basis for hypotheses concerning differences in divorce risks between male and female couples. However, women in heterosexual marriages are often found to be more sensitive to marital problems (Amato and Rogers 1997) and to be more likely than men to initiate divorce (Brinig and Allen 2000; England, Sayer, and Allison 2005; Kalmijn and Poortman 2003). It is unclear whether such gender differences in behavior can be translated into the divorce risks in same-sex partnerships.

## REGISTERED PARTNERSHIPS: DEFINITIONS, DATA, AND METHODS

We study registered partnerships in Norway and Sweden, where registered partners have the same rights and duties as married heterosexual couples in relation to each other and society. Exceptions apply to the solemnization of entry into the new civil status and to rights to adopt children jointly and to receive medically assisted insemination.<sup>6</sup> The legal rights and duties connected to marriage are not as important in Scandinavia as in most other developed countries (for an overview of family law and the consequences of marriage in other European countries, see Hamilton and Perry 2002; for an overview of legal consequences of marriage, cohabitation, and registered partnership in European countries, see Waaldijk 2005). In the Nordic welfare state, social rights largely depend on individual characteristics independent of marital status. Economic motives for marriage in the United

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5. Kurdek (1992, 1995) provided a study of the stability of childless gay and lesbian couples in the United States. However, his work was based on such a small sample that it is difficult to make generalizations about the wider population of gays and lesbians.

6. Churches do not conduct ceremonies of partnership formation. The act of registration is performed by a notarius publicus in Norway and by a court or a private person with special authorization in Sweden. Medically assisted insemination is not available to women in registered partnerships in Norway but was introduced in Sweden in 2005. Since 2003, registered partners in Sweden have been allowed to adopt children jointly. This permission includes international adoption. In Norway, a legal provision is made for the adoption of the partner's child only.

States or continental Europe, such as joint health-insurance coverage or more-favorable taxation, are virtually nonexistent in the Nordic countries.

The legislation concerning registered partnerships is similar in all Nordic countries. Registered partnerships are not included in marriage acts but are subject to separate acts. Because they, by and large, hardly differ from the marriage acts, we use the terms *registered partnership* and *same-sex marriage* interchangeably. This terminology also corresponds to how this civil status is perceived in society at large. We use the term *divorce* to refer to partnership dissolution because the divorce procedures of the marriage act apply to registered partnerships as well. Divorce procedures in the two countries differ, however. In Norway, a one-year period of legal separation is required before a divorce can be granted. In Sweden, there is no such prerequisite, but a reconsideration period of six months is required if one of the partners objects to the divorce.

The data for our calculations on partnership dynamics are derived from the population-register systems of Norway and Sweden. They cover the populations of the two countries and their recordable vital events with great accuracy; each change in civil status is recorded. Each resident of the two countries has a unique personal identity code, which allows us to derive information about the same persons from other administrative registers maintained by the Statistical Central Bureaus of the two countries and to link married individuals as couples.<sup>7</sup> We derive longitudinal histories of the family dynamics of each person who has ever registered a partnership formation in either country.

Our data cover all persons who entered partnership in Norway in 1993–2001 and in Sweden in 1995–2002. Individuals who never lived in either of the two countries cannot be traced directly in the registers, and some partnerships that involve persons living abroad cannot be incorporated properly into our analysis.<sup>8</sup> Similar event histories can be collected for individuals who have entered a heterosexual marriage, and we are able to include such data for Sweden. This allows for an appropriate comparison of our populations of same-sex partnerships with that of an equally defined population of opposite-sex marriages: the populations are defined by their civil status, and there is no ambiguity in the categories we use. Our data on opposite-sex marriages cover all women who married in Sweden in 1993–1999.<sup>9</sup> In principle, the same kind of data on opposite-sex marriages should be accessible in Norway. Because the Norwegian data that were available to us have too much missing or incorrect information, however, for Norway, we present only simple comparisons between statistics on registered partnerships and opposite-sex marriages contracted during our observation period.

