

The Diffusion of Consensual Unions in Finland in the 1970s

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Problem and data

It is commonly agreed among family historians that there have always been couples living together without a marriage recognized as valid by the customs or laws of their society. Consensual unions in their present form and extent, however, seem to be a relatively new phenomenon.¹

This seems to be the case in Finland, too. Information is available on the number of unmarried couples from half a century back. In the early 1930s, a state committee made a survey concerning the number of such couples. Information was collected from ecclesiastical, municipal and police authorities. According to the study, the number of »couples living together illegally» was about 8 000—9 000 (Ehdotus 20/1935, 7). This number should be considered a minimum estimate; nevertheless, it may be considered to reflect the scale order of the phenomenon with some ac-

¹ »A variety of labels has been used to refer to an unmarried heterosexual couple who share a common bedroom. 'Living together', 'living together unmarried', 'two-step marriage', 'live-ins', 'consensual unions', even 'companionate marriage' and 'trial marriage'. Today most agree on the label 'cohabitation'.» (Freeman & Lyon 1983, 5). However, in this primarily demographic context we prefer the term »consensual union», suggested by e.g. the Population Multilingual Thesaurus (1979) and the Multilingual Demographic Dictionary (1982).

curacy. The corresponding figure in present-day Finland is at least 120 000 (Labor Force Survey 1982).

The possible fluctuations in the situation from the 1930s to the 1960s are not known. But we do know that during the last 15 years consensual unions have continually increased. In this paper, our intention is to present some data on the prevalence and incidence of consensual unions during this period of rapid growth, and also to make some attempts to explain the changes which have occurred.

Our analysis is primarily based on interviews carried out by the Central Statistical Office of Finland at the end of 1979. The questions concerning the family history of the respondents were included in an omnibus survey questionnaire.² A sample of 1 100 respondents were interviewed. The regionally stratified sample is representative of the resident population aged 15 years or older. Our intention is to analyze changes in the popularity of consensual unions over time. It follows from the cross-sectional character of the interview data that it has been necessary to determine the values for the relevant variables retrospectively for different points back in time.

Since 1978, information on the prevalence of consensual unions has been provided by the annual Labor Force Survey of the Central Statistical Office. This survey is an interview study with 10 000 respondents. It represents the Finnish population between 15 and 64 years of age.

The definition of a consensual union has been subject to a lot of discussion in the literature. An exact, »objective« definition is needed especially in cases where consensual unions are connected with material benefits and obligations provided by the law. This is the case in some points in Finnish legislation. However, from a sociological point of view, the subjective definitions accepted by the people themselves are more relevant.

In our study, the respondents were asked to define their own family status. The following definition of a consensual union was presented to them: »By a consensual union we mean circumstances where a man and a woman are living together in a marriage-like relationship, but are not married to each other.« They were then asked: »Are you living in a consensual union at present?« and »Have you lived in a consensual union at some earlier time?« Those respondents who gave a positive answer to one or both of these questions were also asked when they had been living in a consensual union, and whether and when the relationship had been dissolved.

The prevalence of consensual unions

Starting with the interview data of 1979, we constructed a time series describing the family status of the respondents from 1968 to 1979. The choice of the year 1968 as a cutting-off point is based on our finding that it was not until after this year that consensual unions began to increase remarkably. The results concerning the family

² This part of the survey was financed by the Research Institute of Legal Policy and the Law Drafting Department of the Ministry of Justice.

status of the respondents in the years 1968—1979 are presented in Table 1. Table 2 presents corresponding figures for the age group 15—64 years for 1978—1982, obtained from the annual Labor Force Surveys.

Table 1. Couples and persons living in consensual unions in 1968—1979.

Year	Living as couples	Living in marital unions	Living in consensual unions	Living in consensual unions out of all couples	N ^a
Proportions of the population aged 15 years or older, percent					
1968	60.2	59.8	0.4	0.7	844
1969	61.7	60.9	0.8	1.3	872
1970	61.4	60.3	1.1	1.7	904
1971	61.5	60.0	1.5	2.4	925
1972	61.3	59.2	2.1	3.4	953
1973	60.7	58.6	2.1	3.5	977
1974	61.2	58.4	2.8	4.6	995
1975	60.9	57.9	3.0	4.9	1014
1976	61.2	57.6	3.6	5.9	1036
1977	61.7	57.2	4.5	7.3	1059
1978	62.7	57.8	4.9	7.8	1078
1979	62.6	57.8	4.8	7.7	1100

^a The number of those respondents who were at least 15 years of age in each respective year.

