

**Initial Marriage Plans and Current Cohabitors' Expectations of Marriage**

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## **Abstract**

Using the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth, which includes measures of initial marriage plans and current expectations of marriage, this paper examines the factors that influence whether a cohabitation begins with an engagement or definite plans to marry and how initial plans are related to expectations of marriage. Those who began cohabiting with initial marriage plans are much more optimistic about their chances of marrying than those without such plans, and among those with initial marriage plans, virtually no socioeconomic or past family formation characteristics affect their expectations of marriage. Among those without initial marriage plans, however, prior union experiences and the presence of both shared children and children from a prior union influence expectations of marriage. The results suggest that the expectations of marriage among couples with stronger commitments at the start of cohabiting are less influenced by potential barriers to marriage than those who did not have a strong commitment.

**Keywords:** Cohabitation, expectations of marriage, marriage plans

Cohabitation has been variously characterized as an alternative to being single (Rindfuss and VandenHeuval 1990; Schoen and Weinick 1993), an alternative to marriage (Landale and Forste 1991; Loomis and Landale 1994), or a stage in the marriage process (Gwartney-Gibbs 1986; Tanfer 1987; Oppenheimer 1988), depending on the populations and outcomes studied. Early research suggested that most cohabitators expected to, and did, marry their partners (Bumpass and Sweet 1989; Bumpass, Sweet, and Cherlin 1991; Waller 2000; Lichter, Batson, and Brown 2004). However, transitions to marriage appear to have declined over time (Bumpass and Lu 2000), begging the question of whether cohabitators are less likely to expect and want to marry now than in the past or whether they are less able to make the transition. In the former scenario, cohabitation may be becoming more like a form of dating whereas the latter scenario suggests that many cohabitations may be thwarted marriages among individuals who wanted to marry but had difficulty in doing so. If this is the case, an examination of cohabiting outcomes would obscure the fact that many cohabitators believe their cohabitation is part of a path to eventual marriage. In an era of marriage promotion and concern over the demise of the family, it is important to understand who forms nonmarital unions with strong plans to marry and the factors that influence whether people expect their unions to make the transition to marriage.

Making use of a new data source that contains information on currently cohabiting relationships not available in prior datasets, I suggest that one way to explore this issue is to examine current cohabitators' plans to marry when they started living together and how their plans at the outset of their relationship are related to their current expectations of marriage. This study extends prior quantitative work on cohabitators' expectations of marriage (Bumpass, Sweet, and Cherlin 1991; Waller 2000; Brown 2000; Manning and Smock 2002; Gibson, Edin, McLanahan 2005; Waller and McLanahan 2005) and qualitative work on the "slide" into cohabitation

(Manning and Smock 2003; Sassler 2004) by examining the factors associated with initial plans to marry and how the presence (or absence) of initial marriage plans influences expectations of marriage. First, I explore how socioeconomic and prior union and fertility experiences influence the likelihood of reporting beginning one's current cohabitation with plans to marry. Second, I examine whether having plans to marry at the start of cohabitation is related to current expectations of marriage. Doing so will allow the identification of individuals who planned to marry their cohabiting partner when they started living together but, having lived together for some time, no longer expect to marry.

### ***Intentions to Marry and Expectations of Marriage***

Oppenheimer (2003) suggests that although quantitative data has been unable to definitively prove it, the quick transition of many cohabitations (Sweet and Bumpass 1992; Manning and Smock 1995; Bumpass and Lu 2000) would imply that they signify an engagement and that perhaps a large proportion of the rise in cohabitation may reflect an increasing tendency for couples to cohabit once they have become engaged. This may be especially true if the actual timing of marriage is becoming a matter of convenience (Bumpass and Sweet 1989), where the actual commitment occurs at the time of engagement. Still, there is little actual evidence to suggest this is true, and recent qualitative work paints a very different picture of cohabitation.

In two different qualitative samples of lower-income, working-class men and women, the entrance into cohabitation is fluid and imprecise (Smock and Manning 2003; Sassler 2004). Many cohabitators, it appears, do not actively discuss the future of their relationship before they begin cohabiting. Among young adults, cohabitation is often entered into quickly, with marriage sometimes not even discussed (Sassler 2004). And despite the quantitative modeling approach where cohabitation is framed as an explicit choice *not* to marry, this work suggests that for many,

marriage simply is not even considered as an option at the same time (Manning and Smock 2003). In fact, the decision to cohabit is often not even a deliberate decision after all (Manning and Smock 2003). Another qualitative study focusing on poor women suggests that low-income women have internalized ideals of weddings and marriage but also strongly believe in certain prerequisites of marriage, particularly economic and residential independence (Edin 2000). For low-income cohabiting women, the intention to marry one's partner at the start of cohabitation may not translate into strong expectations of marriage at any given point, since they may be waiting for economic security that may be a long time coming, if at all. However, given that these qualitative studies are comprised primarily of lower- and working-class individuals, it is unclear whether the formation and purpose of cohabiting unions is similarly blurred among other socioeconomic groups.

Since marriage rates differ sharply by socioeconomic status, cohabitation may still serve as part of the marriage process for more educated and higher-income individuals while at the same time, it may be functioning as "budget" way to start a family (Furstenberg 1996) or represent a convenient, economical way to limit expenses among those of lower socioeconomic status. It is also the case that fewer cohabiting couples today are transitioning to marriage than in the past (Bumpass and Lu 2000; Heuveline and 2004; Lichter, Qian, and Mellot 2005), and the relevance of earlier studies based on dated samples is questionable. The nature of cohabitation may be fundamentally changing as it has become more socially acceptable and more common, or we may be seeing a bifurcation of the role of cohabitation by social class, life course stage, or prior family experiences.