For registered partnerships and marriages, the date of divorce corresponds to the date the divorce was legalized. The legal differences in the timing of divorce in Norway and Sweden would have caused problems if we had estimated joint divorce models on the basis of the combined data of the two countries. However, we estimate separate models for Norway and Sweden and avoid problems in identifying the divorce-risk patterns of each country.

In the next section, we provide a statistical description of various demographic characteristics of individuals who have formed a partnership in Norway or Sweden. The characteristics were measured at the couple level at the time of partnership formation. These demographic characteristics, which include age, sex, geographical background, experience of previous opposite-sex marriage, parenthood, and educational attainment of the partners involved, are defined as follows.

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7. On special terms and conditions, files containing anonymized extracts of this kind of individual-level data can be made available to researchers. For more information on register data of the Nordic countries and access to such data, see Røed and Raaum (2003) and SCB (2003).

8. We exclude 100 same-sex couples in Sweden from our analysis because we have no information on one of the two partners.

9. The minor discrepancy between the observation period of marriages and that of registered partnerships is due to data availability.

The age composition of persons who registered a partnership is the mean age of the two partners at the time of registration. The distribution is provided by the categories “mean age 30 or less,” “mean age 31–40,” and “mean age 41 or older.” In addition, we show the distribution over various categories of age differences between the two partners involved.

For both countries, we describe the fraction of partnerships that involve at least one person living in the capital area at the time of partnership formation.<sup>10</sup> For Norway, this is the city of Oslo; for Sweden, we use the Greater Stockholm Metropolitan Area as our geographical demarcation. We further describe the geographical background of the partners by showing the distribution over various national origins. In Norway, national origin is measured by citizenship at the time of partnership formation, whereas in Sweden, it is measured by country of birth. Couples in which both partners are local residents are distinguished from couples in which at least one of the partners is from abroad. We report on couples in which at least one partner is from another Nordic country, another European country (including the Anglo-Saxon countries overseas), a non-European country, or from an unknown national origin. If both partners are of foreign origin and from different categories of countries, they are allocated to the most “distant” category of our country scale.

We further describe the partners by their previous experiences of registered heterosexual family life. We show the percentage of unions in which at least one of the two partners was previously heterosexually married and in which at least one of the two is a parent.<sup>11</sup> Note that the data on previous heterosexual family life cover only events that are registered in the local country; we have no information about immigrants’ possible previous marriages contracted abroad or about immigrants’ children who have never lived in Sweden or Norway.

Finally, we provide a description of the partners’ educational characteristics as recorded in the educational registers of the two countries. We report on the highest educational level attained at the time of partnership formation, as summarized at the couple level.<sup>12</sup>

When examining divorce patterns, we use the fixed characteristics described above as determinants of divorce. In addition, another covariate is added to account for whether a couple was among the pioneers of same-sex marriages who registered in the first 12 months that it was possible to register a partnership in the country. A relatively large number of partnerships were entered in the first year, and we suspect that these pioneers differ somewhat in their behavior from those who registered in subsequent years.

Our study is a longitudinal event-history analysis of divorce risks. We calculate the relative risks of divorce by the various categories of our variables. We follow each couple from the month of partnership formation to any registration of divorce, which is the event we study, or to censoring owing to the death of one of the partners, the emigration of both partners, or the end of the last year for which we have data, whichever comes first. Technically, we estimate proportional-hazards (intensity-regression) models of the divorce process. Such models are a standard tool for the analysis of time-dependent data like ours. In the Swedish analyses, we incorporate the basic time variable duration of partnership as a piecewise constant covariate. That is, this variable is treated as a grouped categorical vari-

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10. Most partners are likely to live together at the time of partnership formation, but need not necessarily be registered (yet) as living at the same address. In our data for Sweden, about half of the partners involved had been registered as living at the same address for a period of at least two years prior to partnership registration.

11. For Norway, our data on parenthood comprise both biological and adopted children; for Sweden, we use information only on biological parenthood. This difference in definition is of minor importance for our statistical analysis because the data contain only a few cases of adoptions. Also, our data refer to parenthood at the time of partnership registration. Some children were born to partners who were already registered, but there were too few cases to require the inclusion of this time-varying information in our statistical analyses.

