

Personality Traits and Living Apart Together (LAT)

Introduction

Next to cohabitation and same sex unions, LAT (Living Together Apart) unions have been identified in the academic literature not only as a transitional stage to marriage, but as a distinct kind of partnering choice (Levin & Trost, 1999). LAT unions, sometimes referred to as “non-residential partnerships” (Castro-Martín, Domínguez-Folgueras & Martín-García, 2008), are intimate relationships between unmarried partners who live in separate households but identify themselves as part of a couple (Strohm et al., 2009). As a form of partnering, LAT raises questions regarding not only who is involved and why, but also how this practice relates to cohabitation and marriage.

Several studies have investigated LAT in light of individual preferences (De Graaf & Loozen, 2004; Loozen & Steenhof, 2004), revealing distinctive gender, education and age patterns in LAT unions. As noted by Borghans et al (2008), personality traits seem to be related both to preferences and to capabilities, and they have been found to be predictive of individual selection into and out of marriage (Lundberg, 2012). In addition, personality is also associated with family outcomes such as fertility and marital satisfaction (Jokela et al., 2009; Skirbekk & Bleksaune, 2013; Tavares, 2010). Studies on living apart have so far mostly used a qualitative approach to investigate the motivation and preferences for forming a LAT union, but they have not been able to provide more information about the link between personality and LAT, mostly due to data limitations and small sample size.

The aim of this study is to examine the relationship between personality traits and the likelihood of being in a LAT union. We aim to contribute to the scarce literature on the impact of psychological traits on social and demographic behaviors which remains scarce. Further, we aim to investigate the common factors in the sorting of men and women into LAT and of distinct gender differences in the effects of personality traits. Using cross-sectional data from the Netherlands (Life Lines) containing information on current civil status and personality, we estimate multinomial logistic regression models to examine the relationship between personality traits and the likelihood of being into a LAT (Stolk et al., 2008).

Theoretical background

Levin (2004) suggests three potential purposes for entering into LAT relationships: (1) the need to care for a child or other relative from a previous union, (2) the partners work or study in different locations, or (3) as an alternative to both marriage and cohabitation. LAT relationships offer a way for individuals to maintain a romantic relationship separate from the relationship with in house family members. In the Netherlands, a study using large nationally representative data shows that LAT relationships are most common among older divorced women. Almost 20% of all individuals that are not in a cohabiting union or marriage aged from 30 and 60 years are in a LAT union, and 40% declare that they have no intention of living together (de Graaf & Loozen, 2004). Thus, LAT unions are considered a phenomenon of the older cohorts who opt out of more traditional relationship forms. Moreover, research done on LAT using qualitative methods portrays LAT unions as an embodiment of gender equality (Bawin-Legros & Gauthier,

2010; Upton-Davis, 2012) and a match to the ideal of reflexive ‘pure relationships’ based on mutual consent and the recognition of individual autonomy (Giddens, 1992). This may apply to a certain degree to LAT relationships where partners remain autonomous and independent by avoiding to pool household resources.

The higher prevalence of LAT is associated with the change of social norms regarding marriage and childbearing. Behaviors or attitudes are manifestation of a combination between basic traits and external influences such as social norms (McCrae & Costa, 1999). Whereas basic traits are fundamentally stable, behaviors and attitudes can change. We investigate the link between personality traits and LAT unions in the Dutch context as an appropriate setting where social norms regarding alternative family forms are one of the most permissive compared to other societies. Public opinion on LAT shows a gradual increase in the proportion of Dutch people who would prefer a LAT relationship, from 6% in 1990 to 10% in 2002 (Fokema et al., 2008). Thus, we expect that personality traits are related to partnership choice in a way that personality traits predispose certain respondents to select a LAT union over other possible unions such as cohabitation or marriage.

Studies on the genetic effect of fertility behavior (Kohler et al., 1999, 2002) suggests that the weakening social norms regarding childbearing over time permits genetically mediated differences (e.g. in personality) to be expressed as observed outcomes, such as fertility. After the widespread of contraception, partnership is no longer tied to fertility, but similarly the change in cultural norms on cohabitation, divorce and alternative families allows different preferences to be the main determinant of partnership choices. Thus, we expect that personality traits would be more strongly related to partnership choice, and thus to a choosing a LAT union in younger cohorts as they have internalized more permissive social norms compared to older individuals, an assumption that makes allowance for inherent traits to affect behavior more in younger cohorts.

