

Married versus Cohabiting: Comparing the Determinants of Formal and Informal Unions in Brazil

Leticia J. Marteleto *

Paula Miranda-Ribeiro **

Carolina de Souza Costa ***

Introduction

The proportion of Brazilians in union has not changed considerably in the last 40 years. However, the type of unions Brazilians engage in has changed dramatically as legal marriages have decreased, whereas consensual unions have increased (Berquó 1998). In this paper, we present an overview of types of unions highlighting several characteristics found in the literature for developed countries, such as age, education, race, socioeconomic status, rural versus urban, and country region. These factors have been associated with the increase in informal unions. Yet very little is known about this issue in Brazil. Based on census data from 1970, 1980, 1991 and 2000, we investigate the determinants of formal and informal unions in Brazil over time using logistic regression models. This question is of special relevance for societies such as Brazil where the proportion of couples in informal union are high and spread across age and educational groups.

The paper will be structured as follows. First, we discuss the context in which formal and informal unions have been studied elsewhere and in Brazil over time. We then discuss our data and methods, following a preliminary description of the trend in types of unions in Brazil during the last four decades. We will then use logistic regression models to provide a comparison of determinants of formal versus informal unions in Brazil.

* Professor, Cedeplar, Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG), Brazil.

** Professor, Demography Department and Cedeplar, Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG), Brazil.

*** Graduate student in Demography, Cedeplar, Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG), Brazil.

Informal Unions: Cohabitation or Consensual Unions?

The literature on marital unions in the United States has stressed the differences and similarities between formal and informal unions; marriage and cohabitation. Marriage and cohabitation are viewed as similar as both are types of union formation and involve a period of courtship before the transition. Moreover, both marriage and cohabitation are an intimate relationship with co-residence between a couple. However, some argue that cohabitation is different from marriage because the first involves less of an economical share than marriage. Because marriage is seen as a more stable union than cohabitation, spouses are more willing to share their finances. One implication of the potential difference in sharing finances is that cohabitation partners maintain higher levels of individuality than spouses. Cohabitation is seen more as a “try out” union in the U.S., while marriage is seen as a long-time commitment and investment (Davis 1985). Cohabitation is more prevalent as a second union for divorced people than as a first union in the United States (Cherlin 1981). Because cohabitation generally involves less commitment to the relationship and children, the opportunity costs of cohabitation may be less than those of marriage. Marriage is still viewed as the relationship that most legitimizes childbearing in the U.S., which reinforces the commitment differences between marriage and cohabitation (Davis 1985). Indeed, marriage is seen as a security insurance against poverty as well as other demographic behaviors, while cohabitation does not seem to share the same benefits (Waite 1995). According to Waite, some benefits of marriage – as smaller mortality rates - are shared by cohabiting partners but not all, as cohabitation is seen as a more insecure relationship.

Little is known about informal unions in other societies. Cultural differences between the practices of union formation have pointed to somewhat different patterns and meanings of informal unions in other societies. In Sweden, for example, cohabitation is the most common type of union formation for young adults, while births happen within cohabiting unions more often than within marriages.

In Latin America, informal unions are considered “closer” to marriage, so that consensual unions rather than cohabitation would be the right term for informal unions. Under structural high levels of unemployment, consensual unions are seen by some as a way of not compromising with partners that may have not much to offer in terms of

steady source of income (Greene 1992). Greene argues that there is a marriage squeeze in Brazil due to the scarce number of males able to provide women with income security (Greene 1992). Under these circumstances, the legal protection of marriage would not matter in terms of income insurance for women, while consensual unions have the benefit of the “easiness” to dissolve when not satisfied.

The trend: Rising rates of cohabitation

A trend of changing composition of marital unions has been found in several countries. The United States has presented declining marriage rates and raising cohabitation rates. Studies in the U.S. have pointed that cohabitation is now a substitute to marriage, at least temporarily (Bumpass and Sweet 1989; Bumpass, Sweet and Cherlin 1991). Indeed, increased levels of cohabitation account for a substantial fraction of the decline in marriage. If those people who chose to cohabit had married instead, the prevalence of marriage today would not be substantially lower than in the past in the United States (Bumpass and Sweet 1989). Research by Axinn and Thornton (1993) on attitudes and behavior towards marriage and cohabitation suggests that, at the individual and family levels, the acceptance of cohabitation may lead to a substitution of cohabitation for marriage, and an ultimate reduction in the marriage rate. Similar causes may have been operating at the aggregate level. In the early 1970s, the acceptance of cohabitation led to an increase in the overall rate of entering coresidential unions, as many enter cohabitation rather than marriage. The trend in cohabitation may have resulted in the postponement of marriage. Empirical evidence at the micro level suggests that the causal influence of changing attitudes toward cohabitation influenced the changing prevalence of marriage. The parallel decline in religiosity in the 1970s and 1980s has been pointed as another intervening factor making the tolerance on divorce, cohabitation, and premarital sex increase; as well as marriage rates decrease.