Thus, there is a need to test Oppenheimer's (2003) hypothesis that many cohabitations represent engagements, and determine what factors, if any, are perceived as barriers to actually

marrying. To date, though, research has been unable to examine marital plans at the outset of cohabitation in quantitative data due to data limitations. Studies have not collected information on marriage plans at the start of cohabitation, in part due to concerns over the retrospective accuracy of such plans. Inevitably, whether one reports having planned to marry a cohabiting partner at some earlier timepoint is clouded by the current state or outcome of the union. This might have a particularly strong effect on current cohabitations. Cohabitations of exceptionally long duration tend to be over-represented among the currently cohabiting (Bumpass, Sweet, and Cherlin 1991), which may cause the relationship between expectations and subsequent marriage to be biased, as many long-term cohabitators do not want to marry or have been unable to make the transition to marriage (Brown and Booth 1996). In fact, one might expect that those with the most concrete plans and highest expectations of marriage would fairly quickly transition to marriage, leaving behind those with less commitment to marriage.

Still, it seems likely that initial marriage plans are strongly related to whether a cohabitation transitions to marriage, following Fishbein and Ajzen's theory of reasoned action (1975). In the theory of reasoned action, intentions are the most immediate determinant of behavior – individuals who have strong intentions to engage in a particular act are highly likely to actually follow through and complete the act. Intentions, though, have generally been unavailable in studies of marriage, and expectations have been used as a rough proxy (Manning & Smock, 2002). Studies examining the relationship between marital expectations and subsequent marital behavior generally support Fishbein and Ajzen's hypothesis (Brown 2000; McGinnis 2003; Waller and McLanahan 2005). What is unclear, though, is how closely connected initial marital plans (remembered retrospectively) and current expectations are among current cohabitations, and as McGinnis (2003, p. 106) notes, "an important goal in research on

relationship outcomes (e.g., entry into marriage) should be the identification of factors that produce expectations or intentions about the future of the relationship.” In fact, McGinnis goes on to suggest that intentions can be seen as the actual decision, with other factors interfering with the ability to realize intentions. Here, as I have two related measures, plans and expectations, I can study how concrete intentions (measured by initial plans to marry) are related to the respondent’s self-evaluated chances of following through with plans (measured by expectations of marriage). In doing so, this research will shed light on where cohabitation fits in the relationship spectrum *according to cohabitators themselves* and whether (and why) their views about the ultimate role of cohabitation (i.e., whether it serves as a prelude to marriage) change over time.

### ***Factors That May Influence Intentions and Expectations***

As current cohabitations are over-representative of long-duration cohabitations, it stands to reason that many of those with initial marriage plans lack either the desire or the ability to make the transition to marriage, and thus may not actually expect to marry. Thus, it is in the self-evaluation (i.e., expectations of marriage) of the likelihood of realizing initial plans that other factors may come into play. The transition to marriage among cohabitators has been strongly and consistently linked to the male partner’s earnings and education (Smock and Manning 1997; Wu and Pollard 2000), whereas women’s economic circumstances have generally been insignificant in the transition to marriage among cohabitators (Waller and McLanahan 2005). Correspondingly, men’s socioeconomic status has been more strongly linked to expectations of marriage than women’s (Manning and Smock 2002). Family background also affects union formation and dissolution, as individuals who lived in non-intact families during childhood tend to have more positive attitudes toward cohabitation and less favorable attitudes toward marriage

(Thornton 1991; Axinn and Thornton 1996). This may translate into decreased desire for, and thus decreased expectations of, marriage among cohabitators. Race and ethnicity may be a factor as well; despite lower rates of marriage and fewer transitions to marriage from cohabitation among African Americans, black cohabitators as a group are generally not less likely to expect to marry compared to whites (Bumpass, Sweet, and Cherlin 1991; Brown 2000), although more recent data suggests that female black cohabitators are less likely to expect to marry than their white counterparts (Manning and Smock 2002). Similarly, Hispanic women are no less likely to expect to marry than whites (Manning and Smock 1995). Generally, the lower rates of transition to marriage among minority cohabitators would suggest they may have lower expectations of marriage, but it may be that they enter cohabitation with different expectations for the future of the relationship and feel they are less likely to realize their intentions to marry.

In addition to socioeconomic and demographic characteristics, past family formation behaviors are likely to be important. Although previously married cohabitators are less likely to expect to marry (Bumpass, Sweet, and Cherlin 1991), it is less clear whether prior cohabitation acts in a similar manner. Manning and Smock (2002) showed a negative but insignificant effect of having previously cohabited on cohabiting women's expectations of marriage, though they did not distinguish among prior cohabitations' outcomes and had no information on marital intentions at the start of the union. Prior engagement in a previous cohabitation may impact whether individuals' current cohabitation began with plans and whether they currently expect to marry, depending on whether those plans were realized – men and women who were engaged at the start of a prior cohabitation and married may be more likely to be engaged for their current cohabitation whereas those who were not engaged or whose engagement did not end in marriage may be less likely to report marriage plans or to expect to marry.