Data and methods

We use the first wave of Life Lines (n= 94,516) collected between 2007 and 2009. Life Lines is an observational follow-up study in a large sample of the population of the northern provinces of the Netherlands. We limit the sample to individuals over 35 because personality is considered stable only after the late twenties (Caspi & Roberts, 2001) and moreover we are interested in LAT unions that are more likely to be “pure” LATs (hence young adults where LAT is a phase of dating are excluded). This limits the sample size to 57,956 respondents (24,520 men and 33,436 women). Our dependent variable is partnership status, which is measured with a question asking what is the current civil status of respondents with 7 optional categories: married or registered partnership (73%), cohabiting (12%), single (6%), widowed (1%), divorced (4%), other (0.3%) and LAT (3%). Personality traits are measured with the Five Big personality traits (openness, agreeableness, neuroticism, extraversion, conscientiousness) using a combined instrument from the NEO Personality Inventory (NEO-PI-R) and NEO Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI) (Costa & McCrae, 1992)¹. Subscales of traits constituting the Big 5 are consistent and all exhibit Chronbach’s alfa in the range from 0.62 to 0.80.

¹ Due to the size of the Life Lines data the processing of the data is still ongoing, thus preliminary analysis in this abstract contains results computed with neuroticism, extraversion, and conscientiousness. The final version of the paper will examine 5 different personality traits and propose personality and gender specific hypotheses.

Descriptive statistics show that a total of 1,615 respondents are into a LAT union, out of which 62% are women. The majority of LAT's have at least upper secondary education and 34.74% of them have completed tertiary education, confirming previous findings on LAT's in the Netherlands and in other countries. The average age of LAT's is 46 and most of them report to live on monthly household income above \$2000. We proceed by fitting multinomial logistic regression models for men and women separately (Table 1), further distinguishing between younger and older cohorts (Table 2 and Table 3). All models are adjusted for income, labor force participation and education (ISCED).

Preliminary results and conclusion

Preliminary results from multinomial regression models performed for men and woman separately (shown in Table 1) depict that personality traits indeed influence partnership status in a way that both men and women in LAT unions score higher on conscientiousness and extraversion. Emotional stability (neuroticism) seems to have no effect on partnership status when it comes to being in a LAT union. Higher conscientiousness compared to married respondents might be a sign of LAT's deliberation to pursue this form of partnership. We interpret the insignificant results of emotional stability to be associated with a preference to be in a LAT union rather than an inherent undesirability of LAT respondents as partners for a cohabiting union.

The expectation that in younger respondents personality will have a bigger role in the partnership choice, hence will be more associated with LAT compared to older individuals who are in a LAT union, holds true for women only (Table 3). Conscientiousness and extraversion are similarly related to partnership status of men in both subsamples (on one side men born before 1960 and on the other side men born after 1960), whereas extraversion for women is more related to LAT in younger cohorts than in older cohorts, a finding that partly confirms our expectations.

The similarity of traits important for men and women into LAT union is not surprising and is in line with the greater gender equality ascribed to these relationships. Whereas different personality traits are associated with the likelihood of being married for men and women (Lundberg, 2010) especially for older cohorts, our results show that in unions where no joint household is established personality traits need not be complimentary, although a discussion about assortative mating on personality traits cannot be warranted as there is no information about the partner in our data.

Linking personality traits to social outcomes proves challenging as personality influences cognitive skills, and through them outcomes such as education and labor market performance. As family processes are closely intertwined with education and work, it is hard to argue causation of personality and partnership (although personality is considered to remain somewhat stable over the life course). Still, new advances in investigating the association between marriage or divorce and personality prompts us to investigate how personality can explain why some people are forming new types of partnerships that go beyond the conventional cohabiting unions.

Table 1: Relative risk ratios from multinomial regression models (reference category: married or registered partnership)

