Economic Dependency and Cohabiting Couples’ Union Transitions

Thursday, 17 October 2019, 2 PM
Aula Kessler, Palazzo di Sociologia, Via G. Verdi 26, Trento.

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Abstract
The decline of the male breadwinner model and the increasing importance of women as income providers has changed partners’ economic dependency. Focusing on heterosexual cohabiting couples in the United States, we investigate the association between partners’ relative earnings and union stability and progression. Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 and discrete-time hazard models, we analyze whether partners’ relative earnings is associated with continued cohabitation, marriage and separation, net of demographic, socio-economic and couple characteristics. Results indicate that women’s relative economic position is a key determinant of union stability: female breadwinning couples face a lower risk of marriage and a higher risk of union dissolution.

There is some evidence that cohabitation may be a “holding pattern” for both female and male breadwinning couples, suggesting that both men’s and women’s career development may be important for marriage. We further demonstrate that patterns of economic dependency within couples may be of greater importance for the stability of low-income unions; money may be more gendered for poor couples. Taken together, these results demonstrate the importance of and interrelationships between relative and absolute earnings for couples’ relationship progression and stability.