In addition to past relationships, the presence of children will be important, varying by whether the children are shared or are from one partner's a prior union. The Fragile Families data suggest that there is a 'magic moment' after a birth where unmarried parents are particularly optimistic about their chances of marriage across relationship types (McLanahan, Garfinkel, and Mincy 2001), so we might expect that forming a cohabitation during a pregnancy or around the time of a birth might coincide with engagement, when optimism and commitment are high. The reality, though, is that if cohabitators with nonmarital pregnancies do not marry prior to the birth, they are unlikely to subsequently wed their partner (Carlson, McLanahan, and England 2004; Edin and Kefalas 2005; Osbourne 2005; Sassler, Roy, and Stasny 2005), so even if a couple decides to marry, expectations of actually doing so might decline with the duration of the relationship. As with marriage plans, expectations for marriage might be particularly high among cohabitators during a pregnancy or around a birth and, to a lesser extent, if they have children together at all. Even among cohabiting women who have children with their partner, elevated concerns over the stability of their union and divorce may discourage expectations of marriage (Gibson, Edin, and McLanahan 2005; Waller and Peters 2005).

Children from a prior union are a different story. Bumpass, Sweet, and Cherlin (1991) showed that respondents with children from a prior union report higher expectations of marriage but that having a partner with children from a prior union decreases expectations, noting that the former scenario almost certainly represents an element of wishful thinking. Having children from a prior relationship can affect whether one chooses to enter a cohabiting relationship in the first place, since doing so places children in a stepfamily. Cherlin (1992) noted that stepfamilies are an "incomplete institution" because stepparent roles are ambiguous, and the strains of navigating complex relationships (such those between parents and children, stepparents and

stepchildren, and between partners) may be exacerbated in nonmarital relationships where the roles are even less formalized. As such, parents might be more hesitant to enter coresidential relationships than non-parents since they are tying not just themselves but their children to a new person. Thus, they may be reluctant to cohabit at all, but if they do, they may require a higher level of commitment from their partners. And by making a commitment to the relationship from the very beginning of cohabitation (where the children are part of the “package deal,” so to speak), the presence of children may have little impact on expectations of marriage, while mothers who lack the initial commitment may find that the strains of unmarried stepfamilies may decrease their optimism about marrying their partner.

Together, the selection of more committed individuals into cohabitation with firm marriage plans may negate the effect of sociodemographic characteristics and prior union and fertility characteristics on expectations of marriage. However, among those without initial marriage plans, personal and partner characteristics will be related to expectations of marriage. Moreover, individuals in a first cohabitation are more likely to have plans to marry when they started living together and are more likely to continue to expect to marry after they start living together. The presence of shared children or a current pregnancy should increase the likelihood of having initial marriage plans but children from a prior union reduce both the likelihood of having initial marriage plans and of having strong expectations of marriage. For those who had marriage plans at the outset of cohabitation, having or expecting a child together, however, may reduce the likelihood of expecting to actually get married, since the “magic moment” may have passed and these couples may feel they have already made a commitment to be a family.

### *Data and Analytical Strategy*

The analyses use Cycle 6 of the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), conducted in 2002. This survey is the most recent, nationally representative data source of information on family formation. In the past, the NSFG interviewed only females aged 15-44, but in this most recent cycle, males aged 15-44 were also interviewed. Cycle 6 includes 7,643 women and 4,928 men<sup>1</sup>. Approximately 10.5% (n=1,273) of the sample is currently cohabiting (10.3% males and 10.6% of females). Approximately 9% of the current cohabitators were skipped out of questions regarding engagement and expectations of marriage due to a programming error during the data collection process. This error occurred across gender, race/ethnicity, and marital status (though for men, nearly 40% of those who were not asked current cohabitation questions are divorced, while for women 98% of those missing current cohabitation questions are never married). Of those who were currently cohabiting, 1,141 were asked questions regarding engagement and expectations of marriage (of which 8 were refused or don't know), and excluding those with missing information on covariates leaves a final sample size of 1,113 (370 men and 743 women).

Initial marriage plans and expectations of marriage are measured by two questions. Cohabitators were asked, "At the time you began living together, were you and [partner] engaged to be married or did you have definite plans to get married?" In addition to initial marital intentions, current cohabitators were asked, "What is the chance that you and [partner] will marry each other?" with the response categories of "no chance," "a little chance," "50-50 chance," "a pretty good chance," and "an almost certain chance." In multivariate analyses, the categories were collapsed into a dichotomous variable indicating whether the respondent felt they had "a pretty good or almost certain chance" of marrying their current partner.

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<sup>1</sup> The sample was designed to interview more women than men; response rates were 78% and 80%, respectively.

Two sets of analyses are conducted. The first analysis predicts whether current cohabitators began their union intending to marry, where the dependent variable is whether the respondent reported initial plans to marry. The second analysis predicts chances of marriage by initial marital intentions, where the dependent variable is whether the respondent had high expectations of marriage (pretty good or almost certain chance of marriage). Both analyses use logistic regression.

Sociodemographic independent variables include age, race/ethnicity (Non-Hispanic white, Non-Hispanic black, Hispanic, or other), and being foreign born. Measures of current socioeconomic status, used in the models predicting current expectations of marriage, include current employment status, enrollment in school, income, and education. Because marriage plans at the start of the union refer to the past, current socioeconomic characteristics cannot be used to predict initial marriage plans, and the only information available is whether the respondent was a high school graduate at the start of the union; mother's education level is used in the model initial predicting marriage plans as a proxy for the respondent's level of education. Family structure at age 14 is also a covariate.