12. The educational systems of Norway and Sweden are very similar. Their lowest educational level consists of nine years of mandatory primary education. The vast majority of students subsequently take two to three years of secondary education (gymnasium), which can consist of vocational schooling or education in preparation for higher education. Postsecondary education comprises specialized vocational educational lines and university education.

able similar to all other covariates of the model. For Norway, we estimate models that are based on a nonparametric time factor. These differences in modeling are due to the different software used: S-PLUS for Norway and RocaNova for the Swedish analyses. They have no impact on the relative risks that we present.

With our data on couples in different types of unions, we can compare the characteristics and patterns of behavior in male partnerships with those in female partnerships. Similarly, we can compare patterns of unions in Norway with those in Sweden, and patterns of same-sex partnerships with those of opposite-sex marriages.

## REGISTERED PARTNERS IN NORWAY AND SWEDEN

Our first observation is that the incidence of same-sex marriage in Norway and Sweden is not particularly impressive. Our data for Norway contain 1,293 partnerships contracted in 1993–2001.<sup>13</sup> During the same calendar period, 196,000 heterosexual marriages were entered, which suggests a ratio of around 7 new same-sex marriages to every 1,000 new opposite-sex marriages. For Sweden, our data comprise 1,526 partnerships entered during 1995–2002, which, in light of the corresponding 280,000 heterosexual marriages registered during the same calendar period, gives a ratio of 5 new partnerships to every 1,000 new opposite-sex marriages. The ratios of partnerships to marriages are thus considerably lower than the various estimates of fractions of homosexuals that we noted earlier. The incidence of partnership formation in the two countries also appears relatively low when compared with the levels of partnership formation in Denmark and the Netherlands (Digoix, Festy, and Waaldijk 2004; Eggen 2002:229; Noack et al. 2002: figure 1; Waaldijk 2001:463).

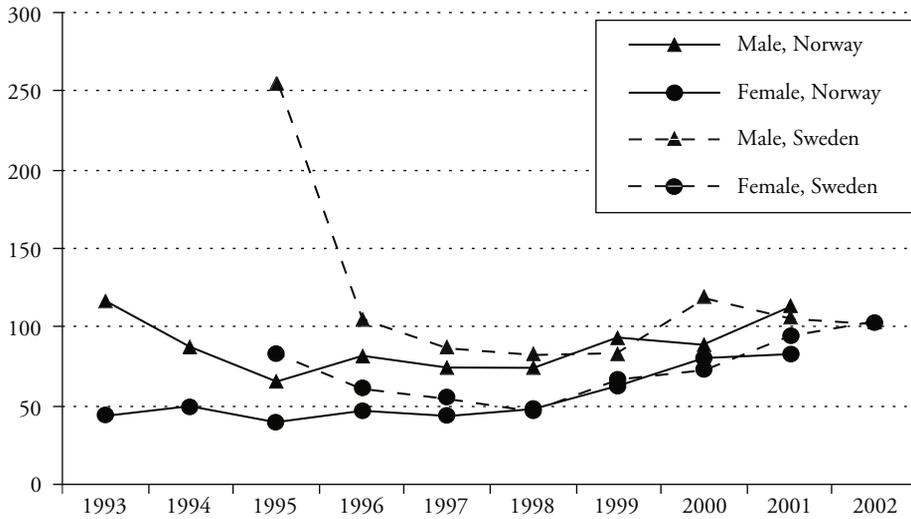
Trends in partnership formation by country and sex (see Figure 1) reveal that the number of new partnerships has been quite similar in the two countries. Both countries exhibited a particularly high level of partnership formation immediately after the legislation on registered partnerships came into force. In both countries, the vast majority of such early partnerships were formed by men.<sup>14</sup> For the whole study period, the number of partnerships of men (62% of all partnerships) was about 60% higher than for women. The initial spurt in partnership formation was followed by a few years of stable trends at a lower level and by a subsequent increase in registration during the most recent years. The recent increase was stronger for women than for men, causing the sex gap in partnership formation to narrow.