	Men						Women					
	Cohabitors	Single	Widowed	Divorced	Other	LAT	Cohabitors	Single	Widowed	Divorced	Other	LAT
Neuroticism	1.00 [0.87,1.16]	1.23 [1.00,1.52]	0.67 [0.34,1.31]	0.76 [0.57,1.02]	1.45 [0.57,3.65]	0.86 [0.63,1.16]	1.00 [0.89,1.13]	1.01 [0.84,1.22]	0.62** [0.45,0.86]	0.62*** [0.51,0.76]	1.12 [0.60,2.10]	0.91 [0.71,1.15]
Conscientiousness	0.85* [0.74,0.97]	0.83 [0.68,1.01]	0.58 [0.32,1.08]	0.56*** [0.43,0.73]	0.73 [0.31,1.73]	0.60*** [0.45,0.79]	0.80*** [0.71,0.90]	0.89 [0.75,1.07]	0.54*** [0.39,0.73]	0.63*** [0.52,0.75]	0.64 [0.35,1.15]	0.68*** [0.54,0.86]
Extraversion	1.22*** [1.13,1.31]	0.97 [0.87,1.09]	1.21 [0.85,1.73]	1.27** [1.09,1.48]	0.82 [0.49,1.35]	1.46*** [1.24,1.71]	1.36*** [1.27,1.45]	1.38*** [1.25,1.53]	1.07 [0.89,1.27]	1.50*** [1.35,1.66]	1.72** [1.21,2.44]	1.51*** [1.33,1.73]
N	24520						33436					

Table 2: Relative risk ratios from multinomial regression models (reference category: married or registered partnership) for cohorts born 1918-1960

	Men (born 1918-1960)						Women (born 1918-1960)					
	Cohabitors	Single	Widowed	Divorced	Other	LAT	Cohabitors	Single	Widowed	Divorced	Other	LAT
Neuroticism	1.02 [0.72,1.45]	0.98 [0.60,1.59]	0.88 [0.39,2.01]	0.80 [0.48,1.33]	3.51 [0.55,22.49]	0.69 [0.38,1.25]	1.00 [0.89,1.13]	1.01 [0.84,1.22]	0.62** [0.45,0.86]	0.62*** [0.51,0.76]	1.12 [0.60,2.10]	0.91 [0.71,1.15]
Conscientiousness	0.72 [0.52,1.01]	0.49** [0.31,0.78]	0.68 [0.32,1.47]	0.53** [0.33,0.86]	1.28 [0.20,8.37]	0.55* [0.31,0.95]	0.80*** [0.71,0.90]	0.89 [0.75,1.07]	0.54*** [0.39,0.73]	0.63*** [0.52,0.75]	0.64 [0.35,1.15]	0.68*** [0.54,0.86]
Extraversion	1.15 [0.96,1.38]	0.96 [0.74,1.26]	1.25 [0.81,1.94]	1.32* [1.00,1.73]	0.27* [0.09,0.84]	1.69*** [1.24,2.31]	1.36*** [1.27,1.45]	1.38*** [1.25,1.53]	1.07 [0.89,1.27]	1.50*** [1.35,1.66]	1.72** [1.21,2.44]	1.51*** [1.33,1.73]
n	8154						10489					

Table 3: Relative risk ratios from multinomial regression models (reference category: married or registered partnership) for cohorts born after 1960

	Men (born after 1960)						Women (born after 1960)					
	Cohabitors	Single	Widowed	Divorced	Other	LAT	Cohabitors	Single	Widowed	Divorced	Other	LAT
Neuroticism	1.03 [0.87,1.21]	1.33* [1.05,1.68]	0.42 [0.13,1.34]	0.77 [0.54,1.11]	1.09 [0.38,3.19]	0.97 [0.68,1.38]	1.00 [0.87,1.14]	1.01 [0.82,1.25]	0.54* [0.30,0.97]	0.66*** [0.52,0.83]	1.34 [0.66,2.73]	1.02 [0.77,1.34]
Conscientiousness	0.90 [0.78,1.05]	0.97 [0.78,1.20]	0.45 [0.16,1.25]	0.60** [0.44,0.84]	0.64 [0.24,1.70]	0.66* [0.47,0.91]	0.81*** [0.71,0.92]	0.94 [0.77,1.15]	0.61 [0.35,1.06]	0.63*** [0.51,0.79]	0.76 [0.39,1.49]	0.78 [0.60,1.01]
Extraversion	1.24*** [1.14,1.35]	0.99 [0.88,1.12]	1.15 [0.63,2.09]	1.29** [1.07,1.56]	1.10 [0.62,1.94]	1.41*** [1.17,1.70]	1.36*** [1.27,1.46]	1.46*** [1.30,1.64]	1.02 [0.74,1.40]	1.61*** [1.42,1.83]	1.83** [1.24,2.72]	1.62*** [1.39,1.88]
n	16366						22947					

Exponentiated coefficients; 95% confidence intervals in brackets, all models adjusted for 95% income, labor force participation and education (ISCED), coefficients not shown.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

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