Most of the studies that focus on the different outcomes of couples in legal and informal unions indirectly show that couples in those unions have different attitudes and values. There are few empirical studies on the actual differences between married couples and couples in informal unions. Little is known about how couples in informal unions and marriage differ. Are those who are legally married really different from those

who are in consensual unions in Brazil? The objective of this work, then, is to compare the determinants of formal and informal marriages in the Brazilian case.

Theoretical Perspectives

Forthcoming.

Data and Methods

In this paper, we use data from the 1970, 1980, 1991 and 2000 Censuses. The dataset contains standard demographic and economic variables such as employment status, occupation, income, and schooling for all members of the household, as well as detailed questions about types of union – if only religious union, if only legal, if both, if consensual union.

We will use logistic regression models to estimate the determinants of formal versus informal unions in Brazil. Equation 1 shows the model of the probability of being in formal or informal union using logistic regression:

$$(1) \quad W_i = a + bD_i + cM_i$$

where W_i equals the probability of being in informal union for women in year i ; D_i is a vector of demographic and socio-economic characteristics such as age, complete years of schooling, log of income in year i ; M_i is a set of dummy variables indicating region and rural versus urban place of residence and working status in year i . We will show results on figures presenting predicted probabilities of being in informal versus formal union by age, schooling, urban versus rural, income, and region of residence.

Our analytical strategy is to first develop single year models to examine whether there is a change in the relationship of each independent variable with the probability of cohabiting. We first establish the relationship between the probabilities of being in informal union for single census year. Next, we assess differences between year trends for the probability of being in informal union by statistically testing the difference of the

coefficients for the regressions for each separate year. We then decompose the total explained difference among census years to the differences accounted for by each of the independent variables. The results will indicate which factors better explain the large and recent increases in the proportion of women in informal unions.

Preliminary Descriptive Results

We present a preliminary description of the trend in types of unions in 1970, 1980, 1991 and 2000 in Brazil. Figure 1 shows that the proportion of women age 15 and over in union has not changed across the last four decades. This percentage of women in all types of marital union has been around 55% during the last four decades. However, the types of union women engage in have changed substantially. In 1970, about 4% of women were in informal unions, whereas in 2000 this proportion has increased to 16%. Conversely, in 1970 51% of women were in a formal marriage, while in 2000 this number decreased to approximately 39%. Such a trend has been found in other developed countries but has not been appropriately examined in many developing nations such as Brazil. Figure 2 shows the proportion of women in union by type of union. This figure clearly shows the increase in informal union “substituting” formal unions in Brazil.

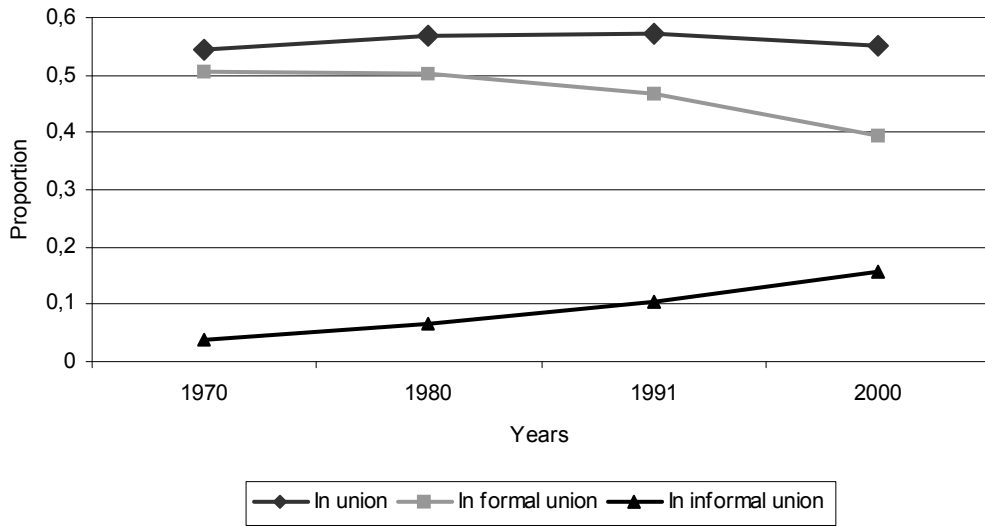
Figures 3 and 4 show the age distribution of women in formal and informal unions, respectively. These Figures show that informal unions are most common among younger women and that such a trend has not changed except that the levels are higher in 2000 than earlier. We will also show the time trend for complete years of schooling, rural/urban as well as income groups and region of residence (forthcoming). We will next develop Figures of union distribution by age, complete years of schooling, rural/urban as well as income groups and region of residence (forthcoming).