Prior union experience here is measured with a more fine-grained approach than in earlier work to discern between cohabitations that did or did not include initial marriage plans and did or did not end in marriage as well as marriages that did not include cohabitation. It is divided into six categories: never cohabited and never married, never cohabited but previously married, no marriage plans at start of a prior cohabitation but married, marriage plans at start of a prior cohabitation and married, marriage plans at the start of a prior cohabitation but did not marry, and no marriage plans at the start of a prior cohabitation and did not marry. If a respondent has

more than one cohabitation, any cohabitations ending in marriage are preferenced in the coding strategy, followed by those with initial plans to marry.

Fertility covariates are measured differently in the initial marital intentions and expectations of marriage models, since the question refers to marriage plans at the start of the union (i.e., in the past), and the expectations of marriage refer to the present. In the initial marriage plans model, two variables measuring shared children are used: whether the respondent (or partner) was pregnant at the start of cohabitation (defined as the seven months preceding a birth) and whether the respondent had a birth in the same month or within two months preceding the start of cohabitation. In the expectations of marriage model, fertility includes whether the respondent (or partner) is currently pregnant and whether they have any children together. For men, the latter is derived from a direct question inquiring whether they have any children with their current partner. For women, no such question is asked and instead it is defined as having any children born during the cohabiting union or in the 6 months preceding the start of the union for women, which assumes a) that any unions formed near the time of a birth are probably with the newborn's biological father, b) that if a couple is going to cohabit after a birth it happens fairly quickly, and c) that new mothers are unlikely to be able to be fully 'on the market' or attractive to potential partners immediately after a birth. Finally, both models include whether the respondent has any coresidential children under 18 from a prior union living with them, defined as having a coresidential child born more than 12 months prior to the start of the current cohabitation, which assumes in the engagement model that current coresidential children were also present at the start of the union. Births between six months and one year prior to cohabitation (9 births to men, 8 births to women) represent a gray area in terms of relationship status; coding such births as with the current partner would falsely attribute 5 births to the current

union for men when comparing it to the direct question asked of men. For women, attributing these births either to the current union or as children living with them from a prior union does not substantively change the results, and as such, these births are ignored.

Finally, a number of variables concerning the current union are included. Duration of cohabitation (not in the model predicting marital intentions) is expected to be inversely related to expectations of marriage. Partner's age, marital status, level of education, and whether the partner had any coresidential children under 18 living with them at the start of the cohabitation are included in the models of expectations of marriage. It is assumed that if a partner had a child living with them at the start of the union, the child is still living with them at the time of interview. Because partner education is measured at the time of interview and may have changed over time, it is not included in the model predicting marriage plans at the start of the union.

### ***Descriptive Results***

The sample of current cohabitators is described in Table 1, which compares the characteristics of those with and without initial marriage plans. The mean duration of current cohabitations is about three and half years, supporting prior research that current cohabitations are indeed over-representative of exceptionally long cohabitations compared to all cohabitations (Bumpass, Sweet, and Cherlin 1991); it is slightly longer for those without initial marriage plans but the differences are not significant. Although individuals who have ever cohabited tend to be fairly young at their first cohabitation, the average age of current cohabitators in the 2002 NSFG is just under thirty years. Somewhat surprisingly given lower rates of transition to marriage among minority cohabitators, a greater proportion of blacks and Hispanics report initial marriage plans at

the start of cohabitation rather than not having initial marriage plans, and a greater proportion of foreign born cohabitators report having initial marriage plans.

– Table 1 here –

Many current cohabitators also have prior union experiences – about half of them have either been married or cohabited (or both) in the past, though the type of past union experiences varies by initial marriage plans. Among those with no initial marriage plans at the start of their union, 11% report a prior marriage that did not include cohabitation (more than twice the percent among those with initial marriage plans), and 23% report a ‘failed engagement’ – having a past cohabitation that began with plans to marry but that did not end in marriage (about 8% higher than those with initial marriage plans). Conversely, twice as many of those with initial marriage plans in their current cohabitation report a past cohabitation began with marriage plans and ended in marriage than those who reported having no plans to marry at the start of their current union (13.8% vs. 6.7%, respectively). Together, this suggests that how past unions formed and how they ended influences the entrance into current unions. Children are also present in many current cohabitations, though differences by the presence of initial marriage plans are significant only for having children with their current partner. A greater proportion of those with initial marriage plans have children with their current partner (41.5%) compared to only 31.2% of those without plans. Between one-fifth and one-fourth of currently cohabiting individuals have coresidential children from a prior union.

With few exceptions, socioeconomic differences between those with and without initial marriage plans are minimal. Most cohabitators are currently employed or working, though the majority report incomes below \$35,000 and only 15% of those with initial marriage plans and 23% of those without initial marriage plans have an associate’s degree or higher; about 40% of

current cohabitators did not have their high school degree or GED when they began cohabiting. Those without initial marriage plans do, however, come from families with higher-educated mothers. About one-third of currently cohabiting individuals did not live with both biological parents at age 14. Current cohabitators' partners are, on average, slightly older than respondents. Cohabitators without initial marriage plans are significantly more likely to have partners who have been married before compared to those with initial plans (33.8% vs. 24.1%, respectively), again suggesting that past unions influences the formation of new unions. Most partners (about three-quarters of both those with and without initial marriage plans) have at least a high school degree but only about a fifth have an associate's degree or higher.