Table 2. Couples and persons living in consensual unions in 1978—1982.

Year	Living as couples	Living in marital unions	Living in consensual unions	Living in consensual unions out of all couples
Proportions of the 15—64-year-old population, percent				
1978	63.5	58.4	5.1	8.0
1979	63.5	57.8	5.7	9.0
1980	63.1	56.9	6.2	9.8
1981	63.6	57.0	6.6	10.4
1982	63.4	56.5	6.9	10.9

The results are quite clear. Living as a couple has increased in the whole period of 1968—1979. But the proportions of different types of relationships have changed: marriages have decreased and consensual unions have increased rapidly. The prevalence of persons living in consensual unions in the population aged 15 years or older was below one percent at the end of the 1960s. The corresponding figure

at the end of the 1970s was about five percent. In the early 1980s, already close to seven percent of the population between 15—64 years of age was living in consensual unions, which meant that one couple out of nine was not married.

The incidence of consensual unions

In the previous section we analyzed in epidemiological terminology — not that we attempted to pathologize cohabitation — the prevalence of consensual unions, i.e. the frequency of consensual unions in the whole population at different points in time. Another way to look at the phenomenon is to analyze the frequency of consensual unions among new couples established in different years, which epidemiologically speaking corresponds to their incidence. It can be argued that the incidence figures are more suitable if we wish to describe the importance of consensual unions at different points in time. This argument is based on the fact that we are dealing with the widespread phenomenon of the family, where the weight of old, already existing family types substantially influence the prevalence figures.

In the following, we therefore concentrate on data concerning the proportion of consensual unions among new unions in the years 1968—1979, as calculated from the 1979 interviews.

The respondents reported 312 new unions initiated in this twelve-year period. The incidence of consensual unions has grown as follows:

	1968— ^a 1969	1970— 1971	1972— 1973	1974— 1975	1976— 1977	1978— 1979
New couples (N)	56	45	43	47	59	62
Percentage of all new couples living in a consensual union	13	29	35	64	70	65

^a Due to the small number of cases, we have used two-year intervals.

The change is dramatic. In the late 1960s, only one new couple out of eight lived in a consensual union, but ten years later the corresponding proportion was two out of three.

Diffusion channels of consensual unions

The 1979 interviews included questions on the demographic characteristics of the respondents: age, formal education, and domicile. These variables are, of course, not sufficient if we were to attempt an explanation of the increase of consensual unions. They are, however, useful in describing the diffusion channels of consensual unions in Finland.

In the following analysis, we have divided the data in two parts: unions initiated in 1968—1974, and those initiated in 1975—1979. The proportion of consensual unions in different *age groups* in the two periods are presented in Table 3.

T a b l e 3. Consensual unions of all new couples by age.

Age group	1968—1974		1975—1979	
	%	N	%	N
—20	41	(41)	69	(32)
21—25	28	(78)	59	(61)
26—30	17	(29)	72	(25)
31—	36	(22)	74	(23)

In the earlier period, consensual unions proved to be an exceptional way of initiating life as a couple. It was not very unusual, but with regard to the typical marrying age it was most frequent in atypical segments of the population. Those who initiated their couple relationship at a very young age (younger than 20 years) and those who had passed the typical marrying age (over 30 years of age) started their unions as a consensual union clearly more often than those aged 21—30 years.

In only a few years' time, a marked change seems to have taken place. In the late 1970s, the dominant part of new couples in all age groups lived in consensual unions. It may be of some interest to note that in the most typical marrying age (21—25), the proportion of consensual unions continues to be — albeit slightly — lower than in other age groups. These findings justify, however, the claim that consensual unions have become normalized as a form of starting to live as a couple.