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**Figure 1. Proportion of women 15 and over by type of union:
Brazil, 1970-2000**



**Figure 2. Proportion of women 15 and over in union by type of union:
Brazil, 1970-2000**

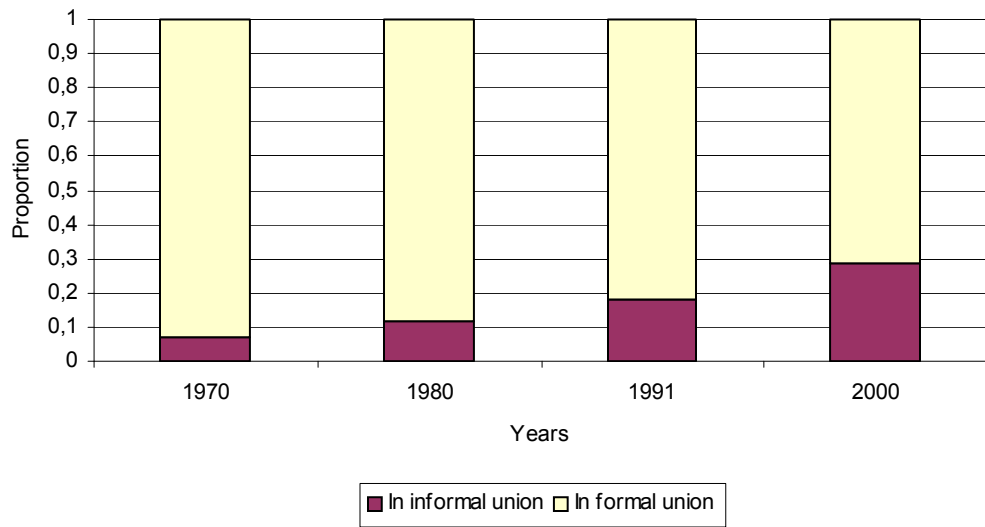


Figure 3. Proportion of women 15 and over in formal union by age group: Brazil, 1970-2000

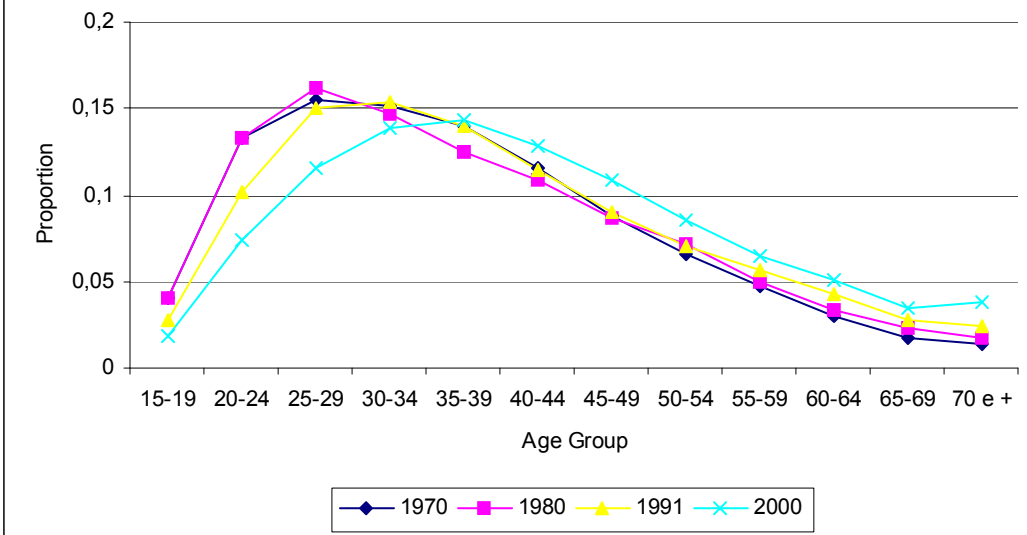


Figure 4. Proportion of women 15 and over in informal union by age group: Brazil, 1970-2000