Table 2 shows the distribution of initial marriage plans and expectations of marriage. About 70% of currently cohabiting individuals feel optimistic that their union will transition to marriage; however, this varies significantly by whether the respondent reported entering cohabitation with marriage plans. Two-thirds of those with initial marriage plans reported an almost certain chance of marriage compared to just over one-third of those without marriage plans. Even when combining "pretty good" and "almost certain," those with initial marriage plans are much more optimistic about marriage than those without (81.7% vs. 60.2%). Thus, whether cohabitation is a prelude to marriage is highly related to how individuals entered cohabitation – it is significantly less likely to be considered part of the marital process for individuals who were not strongly committed to marriage when they started living with their partner. However, nearly 20% of those who began cohabiting with plans to marry do not have particularly favorable expectations of actually getting married, and it is these individuals who may have personal or relationship characteristics that interfere with the ability to realize and carry out their initial marriage plans.



– Table 2 here –

### ***Multivariate Results***

The odds ratios from logistic regression of the likelihood that a current cohabitor began their union with the intention to marry are presented in Table 3. Overall, relatively little predicts marital intentions at the start of the union, with some exceptions. Despite the fact that prior research has shown that minority cohabitators are less likely to transition to marriage, Hispanics and especially blacks are *more* likely than whites to report having begun cohabiting with plans to marry. This suggests that despite lower rates of transition to marriage among Hispanics and blacks, they are more likely to view their cohabitation as part of the marriage process than whites. However, the lower rates of transition to marriage among minorities suggests that they face substantial barriers in realizing their intentions to marry or that they view engagement differently than whites.

– Table 3 here –

Prior union and family formation behaviors are important as well. Having either a prior cohabitation that did not begin with firm marriage plans but ended in marriage or a past cohabitation that neither began with plans to marry nor ended in marriage decreases the odds that the current union began with marriage plans by about 50%. However, there seems to be no support for the contention that having definite marriage plans in a prior cohabitation and failing to marry reduces the likelihood of having marriage plans in the current cohabitation. And in fact, having failed to marry a prior cohabiting partner for whom they had planned to marry actually marginally increases the likelihood of having marriage plans in their current union. There is no support for the idea that beginning a cohabitation with a pregnancy or a recent birth increases the likelihood that men and women began cohabiting with plans to marry. Children from prior

relationships, conversely, are important. Individuals who have coresidential children from a prior relationship are about 50% more likely than their childless peers to begin cohabiting with firm marriage plans, which may reflect a need to have a high level of commitment among parents to better ensure the stability of their newly formed stepfamily.

Turning now to expectations of marriage, the first column of Table 4 examines expectations of marriage, controlling for marriage plans, and the last two columns disaggregate by whether the respondent reported having initial marital plans. Looking first at the full sample, relatively few characteristics are predictive of having high expectations of marriage. As expected, being engaged or having definite plans to marry at the start of the union is strongly and significantly associated with expecting to marry. Compared to their peers who did not begin cohabiting with initial marriage plans, those with initial marriage plans are 3.6 times as likely to expect to marry their partner. Clearly, having initial expectations of marriage when starting to live together is positively related to current expectations of marriage, yet as is shown in the descriptive analyses, not everyone who began cohabiting with marriage plans expects to marry.

– Table 4 here –

There is only weak support for an effect of the respondent's past cohabitation and marriage experience impacting their outlook on the current relationship, with having a past cohabitation that began with plans to marry but that did not end in marriage marginally discouraging an optimistic outlook towards marriage in the current union. Interestingly, having a partner who has been previously married marginally increases the odds of expecting to marry, which implies that not only do individuals not view their partner's past relationships negatively (that is, they do not appear to be reluctant to enter a relationship with someone who has a failed marriage in the past) but that having a partner who has been married before actually increases

their optimism about their current relationship. Respondent's coresidential children from a prior union are also marginally significant, decreasing the odds of expecting to marry by about 25%. This confirms prior work that suggests that stepchildren can create difficulties in new relationships.

Few socioeconomic and demographic variables are important. It is worth noting that, as in other research, Hispanics and blacks are no less likely to expect to marry. They are no *more* likely to expect to marry either, which is interesting since they are more likely to begin cohabiting with plans to marry. This suggests that either minorities face substantial barriers in realizing their plans or that the commitment to each other, signified by planning to marry (with perhaps an engagement ring), is sufficient. Only two other socioeconomic variables are important. Income is positively and significantly associated with expectations of marriage, and while the respondent's level of education is insignificant, having a partner who has attended at least some college increases the odds of expecting to marry by nearly 150%.

Turning now to the disaggregated models, a few interesting things emerge. First, while there are no significant differences among expectations of marriage among minorities without plans to marry, it appears that Hispanics who began cohabiting with plans to marry are actually much less likely to expect to actually marry. This supports contentions from other research that cohabitation may act as a substitute for marriage for Hispanics (Landale and Forste 1991; Manning and Landale 1996; Manning 2002; 2004), where the commitment is made at the outset of cohabitation and actually formalizing the relationship is less important. Stratifying by initial marriage plans also reveals that the negative effect on expectations of marriage of having a prior cohabitation that began with plans to marry but that did not end to marriage in the aggregated sample is driven primarily by those with initial marriage plans. Among those with plans to

marry, a ‘failed engagement’ in a past cohabitation appears to reduce their optimism about the future of their current relationship.