Table 1 gives a more detailed description of the composition of same-sex partnerships in the two countries and opposite-sex marriages in Sweden. The table shows that new same-sex partners, on average, were considerably older than corresponding opposite-sex spouses.<sup>15</sup> About one-third of all partnerships were contracted by partners aged 41 and older. In Sweden, half of all new male partnerships involved partners with a couple mean age above 40. By contrast, only 14% of heterosexual marriages belonged to this category. The relatively high ages also account for substantial age differences between same-sex partners, which are more common than in opposite-sex marriages. There is also a larger age gap for male partners than for female partners: around one-third of all male partnerships were formed by

13. The number of partnerships included in our study is slightly larger than that found in official statistics on partnership formation in Norway and Sweden because the official statistics report only events of individuals living in the country (at the time of partnership formation). Norwegian statistics report new *partnerships* if the oldest partner lived in Norway, while Swedish statistics are based entirely on individuals and thus report new *registered partners* living in Sweden. In our research, we have also been able to retrieve information on partners who subsequently moved to the country of partnership registration.

14. A closer inspection of the demographic characteristics of these pioneering partners reveals that, on average, they were a few years older than those in subsequently formed partnerships. In addition, they slightly more often stemmed from the capital region and less often involved an immigrant. These differences in characteristics are similar for Norway and Sweden, and those for Norway are also documented by Noack et al. (2005).

15. The mean age of newly married heterosexual spouses was close to 30 years, while that of all newly registered homosexual partners was close to 40 years.

**Figure 1. Partnerships Contracted in Norway and Sweden, 1993–2002**

*Notes:* The Norwegian partnership law became effective August 1, 1993. The Swedish law came into force January 1, 1995.

men with an age difference of 10 years or more, compared with a corresponding 13%–15% for female partnerships.

In both countries, same-sex couples tended to be concentrated in the metropolitan areas of Oslo and Stockholm. This tendency was stronger in Norway than in Sweden, and it was stronger for men than for women in both countries. In Norway, 62% of male partnerships and 45% of female partnerships involved a partner living in the city of Oslo. This compares to a mere 11% of the total Norwegian population living in Oslo. In Sweden, 47% of male new partnerships and 36% of female partnerships involved a partner living in the Stockholm region, compared with 21% of registered heterosexual marriages.

Same-sex partnerships also differ from opposite-sex marriages in that one of the partners is more often foreign-born. This is particularly the case for partnerships between men. In Norway, 43% of male partnerships included a non-Norwegian citizen. In Sweden, 45% of gay partnerships involved at least one foreign-born partner, compared with 22% of newly contracted heterosexual marriages that had at least one partner of foreign origin. The latter figure does not necessarily suggest that Swedes tend to marry foreigners; it corresponds rather well with the total share of foreign-born people living in Sweden at the ages when people marry.

It is not uncommon for partners in same-sex unions to have had a previous heterosexual family life. In our populations, one-fourth of lesbian partnerships included at least one partner who had been married to a man previously. Also, one-fourth of new heterosexual marriages involved at least one previously married spouse. Note that lesbians were somewhat older at partnership formation and had more time for previous marital life than did their heterosexual counterparts. The corresponding numbers for male partnerships are somewhat lower.

The number who had a previous heterosexual marriage corresponds well with the fraction of partnerships that involve a partner who is a parent. Female partners tend to be

**Table 1. Characteristics of Partnerships Contracted in Norway (1993–2001) and Sweden (1995–2002) and Marriages Entered in Sweden (1993–1999)**

Variable	Norway		Sweden		Opposite-Sex Marriage (%)
	Male (%)	Female (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)	
Mean Age of Couple					
< 31	21	21	12	24	52
31–40	46	49	38	47	34
41+	32	29	50	29	14
Age Difference					
< 3	24	38	24	38	50
3–5	23	28	21	24	27
6–9	18	21	22	22	14
10+	35	13	34	15	9
Region					
Oslo/Stockholm	62	45	47	36	21
Nationality/Origin					
Both native	57	81	55	70	78
One Nordic	5	6	11	11	5
One “European”	15	7	14	10	6
One non-European	19	3	21	9	7
One unknown	4	2	—	—	4
Previous Heterosexual Marriage					
At least one of the partners	15	26	20	27	27
Parent(s) at Registration					
At least one of the partners	13	24	19	34	58
Highest Educational Level					
Both postsecondary	19	34	20	32	17
One postsecondary	37	33	36	25	27
Both secondary	16	20	14	19	29
One secondary	22	11	20	16	19
Both primary/unknown	6	1	9	8	8
<i>N</i>	796	497	942	584	222,242