In Table 4, we analyze the *regional* increase in the popularity of consensual unions. The regions have been defined by combining two criteria. Firstly, the respondents have been classified geographically — on the basis of their domicile — into those who live in the Helsinki (capital city) metropolitan area, those who live in the four most industrialized provinces of Southern Finland (excluding the Helsinki metropolitan area), and those living in other parts of the country. Sec-

T a b l e 4. Consensual unions among all new unions by type of residence.

Type of residence	1968—1974		1975—1979	
	%	N	%	N
The Helsinki metropolitan area	49	(35)	74	(27)
Other industrialized municipalities in Southern Finland	37	(49)	73	(45)
Rural municipalities in Southern Finland	20	(25)	44	(18)
Industrialized municipalities in the rest of the country	16	(31)	62	(34)
Rural municipalities in the rest of the country	23	(30)	67	(18)

only, we classified the municipalities according to their industrial structure. The municipalities in which the respondents lived have been divided into »agricultural» ones, where more than ten percent of the economically active population is engaged in agriculture, and »industrial» ones, with the corresponding proportion remaining below the ten percent threshold. This ten percent threshold corresponds roughly to the average proportion of the agricultural population in the whole country.

The results resemble those found in the analysis dealing with age. In the first period described, less than half of the new couples in the Helsinki metropolitan area, the most developed area, started their unions as consensual unions. The corresponding proportion was one-third in the industrialized municipalities of the other southern provinces, and one-fifth in the other regions. In the late 1970s, the great majority of all new couples started living together in consensual union with the — partial — exception of the rural municipalities of Southern Finland. Consensual unions have thus become normalized also in a regional sense.

Data on the *social stratum* of our respondents were not available to us. However, *formal education* is strongly correlated with this characteristic. Therefore, we have made use of the formal schooling level of the respondents in describing the increase in the social popularity of consensual unions.

The measurement of the level of formal education provides some problems in a population greatly heterogeneous with regard to age. The general education level has increased very much, and therefore young people are on the average much better schooled than older persons. When dividing the respondents into those with an extended education and those with a more limited education, this problem has been accounted for by accepting as extended education for those older than 34 years all schooling which is continued beyond the basic level; for the younger respondents (15—34 years), we required the matriculation examination. Table 5 presents the results on the increase of consensual unions in different educational groups.

T a b l e 5. Consensual unions among all new unions by education.

Education	1968—1974		1975—1979	
	%	N	%	N
Limited	36	(109)	72	(103)
Extended	21	(61)	48	(39)

It is probably quite commonly believed that consensual unions are a phenomenon connected with student radicalism. It is possible that it was common in those circles. But if we are interested in the popularity of consensual unions in the whole population, the situation seems to be different. In both periods, consensual unions have been more common among those with less schooling, and in both educational groups, the rate of increase has been equal. The proportion of consensual unions out of all new unions has doubled during the 1970s.

The termination of consensual unions

Above, we have treated marriage and consensual unions as comparable forms of living as a couple. Still, we are dealing with two quite different phenomena. A woman and a man starting to live together are not often consciously able to choose between these two forms; instead, many psychological, sociological and also legal factors influence the outcome. The growth of consensual unions indicates, however, that the possibilities of choice have increased.

Consensual unions and marriage are probably not similar as ways of life, either. The data of this study does not allow a comparison of the contents of the two union types. Results which we have presented elsewhere (Aromaa—Cantell—Jaakkola 1983) indicate, however, that these two forms of couple life have been becoming functionally more similar.

Our data allows us to analyze one important characteristic of the unions, which sheds some light on the question concerning the nature of life in a consensual union. The *duration* of a consensual union and of a marriage is an important matter for the parties concerned as well as for their social environment and society in general. Paradoxically, the total duration of a union can be measured only in those cases where the union has already been dissolved. But the respondents usually were still living in some kind of union. And as consensual unions are also quite a new phenomenon, our data has great limitations.

A consensual union can be terminated in three ways: the persons living in a consensual union can enter a mutual marriage; they can separate; and the man or the woman (or both) may die during the union. Our data contains 102 terminated consensual unions. In 83 cases, the persons living in a consensual union had married each other; in 18 cases the union had dissolved when the man and woman had separated; and in one case, one of the two had died. Consensual unions which had dissolved through separation had lasted an average of 13 months (median). Table 6 describes the duration of consensual unions which had ended when the man and woman got married to each other.