Among those without initial plans to marry, having shared children with their partner increases optimism about marriage by about 50%, while having children from a prior union reduces optimism by about 40%. This suggests that for those who entered their union without a strong commitment to the relationship and a clear understanding of where the relationship was going, the presence of children plays a big role. Unmarried couples with children together are already functioning as families – however fragile – and expect that they will formalize their union sometime in the future, though the work from the Fragile Families research suggests these couples will face substantial barriers in doing so (Carlson, McLanahan, and England 2004). Still, they are optimistic about the marriage. The presence of children from a prior union, though, presents obstacles to marriage for those who had no marriage plans. For these couples, stepchildren may be a source of friction that lowers relationship quality and expectations of marriage, but conversely, low expectations of marriage may reflect low desire to marry, with reluctance (or inability, in the case of couples who are separated but not divorced) to legally bind one’s children to a stepparent. Note that this is not the case for initial plans to marry – individuals who have children from a prior union are actually more likely to begin cohabiting with plans to marry. This suggests that some individuals with children do not enter a cohabiting union unless they are very optimistic about the union’s future, perhaps out of reluctance to expose their children to any future union stability. Partner’s children, though, seem to be unrelated to expectations of marriage.

Other partner characteristics are also important but only for those who began cohabiting without plans to marry. Partner’s age is inversely related to expectations of marriage, while a

partner's prior marriage is positively (though marginally) related to marriage. Having a partner with some college increases expectations of marriage. The significance of partner characteristics in the full sample of cohabitators was driven entirely by the role of partner characteristics among those without plans, implying that once individuals make an initial commitment to wed, they are not influenced by partner characteristics.

Finally, socioeconomic factors also appear to act somewhat differently for those with and without plans. Income is only significant for those who did not have initial marriage plans; although I was unable to control for income in the model predicting initial marriage plans, it is possible that there is selection into a cohabitation with plans to marry of those with higher incomes. Having less than a high school education reduces by about half the odds of expecting to marry among those who had marriage plans but is unrelated to expectations for those without marriage plans.

Since current cohabitation is subjected to censoring – that is, cohabitators who most want to marry will leave cohabitation fairly quickly – I also examined these models on sub-samples of cohabitators of varying duration: 24 months, 12 months, and 6 months (not shown). In all models, entering cohabitation with plans to marry strongly and significantly increased the likelihood of expecting to marry.

### ***Discussion***

Despite the increasing prevalence of cohabitation and research devoted to understanding where it fits into to the relationship spectrum, an often overlooked aspect of cohabitation concerns intentions and expectations. Determining whether cohabitation is an alternative to being single, an alternative to marriage, or a precursor to marriage is generally based on comparisons across groups or outcomes of cohabiting unions. However, regardless of how

cohabiting unions turn out, many cohabitators believe their union will, at some point, transition into marriage. This suggests that there are some cohabitations that actually represent ‘thwarted marriages,’ where marriages were expected but for some reason did not occur. The current study is unique in examining both intentions at the start of cohabitation and subsequent expectations of marriage.

I argue that initial marriage plans and current expectations of marriage represent two different concepts. Building on McGinnis’ work, I conceptualize initial marriage plans as the actual commitment a couple makes and current expectations of marriage as an individual’s evaluation of the chances of realizing those initial plans. Many individuals and couples experience factors that can facilitate or create a barrier in making a transition to marriage, but it is possible that those with a higher initial commitment are better equipped to make the transition to marriage than those without such a commitment. Entering cohabitation with plans to marry one’s partner implies a more serious relationship, one in which many of the barriers and obstacles couples face have been discussed and dealt with prior to cohabitation. Of course, many couples also enter cohabitation with less firm plans for the future; qualitative research has revealed that many couples sort of drift into cohabitation, and marriage has not been discussed (Sassler 2004; Manning and Smock 2005). It is these couples – those that began cohabiting with no firm commitment to each other or the union – that will be most strongly impacted by socioeconomic factors and that might be most affected by socioeconomic issues or problems stemming from prior family experiences.

The results here largely support this argument. Prior family formation behaviors and the presence of children influence who enters cohabitation with firm marriage plans. Among cohabitators with initial marriage plans (the vast majority of whom expect to marry, as would be

expected), relatively little influences their evaluations of the chances of marriage, but for those who entered cohabitation without initial marriage plans, socioeconomic factors and the presence of children become salient. Of course, it should be noted that those who had marriage plans are, not surprisingly, more optimistic about the chances of marriage overall, but the majority of those without firm plans to marry at the start of their union expect to marry as well.

Hispanic and black individuals are particularly likely to report themselves as having plans to marry at the start of their unions; this is an unexpected finding, given that prior work has shown that minority cohabitators have lower rates of transitioning to marriage and do not appear to be *more* likely to expect to marry. Interestingly, Hispanics with plans to marry their partner when they started living together are significantly less likely to expect to actually marry than whites. This confirms suppositions in earlier work that cohabitations act as a substitute for marriage among Hispanics, and this may especially be the case for cohabiting Hispanics who have made a commitment to each other by getting engaged or making plans to marry (however vague).