Source: Population-register data of Statistics Norway and Statistics Sweden, authors' own computations.

parents more often than male partners. Parenthood is also more common in partnerships in Sweden than in Norway. One-third of lesbian partnerships in Sweden included at least one parent. For newly contracted heterosexual marriages, the corresponding fraction is 58%. In Scandinavia, it is more common to marry after entry into parenthood than before having a first child, if at all.

When it comes to socioeconomic characteristics, same-sex partners have a relatively high educational attainment. In 56% to 67% of homosexual partnerships, one or both partners had a postsecondary education. The corresponding fraction for new heterosexual marriages

is 44% in Sweden. The difference would have been even larger if we had accounted for the facts that educational attainment typically is higher for persons of younger cohorts and that same-sex partners belong to somewhat older cohorts than do heterosexual couples.

### **PATTERNS OF DIVORCE IN SAME-SEX MARRIAGES**

In Table 2, we display the relative divorce risks of couples in registered partnerships for each sex and country separately. For comparison, we provide the corresponding risks for heterosexual marriages in Sweden. The divorce risks are calculated for each of the variables described earlier and indicate the effects of any level of a certain covariate relative to a baseline category of the same covariate. A risk of 1.20 indicates that the standardized risk of divorce is 20% higher for couples of the relevant category compared with couples belonging to the reference category of the same variable (cf. Hoem 1993).

Divorce patterns in partnerships and in marriages are remarkably similar in terms of the associations with the covariates. The results can be summarized as follows.<sup>16</sup> We find no systematic or important difference in divorce propensities between the pioneering partners of the first year of partnership registration and subsequently registered partners.<sup>17</sup> For both heterosexual spouses and registered partners, there is a clear age gradient in divorce risks: persons who contract a marriage or register a partnership at young ages have much higher divorce risks than persons who do so at more mature ages. In most cases, a relatively large age difference between the two partners is related to an elevated propensity for divorce. Divorce risks tend not to differ between couples of the capital region and couples registered elsewhere in the two countries. In contrast, the involvement of at least one foreign partner is negatively related to the stability of unions. The association of any previous heterosexual marriage with divorce risks is not as apparent for same-sex couples as it is for heterosexually married couples. The risk related to earlier parenthood seems to differ somewhat between male and female couples, but the patterns appear quite irregular. High educational attainment is related to lower divorce risks. For Sweden, there is a clear gradient in the association of divorce risks with partners' educational levels. For Norway, it is more irregular. Finally, the profile of divorce risks by time since marriage formation is practically the same for same-sex partnerships and opposite-sex marriages.

Next, we examine the extent to which the propensity to divorce differs by the sex of the partnership and whether it differs between registered partnerships and opposite-sex marriages by estimating common models for partnerships of women and men and, in the case of Sweden, for partnerships and marriages. A covariate for type of union gives information on divorce risks by the different family types. Tables 3 and 4 contain the relative risks for Norway and Sweden, respectively.

For Norway, an introductory model that includes only the type of union as a covariate (Model 1 of Table 3) indicates that divorce risks are 77% higher in lesbian partnerships than in those of gay men. To some extent, this could be the result of various demographic and socioeconomic differences in the composition of gay and lesbian partnerships. However, a model that controls for the effect of such covariates (Model 2 of Table 3) reveals that the excess risk of divorce for female partnerships actually is more than twice that for male unions.

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16. Not all variables are significant at a 5% level. For Sweden, only age, educational level, and duration of partnership have a significant effect. For Norway, only age is significant in all models. For heterosexual marriages, however, each effect is significant at the 5% level. Note that most of the risk patterns we observe are stable across the various subpopulations of married people. Regardless of significance, this stability in patterns reassures us that we can generally trust our findings. Still, we should not consider every deviation in divorce risk to be an established fact.