T a b l e 6. The duration of consensual unions which ended in a mutual marriage.

The year in which the consensual union ended (= marriage was entered)	(N)	The duration of the consensual union, in months	
		mean	median
—1968	5	(39.8)	(28.0)
1969—1973	15	13.1	10.0
1974—1975	18	14.9	10.5
1976—1977	22	22.7	12.0
1978—1979	23	24.9	13.0

The means and medians of the duration of the period of consensual union increase steadily towards the end of the 1970s. It should also be noted that the duration of the consensual union period preceding the marriage is quite long as such. Already in the early 1970s, it exceeded ten months in one case out of two, and its average length was more than one year. In the late 1970s, one couple out of two living in a consensual union who entered marriage, had been living together for more than one year, with the average duration of the consensual union period exceeding two years. These results can be interpreted as an indication of the social normalization of consensual unions.

To justify the claim that consensual unions have been normalized, we should also be able to find an increasing number of relatively long-lived consensual unions. In the following Table 7, prevalence figures are given for couples living in a consensual union at the end of each year in the period 1968—1979, in relation to the population aged 15 years or older, by the duration of the consensual union.

Table 7. The duration of consensual unions existing at the end of each year.

Year	Persons who at the end of each year had been living in a consensual union for				
	1—12 months	13—24 months	25—36 months	37—48 months	49 months or longer
	Per 1000 of the population aged 15 years or older				
1968—1969	2	1	—	—	2
1970—1971	7	4	1	—	1
1972—1973	6	5	4	2	2
1974—1975	12	5	3	1	6
1976—1977	18	10	4	2	7
1978—1979	18	9	8	5	8

The table once again illustrates the rapid growth of consensual unions. In this case, this is seen in the increase of the prevalence figures in all duration categories. But the table also conveys new findings. Short-lived unions are most common in all years; but the increase in the prevalence of long-lasting consensual unions has been the most rapid. The relative increase of consensual unions lasting between two and four years is clearly slower.

We may interpret this in the following manner. Existing consensual unions are actually comprised of two basically different types of unions. The majority of cohabiting couples living in a consensual union marry after a relatively short consensual union. For them, the consensual union serves functionally as a preliminary explicitly intended stage of marriage, regardless of whether the couple from the beginning of their relationship enter a »trial marriage« or not. Marriage and — less often — separation create a »dip« about the middle of the duration distribution.

The increase of long-lasting consensual unions indicates that another type of consensual union is also becoming more common. We believe that a small (in relation to the whole population) — but increasing — segment of the population is emerging for whom a consensual union functionally plays the role of a stable couple relationship. And, we might add, a union which has lasted for four years *is stable* already — many marriages end through divorce in a much shorter time.

Summary and discussion

Living together as a couple in circumstances in which the union has not been considered a valid marriage according to the norms of the society has a long history. Nevertheless, consensual unions in their modern form are a new phenomenon. They started to increase in Finland very rapidly at the end of the 1960s. At present two out of three new couples start living together in a consensual union, and one couple out of nine is living in a consensual union.

It would, of course, be an exciting task to try to find causes for this radical change in the customs concerning the establishment of family relationships. Our empirical data are not suited, however, for carrying out such a task adequately. Here, we are only able to present speculative interpretations on the basis of the main results of the study.

Our main results were:

- 1) living as a couple has become more frequent in the 1970s;
- 2) an increasing, and now already quite substantial proportion of all couples are living in a consensual union;
- 3) new couples typically are living in a consensual union;
- 4) consensual unions have become a custom accepted in all segments of the population, whereas it used to be more popular in atypical population groups; it has also spread geographically from central to peripheral areas;
- 5) the majority of consensual unions lead to a mutual marriage of the couple in a relatively short time, but to some extent, another type of consensual union also seems to be emerging, where the couple lives together for an extensive period of time without marrying.