Union and fertility behaviors are only partially related to marriage plans and expectations of marriage. Having a prior cohabitation that did not start with firm plans decreases the likelihood that men and women start their current union with marriage plans. However, a ‘failed’ engagement from a past cohabitation increases the likelihood that the current union begins with marriage plans as well – such individuals might be overly optimistic about their relationships overall or may take engagement lightly. Prior union experiences are largely unrelated to expectations of marriage, though. There does not appear to be a “magic” moment around the start of cohabitation for expectant or new parents but having children from a prior union encourages starting a cohabitation with plans. As argued, having either shared children or

children from a prior union does not affect expectations of marriage among those with initial marriage plans, but they are important for those without initial marriage plans. Shared children among those without initial marriage plans promotes optimism about marriage (even though the Fragile Families work suggests that these relationships are unlikely to last) whereas children from a prior union decrease optimism about marriage, implying that unmarried stepfamilies face considerable barriers to marriage.

### **Limitations**

Unfortunately, while the NSFG is the first data set to include marital intentions at the start of a cohabiting union, it does have some limitations. One limitation is that couples are not interviewed, and it is possible that one partner may believe they have definite plans to marry but the other partner does not share that belief. Similarly, it is possible that one partner's plans for the future outweigh the other partner's; for instance, if a woman wanted to get engaged but her partner did not, they likely would not get engaged. It would be interesting to know how both partners view their relationship and how disagreement about marital intentions may influence subsequent expectations and transitions. Moreover, there is also some evidence that the male partner's expectations of marriage hold more weight in subsequent transitions (Brown 2000).

Although this study is among the first to analyze engagement and plans to marry in a nationally representative sample, these concepts involve issues of retrospective rationalization. Some cohabitators may report they were engaged when they were not and vice versa. As discussed earlier, engagement and plans to marry are a "fuzzy" concept at best, begging the question of what exactly it means to have plans to marry. For the middle-class, it usually entails formally "popping the question" about marriage and the gift of an engagement ring from the man to the woman. In essence, it implies actually planning to get married, including setting a



wedding date. Whether this conception actually holds true for the majority of the middle-class or for other groups is unclear. It could also mean, for instance, that a couple has discussed marriage and both members agree that marriage is in the future, even if they have no concrete plans to wed any time soon. It is also possible that the individuals' current assessment of their relationship can impact their retrospective reporting of marital intentions, where those who do not expect to marry will be less likely to report marital intentions at the outset to minimize any sense of relationship failure. The descriptive results showed that only two-thirds of those with marital intentions think there is an almost certain chance of marriage, though, which suggests that people do not have problems reporting what appear to be inconsistencies over time. And overall, despite these limitations, this work contributes to our understanding of how initial marriage plans among cohabitators are related to subsequent expectations of marriage and hopefully will spur future work to incorporate multiple measures of expectations of marriage, such as engagement.

This research suggests that most people consider their cohabitations as a precursor to marriage, and this is important, as researchers' tendency to look only at outcomes obscures the fact that many individuals believe their cohabitation is part of a path to marriage. As the government plans to spend millions of dollars to encourage marriage and strengthen relationships, particularly among unmarried parents, the need to understand what factors come between wanting and expecting to marry and actually doing so is vital. This research provides a first step and highlights some factors that seem to influence realizing plans to marry. Only recently has qualitative research begun to explore the issue of initial commitment (Smock and Manning 2003; Sassler 2004), and due to data limitations, quantitative research has yet to do so. However, the existence of a booming wedding industry (Mead 2007) at the same time we are experiencing increasing rates of delayed marriage and nonmarriage, with significant differences

by race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status, would suggest that issues surrounding engagement, commitment to marriage, and the ability to realize marital plans will be an important line of future research.

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**Table 1. Percent Distribution and Means of Descriptive Characteristics by Initial Marriage Plans, weighted (sample size is unweighted; standard errors in parentheses where appropriate)**

	Initial Marriage Plans	No Initial Marriage Plans
Mean duration of current cohabitation	41.0 months (2.922)	43.6 months (2.335)
Mean age	29.0 years (0.381)	29.3 years (0.501)
Female	47.7%	51.9%
Race		
Hispanic	27.3%	19.9%**
Non-Hispanic White	52.1%	61.6%**
Non-Hispanic Black	17.7%	11.2%**
Other	2.9%	7.3%**
Foreign Born	18.7%	13.8%†
Prior union experiences		
Never cohabited, never married	52.4%	47.2%**
Never cohabited but married	5.0%	10.9%**
No marriage plans at start of prior cohabitation but married	5.2%	5.7%**
Marriage plans at start of prior cohabitation and married	13.8%	6.7%**
Marriage plans at start of prior cohabitation but did not marry	15.0%	23.4%**
No marriage plans at start of prior cohabitation, did not marry	8.6%	6.2%**
Any children with current partner	41.5%	31.2%*
Currently pregnant	7.4%	4.9%
Started cohabitation pregnant	7.8%	4.7%
Started cohabitation within three months of a birth	4.1%	2.5%
Has coresidential children from prior union	26.0%	20.7%
Currently working	76.2%	75.7%
Currently enrolled in school	12.8%	16.4%
Income		
Less than \$15,000	21.8%	22.2%
\$15,000-\$24,999	19.2%	17.8%
\$25,000-\$34,999	20.4%	15.6%
\$35,000-\$49,999	21.9%	17.2%
\$50,000 or more	16.7%	27.3%
Education		
Less than HS	21.0%	24.3%
HS/GED	43.3%	35.9%
Some college	20.0%	16.8%
Associate's Degree	5.7%	6.8%
College or higher	10.1%	16.2%
Started cohabitation as a HS graduate	63.4%	60.2%
Family structure at 14		
Both biological parents	65.0%	60.7%
Two parent stepfamily	11.9%	11.4%
Other	23.2%	27.9%
Mother's education		
Less than HS/missing	36.1%	27.8%*
HS/GED	35.8%	39.5%*
Some college	18.3%	18.7%*
College or higher	9.8%	14.0%*
Partner's age	29.8 years (0.686)	31.1 years (0.421)
Partner previously married	24.1%	33.8%*
Partner has coresidential children from prior union	20.9%	23.2%
Partner education		
Less than HS	23.4%	20.3%
HS/GED	37.5%	35.3%
Some college	17.8%	21.7%
Associate's Degree	5.5%	6.6%
College or higher	15.7%	16.2%
<b>N</b>	<b>383</b>	<b>730</b>