17. Separate modeling of divorce risks for pioneering and nonpioneering partnerships reveals that the structure of divorce risks is also very similar for these two categories of same-sex marriages.





**Table 3. Relative Risk of Divorce in Registered Partnerships in Norway, by Sex and Other Demographic Covariates**

Variable	Model 1		Model 2	
	Relative Risk	Confidence Interval	Relative Risk	Confidence Interval
Type of Union				
Male partnership	1		1	
Female partnership	1.77	1.23–2.54	2.32	1.51–3.54
Partnership Cohort				
First 12 months			0.84	0.55–1.28
Subsequent cohorts			1	
Mean Age of Couple				
<31			2.37	1.48–3.79
31–35			1	
36–40			0.64	0.35–1.18
41+			0.45	0.25–0.81
Age Difference				
< 3			1	
3–5			0.85	0.51–1.41
6–9			1.36	0.80–2.30
10+			1.43	0.83–2.46
Region				
Oslo			1	
Other			0.95	0.65–1.41
Citizenship				
Both Norwegian			1	
One Nordic			1.64	0.73–3.68
One “European”			2.20	1.24–3.90
One non-European			3.04	1.62–5.69
Unknown			3.56	1.58–8.04
Previous Heterosexual Marriage				
None			1	
At least one of partners			1.10	0.60–2.02
Parent(s) at Registration				
None			1.00	
At least one of partners			1.57	0.85–2.89
Highest Educational Level				
Both postsecondary			1	
One postsecondary			1.12	0.66–1.91
Both secondary			1.90	1.06–3.42
One secondary			0.93	0.49–1.77
Both primary/unknown			0.70	0.23–2.15
<i>N</i>	1,293		1,293	

*Note:* Relative risks are given with 95% confidence intervals. The baseline hazard of partnership duration is estimated by means of a nonparametric function.

*Source:* Population-register data of Statistics Norway, authors' own computations.

The same relation between the divorce risks of lesbian and gay partnerships is found for Sweden. In addition, we compare the divorce-risk levels of same-sex and opposite-sex marriages (Table 4). An introductory model without further explanatory variables (Model 1a) shows that the divorce risk for partnerships of men is 50% higher than the corresponding risk for heterosexual marriages and that the divorce risk for partnerships of women is about double (2.67) that for men (1.50). Again, such differences in risk levels could partly be the result of differences in the composition of the different groups under study. For example, same-sex partnerships relatively often involve a nonnative partner, and such characteristics are related to higher divorce risks. On the other hand, those in registered same-sex partnerships are often older than those in newly formed, opposite-sex marriages, and older age is related to a lower propensity for divorce. Controls for demographic characteristics (Model 2a of Table 4) do not alter the basic relation between divorce risks in different types of families.<sup>18</sup>

One basic difference between same-sex partnerships and opposite-sex marriages is that most often, the former family type does not produce children. Perhaps the relatively lower divorce risk of heterosexual marriages is, to some extent, related to parenting. To test this hypothesis, we estimate two additional models for childless couples only. We thus exclude all partnerships and marriages in which at least one of the partners was a parent at the time of registration. In addition, we censor each childless heterosexual marriage at the time of any first birth. A crude model without additional demographic covariates (Model 1b of Table 4) indicates that the excess risk of divorce of gay partnerships tends to disappear when the comparison is for childless couples. Nevertheless, controls for relevant covariates (Model 2b) leave patterns more or less as we first found them.

## CONCLUSIONS

In our study, we provided an overview of the demographic characteristics and patterns in the union dynamics of the first cohorts of registered partnerships in Norway and Sweden. The data on these pioneering cohorts of same-sex spouses provide information on a family type that is being introduced into a wider circle of countries. Because this still is a recent family type, we cannot say much about any long-term patterns or developments. However, our cross-country comparison allows us to draw at least some conclusions about the dynamics of registered partnerships in the years following partnership registration.