It is hardly an exaggeration to state that consensual unions in their present form represent one of the most radical changes concerning family behavior, at least in our country. Such a conclusion seems to be justified by the present extent of the phenomenon, and the rapid pace at which it is changing. Therefore, it seems obvious that explanations for the increasing popularity of consensual unions should be looked for among general social changes which have affected the family.

The basic structural changes in Finnish society during the past two decades are related to the process of industrialization. In Finland, this process started very late but has proceeded very rapidly. Some figures concerning the changes in the occupational structure are illustrative. In 1960, 36 percent of the economically active population were occupied in farming; in 1970 the proportion was 20 percent, and

in 1980 only 11 percent. In service occupations, the change has been of the same magnitude but opposite in direction: from 34 percent in 1960 to 44 percent in 1970 and 53 percent in 1980. In manufacturing, the changes have been quite small (Pöntinen 1983, 46).

The changes in the occupational structure are connected with the process of urbanization. In 1960, 38 percent of the population lived in cities and towns; in 1970 the proportion was 51 percent and in 1980 60 percent. Due to migration, only 55 percent of the residents of rural areas and 40 percent of the residents of urban areas were born in the same municipality in which they were living in 1980 (Statistical Yearbook of Finland 1981, 5 and 12).

Another important change in Finnish society has been the great increase in higher education. We are also dealing here with a geographical shift to larger cities, as well as with a separation of the young generation from the mental environment of their parents.

It is obvious that the societal changes have had dramatic consequences on the individual level, too. Very important in this respect is the social isolation caused by the discontinuance of social relationships with relatives and friends. The results of a comparative survey concerning friendship networks in four Scandinavian countries indicate that people in Finland have fewer friends than other Scandinavians, and the complete absence of friends is also most common in this country (Jaakkola—Karisto 1976, 62).

It is very likely that the growth in the tendency of establishing life as a couple can be understood as a compensation mechanism based on the social isolation of people forced to migrate by the rapid social changes in Finnish society.

The increase in living as a couple can also be given a materialistic interpretation. Such an interpretation is also necessary since the growth of the marriage rate in Finland concerns the whole period after the Second World War (Jallinoja—Haavio-Mannila 1983, 13—14) and not only the 1970s. This tendency is probably connected with the well-known fact that the founding of a family has always been strongly correlated with the man becoming economically independent. Marriage has been actualized when it has become possible for the man to support a family. In Finland the change from an agricultural society into an industrialized society based on paid labor has proceeded most clearly since the 1940s. In this period, the number of economically independent wage and salary earners has increased greatly, whereas the number of farmers' sons dependent on their fathers and farm laborers tied to landowners has fallen. Simultaneously, the opportunities for founding a family have increased.

But the need of lonely and independent people for intimate relationships is an insufficient explanation for the *popularity of consensual unions* as a solution to the problem. We might ask why people don't get married as they have formerly. But this is not the right question. Most people do get married, but only when they decide to do so. The point of the question is that the social forces and individual pressures to marry are today weaker than ever before. Individual choice with regard to the form of family life is today less limited than earlier.

For example, the need for a permanent sexual relationship is no longer a cause to marry. This is due to advanced contraceptive techniques and practically free abortion in Finland since 1970. Neither is a child born out of wedlock any longer a great social or economic disaster in Finnish society because of the change in attitudes, the development of the social security system in general, and especially with regard to one-parent families (see Jaakkola—Aromaa—Cantell 1982).

Still more important is that the woman, especially, no longer needs marriage for social and economic security in the same way as she did earlier. In Finland, there is a longer tradition of women commonly working outside the home than in other Western countries. The beginning of family life will interrupt participation in working life only temporarily for the delivery and care of the baby — and the number of babies born in Finnish families today is very small.

The social security of the individual has been very much dependent on family income and still more on family property accumulated during marriage. But this is no longer true. The social security of the woman as well as of the man in modern states is based primarily on personal skills and occupation, and the social security »earned» in the active working stage of the life cycle. The family and the spouse play a less critical part in it.³

Thus people need companionship and, therefore, life as a couple is increasing. However, matrimonial rights which formerly served as a solution to the problem of social security, have today been substituted by individually determined social security, and therefore pressures to marry have lost their hold.

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³ For an excellent analysis of these questions, see Glendon 1982.