†p≤0.1 \*p≤0.05 \*\*p≤0.01 \*\*\*p≤0.001



**Table 2. Initial Plans to Marry and Expectations of Marriage Among Current Cohabiters, weighted (sample sizes are unweighted)**

	<b>Initial Marriage Plans</b>	<b>No Initial Marriage Plans</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Chance of Marriage</b>			
No chance	3.2%***	5.9%	5.0%
A little chance	3.0%***	12.0%	8.9%
50-50 chance	12.2%***	18.0%	16.0%
A pretty good chance	15.3%***	28.0%	23.6%
An almost certain chance	66.4%***	36.2%	46.6%
<b>Total</b>	<b>34.5%</b>	<b>65.5%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
<b>N</b>	<b>383</b>	<b>730</b>	<b>1113</b>

Percentages may not add up exactly due to rounding.

\*\*\* $p \leq 0.001$  Significant differences in initial marriage plans.

**Table 3. Odds Ratios of Having Marriage Plans at the Initiation of Current Cohabitation**

	<i>Marriage Plans at Start of Cohabitation</i>	
Age		1.016
Female		0.783
Race (default=white)		
	Hispanic	1.374†
	Black	1.704**
	Other	0.835
Foreign Born		0.992
Prior union experience (default=never cohabited, never married)		
	Never cohabited but married	0.776
	No marriage plans at start of prior cohabitation but married	0.487*
	Marriage plans at start of prior cohabitation and married	0.868
	Marriage plans at start of prior cohabitation but did not marry	1.557†
	No marriage plans at start of prior cohabitation, did not marry	0.515***
Started current cohabitation pregnant		1.183
Started current cohabitation within three months of a birth		1.008
Has coresidential children from prior union		1.489*
High school graduate		1.009
Family structure at 14 (default=both biological parents)		
	Two parent stepfamily	1.275
	Other	0.792
Mother's education (default=HS/GED)		
	Less than HS	1.054
	Some college	0.939
	College or higher	0.719
Partner's age		0.980
Partner previously married		0.846
Partner has coresidential children from prior union		0.873
<b>N</b>		1113
<b>DF</b>		23
<b>-2 log likelihood</b>		1362.948

†p≤0.1 \*p≤0.05 \*\*p≤0.01 \*\*\*p≤0.001

**Table 4. Odds Ratios of the Expectations of Marriage Among Current Cohabitors by Marriage Plans at the Initiation of Cohabitation**

		<i>Expect to Marry</i>		
		<i>Expect to Marry</i>	<i>Initial Marriage Plans</i>	<i>No Initial Marriage Plans</i>
Age		0.984	0.871	0.982
Female		1.158	0.934	1.158
Race (default=white)				
	Hispanic	0.775	0.395*	0.973
	Black	0.821	0.675	0.831
	Other	1.510	0.270	1.924
Foreign Born		0.909	2.089	0.724
Prior union experiences (default=never cohabited, never married)				
	Never cohabited but married	0.970	1.912	0.744
	No marriage plans at start of prior cohabitation but married	0.843	1.298	0.810
	Marriage plans at start of prior cohabitation and married	1.215	0.683	1.932
	Marriage plans at start of prior cohabitation but did not marry	0.607†	0.469†	0.791
	No marriage plans at start of prior cohabitation, did not marry	0.992	1.418	0.953
Marriage plans at the start of current cohabitation		3.605***	n/a	n/a
Duration of cohabitation		0.997	0.997	0.999
Any children with current partner		1.233	0.595	1.556*
Currently pregnant		1.413	0.717	1.914†
Has coresidential children from prior union		0.741†	1.323	0.613*
Currently working		0.952	0.668	1.032
Currently enrolled in school		0.994	1.002	1.033
Income		1.076***	1.049	1.087***
Education (default=HS/GED)				
	Less than HS	0.632	0.405*	0.732
	Some college	1.365	1.962	1.397
	Associate's Degree	1.119	1.916	1.098
	College or higher	1.388	2.877	1.384
Family structure at 14 (default=both biological parents)				
	Two parent stepfamily	1.120	1.928	1.036
	Other	1.303	1.255	1.307
Partner's age		0.965	0.963	0.957**
Partner previously married		1.413†	1.530	1.468†
Partner has coresidential children from prior union		0.809	0.785	0.846
Partner education (default=HS/GED)				
	Less than HS	1.015	1.145	0.963
	Some college	2.530**	4.369	2.445*
	Associate's Degree	1.098	1.651	0.986
	College or higher	1.264	1.027	1.274
<b>N</b>		1113	383	740
<b>DF</b>		32	31	31
<b>-2 log likelihood</b>		1231.526	308.919	883.704

†p≤0.1 \*p≤0.05 \*\*p≤0.01 \*\*\*p≤0.001