Male partners form the majority of registered partnerships in both Norway and Sweden. To some extent, this pattern may reflect a larger fraction of gays than lesbians in the total population. However, it could also reflect differences in the motivation for partnership registration between women and men or differences in the relative importance of some instrumental motives that appear to be relevant for partnership registration. Two such motives are more likely to be relevant for gay men than for lesbians. The first is the need for the legal protection of common assets in the face of the anticipated mortality of the partner. Male partners are older with larger age gaps between partners, and gay men are more often confronted with AIDS morbidity than are lesbian partners. Hence, the possible mortality of one partner may be a larger concern for these partnerships.<sup>19</sup>

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18. In the common model of registered partnerships and heterosexual marriages, we exclude variables for partnership cohort, previous marriage, and parenthood. The meaning of these variables differs between the populations, and the relative risks in Table 2 show that the effects on divorce differ as well.

19. This motive for partnership registration could also affect the structure of the divorce risks we estimate. However, an evaluation of mortality patterns in the different study populations reassures us that differences in mortality are unlikely to affect divorce risks. Mortality is somewhat higher in male partnerships than in female partnerships, but this excess mortality is mainly due to a few partnership registrations occurring shortly before the death of one of the partners. Evidently, a motive for such partnership registration would be to secure automatic heritage rights for the surviving partner.

**Table 4. Relative Risk of Divorce in Registered Partnerships and Marriages in Sweden, by Type of Union and Other Demographic Covariates**

	All Couples				Childless Couples			
	Model 1a		Model 2a		Model 1b		Model 2b	
	Relative Risk	Confidence Interval	Relative Risk	Confidence Interval	Relative Risk	Confidence Interval	Relative Risk	Confidence Interval
Type of Union								
Male partnership	1.50	1.26–1.77	1.35	1.13–1.59	1.04	0.85–1.24	1.49	1.22–1.79
Female partnership	2.67	2.22–3.19	3.03	2.51–3.61	1.96	1.57–2.41	3.00	2.40–3.69
Heterosexual marriage	1		1		1		1	
Mean Age of Couple								
< 31			1.15	1.13–1.17			1.31	1.27–1.36
31–35			1				1	
36–40			1.08	1.03–1.13			0.69	0.60–0.78
41+			1.03	0.99–1.08			0.43	0.37–0.49
Age Difference								
< 3			1				1	
3–5			1.11	1.07–1.14			1.10	1.05–1.16
6–9			1.23	1.19–1.28			1.16	1.07–1.25
10+			1.50	1.44–1.56			1.48	1.35–1.62
Region								
Stockholm			1				1	
Other			0.95	0.93–0.97			0.85	0.82–0.88
Country of Birth								
Both Swedish-born			1				1	
One Nordic			1.35	1.28–1.43			1.01	0.86–1.17
One “European”			1.24	1.17–1.31			1.21	1.09–1.34
One non-European			1.96	1.90–2.02			1.71	1.63–1.80
Highest Educational Level								
Both postsecondary			1				1	
One postsecondary			1.70	1.64–1.75			1.36	1.28–1.44
Both secondary			2.27	2.21–2.34			1.61	1.51–1.71
One secondary			3.71	3.62–3.81			2.31	2.19–2.44
Both primary/unknown			4.46	4.30–4.62			3.01	2.80–3.22
Duration								
First year	1		1		1		1	
Second year	2.40	2.33–2.48	2.40	2.33–2.48	2.62	2.49–2.77	2.59	2.46–2.74
Third year	3.02	2.93–3.11	3.04	2.95–3.13	3.82	3.60–4.05	3.78	3.56–4.01
Fourth–fifth years	3.32	3.24–3.41	3.40	3.31–3.49	4.91	4.63–5.18	4.94	4.67–5.22
Sixth–eighth years	3.07	2.93–3.22	3.21	3.06–3.37	4.00	3.52–4.53	4.25	3.74–4.80
<i>N</i>	223,768		223,768		93,522		93,522	

Note: Relative risks are given with 95% confidence intervals.

Source: Population-register data of Statistics Sweden, authors' own computations.

The second motive is related to the migration of a foreign partner. Our data show that a large fraction of male partnerships involve a foreign partner. In many such cases, a migration to Norway or Sweden and, consequently, coresidence simply may not be possible without the legal intervention of a partnership registration. Differences in attitudes toward state-sanctioned registered partnerships may also explain some of the differences in partnership registration between lesbians and gay men and how these differences in registration have evolved over time.<sup>20</sup>

Our population of same-sex couples is defined by their change in civil status to that of a registered partnership. Such an unambiguously defined population of gay and lesbian couples has never been studied before. Nevertheless, many of the demographic characteristics of our Scandinavian couples resemble those found for other populations of same-sex couples, such as same-sex coresidents in the United States (Black et al. 2000). This holds for variables related to previous heterosexual family life, educational attainment, and geographical concentration. Evidently, some aspects of gay and lesbian lifestyles are common for different countries.

We found that divorce risks are higher in same-sex partnerships than opposite-sex marriages and that unions of lesbians are considerably less stable, or more dynamic, than unions of gay men. In Norway and Sweden, the divorce risk for female partnerships is practically double that for male partnerships. Because our data include legal unions of short durations only, we cannot say much about the fraction of unions that eventually will end in disruption. An application of life-table techniques to our data gives an estimation of the fractions of partnerships that would end in divorce within the partnership durations we can cover, assuming that the duration-specific divorce risks we observe prevail. In Norway, 13% of partnerships of men and 21% of female partnerships are likely to end in divorce within six years from partnership registration. In Sweden, 20% of male partnerships and 30% of female marriages are likely to end in divorce within five years of partnership formation.<sup>21</sup> These levels are higher than the corresponding 13% of heterosexual marriages that end in divorce within five years in Sweden, but not high when compared with divorce levels in the United States (cf. Andersson 2002).

A higher propensity for divorce in same-sex couples is perhaps not very surprising given this group's lower exposure to normative pressure to maintain lifelong unions. In addition, if expectations about relationship duration are based on past relationship experience and on the experiences of one's peers, then lesbians and gay men will probably have lower expectations of relationship duration than will heterosexual people, given the less-institutionalized nature of same-sex relationship dynamics.

The difference in divorce behavior between lesbians and gay men is more intriguing. It cannot be explained by differences in the composition of couples in terms of the explanatory factors we have at hand. Nevertheless, some of these differences provide insights into possible unobserved characteristics that may be relevant. We found that partnerships of women are more sociodemographically homogamous than are partnerships of men: lesbian partners often have relatively similar characteristics, while gay spouses more often differ in terms of characteristics such as age, nationality, education, and income.<sup>22</sup> Homogamy in demographic characteristics is usually assumed to enhance marital stabil-

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20. Rydström (2004) argued that the introduction of the partnership legislation was particularly welcomed by activist gay men, while many women with a background in lesbian feminism were not enthusiastic about the possibility of acquiring the state's recognition of their relationship. In subsequent years, the practice of new generations of lesbians seems to have made sex differences in partnership registration disappear.

21. A five-year partnership duration for Sweden corresponds to a duration of six years in Norway if we account for Norway's required one-year separation period before a divorce can be granted.

22. For Sweden, we also had access to data on the individual taxable annual earnings of the partners. The data reveal that, on average, the distribution of income between partners in gay couples is about as unequal as that of heterosexual spouses, while lesbian partners tend to have similar earnings levels.

ity. However, some aspects of homogamy, especially in terms of economic characteristics, may be related to less-clear power structures in a couple. This situation may be conducive to a high level of dynamism in the relationship, but perhaps not to the kind of inertia that is related to marital stability.

We do not assume that elevated divorce risks of a particular category of married couples are evidence of lower relationship quality of that group compared with other groups (cf. Kurdek 2003, 2004 for evidence of a lack of association of general relationship quality and separation levels in the relationship dynamics of a U.S. sample of same-sex couples). To some extent, the higher divorce risks of female partnerships may be related to a stronger general sensitivity to the quality of relationships among women than among men, regardless of sexual orientation. Differences in divorce risks may also arise from differences in the motives of lesbians and gays for entering a registered partnership in the first place. Because of the type of data we used, we must leave explorations of qualitative aspects of that kind to future research.

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