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Racial/Ethnic Differences in Fertility Behavior and Intentions within Cohabiting Unions

Abstract

Using data from the 1995 and 2002 waves of the National Survey of Family Growth this study examines the potential racial/ethnic variation of the role of cohabitation in the family system. Cohabitation represents an increasingly prevalent family form and past and current research examines the role of cohabitation in the family system. Three potential roles of cohabitation have been advanced, that it is an alternative to being single, a precursor to marriage, and an alternative to marriage. Past research suggests that examining the fertility behavior of cohabitators is a promising avenue for understanding the role of cohabitation. In addition, existing studies in this area suggest that cohabitation may not play the same role for individuals from different racial/ethnic backgrounds. This study uses information from fertility related behavior and intentions to add to research on whether the role of cohabitation varies for White, Black, and Mexican American women.

Cohabitation represents an increasingly prevalent family form. Over recent decades rates of cohabitation have increased approaching a level where the majority of women will cohabit at some point in their lives. National estimates of the prevalence of cohabiting unions from the U.S. Census suggest that in the year 2000 there were over three million cohabiting couples and that this arrangement constituted 3.7% of all households (Fields and Casper 2001). As for incidence, in 1995 nearly half of all women ages 35-39 had ever cohabited compared to only 30 percent of women in the same age group in 1987 (Bumpass and Lu 2000).

With the increase in this type of family form comes an increase in research attempting to describe and explain factors related to cohabitation. One area where a substantial body of research has developed is on how cohabitation fits into the family system. Past research summarizes three alternative perspectives that frame research on the role of cohabitation. They include the view that cohabitation is an alternative to being single, cohabitation is an alternative to legal marriage, and that cohabitation is a precursor to marriage (Rindfuss and VandenHeuvel 1990). Manning and Landale (1996) suggest that the relationship of cohabitation to legal marriage is related to the prevalence and acceptance of procreation in this family form. This suggests that examining fertility within cohabiting unions is a promising avenue for uncovering how cohabitation fits into the family system.

Bumpass and Lu (2000) indicate that between 1990 and 1994 nearly two-fifths of non-marital births were to cohabiting couples. They also indicate that there is substantial variation across race and ethnicity in this trend. For Non-Hispanic White women 50 percent of non-marital births were in cohabiting unions for this time period. This figure was 53 percent for Hispanic women and 22 percent for Black women. A great deal of research describes and

examines racial and ethnic differences in the link between cohabitation and non-marital fertility and the current study aims to advance research in this area.

The framework of the Second Demographic Transition offers insights into how cohabitation and fertility within cohabiting unions fit into the family system. Raley (2001) posits that over the course of the Second Demographic Transition cohabiting unions become more prevalent and undergo a shift from being a precursor to marriage that is often viewed as deviant to a more normative state as an alternative to marriage where childbearing is acceptable. The end result of this transition is that cohabitation and marriage become equivalent with the stability of and fertility within cohabiting unions matching that of marriages.

The aim of the current study is to provide a better understanding of the relationship between cohabitation and fertility, but rather than focusing on birth rates, the focus of the present study is on racial and ethnic differences in two of the proximate determinants of fertility and the link between union status and fertility intentions. By focusing on the proximate determinants of fertility rather than fertility rates across groups the current study provides information on the potential determinants of these fertility differentials. Past research provides evidence that fertility rates within cohabiting unions vary and that cohabitation may not serve the same family function for individuals of different racial or ethnic backgrounds (Loomis and Landale 1994, Manning and Landale 1996, Manning 2001, Raley 2001).

Data

The data are from the 1995 and 2002 waves of the National Survey of Family Growth. This survey includes respondents ages 15 to 44. Only White, Black, and Mexican women are included in the sample. There are 6,594 White, Black, and Mexican American women in the 2002 data and 9,853 in 1995. The data from the two waves are pooled.

Measures

Dependent Variables

The analysis focuses on two outcomes. The first outcome is the proximate determinants of fertility and the second is current fertility intentions. The two proximate determinants that are examined separately are frequency of sexual intercourse and effectiveness of contraceptive use. Frequency of sexual intercourse is measured with the question asking the respondents how many times they had sexual intercourse in the last four weeks. Following Bachrach (1987) contraceptive use is grouped into three categories, no method, the use of a less effective method, and the use of a more effective method.

For the second part, the outcome variable is whether the respondent is currently seeking a pregnancy. Respondents are coded as not using contraception and currently seeking a pregnancy, not using contraception and not currently seeking a pregnancy, and using contraception and not currently seeking a pregnancy.

Independent Variables

The major aim of this study is to examine racial/ethnic differences in the role of cohabitation. Therefore, the major independent variable is the respondent's racial/ethnic background. The analysis is limited to White, Black, and Mexican American women. The control variables include the respondent's level of education, current school enrollment, work status, household income, current relationship duration, age, parity, religion, and previous non-marital, marital, and non-union births. The partner characteristics include the partner's work status. The family background variables include whether the respondent lived in an intact family until age 18, their mother's education, their mother's age at first birth, mother's work status during childhood, and the number of siblings the respondent has.

Analysis

Since the aim of this research is to contribute to our knowledge about potential racial/ethnic variation in the role of cohabitation the analysis for each outcome is done in two steps. The first step is to analyze racial/ethnic differences in the outcome variables among only those women who are currently cohabiting. The second step is to use the full sample of women and compare cohabiting women of each race/ethnic group to single and married women to see how cohabitators compare to single and married women on these outcomes. This step will test whether cohabitators of each racial/ethnic group are more like single or married individuals. For the analysis of the frequency of sexual intercourse linear regression is used. For the analysis of contraceptive use and current fertility intentions multinomial logistic regression is used.

Expected Findings

For section one, the comparison of the proximate determinants of fertility, I expect that there will not be racial or ethnic variations in the frequency of intercourse, but there will be variation in the use of more effective contraception as compared to less effective contraception with White cohabitators being more likely to use more effective contraception than Black or Mexican cohabitators. I expect that controlling for socioeconomic characteristics will at least partially mediate this relationship. For the second part of aim one I will compare White, Black, and Mexican cohabitators to single and married individuals within the same racial or ethnic group on their frequency of intercourse and contraceptive use. I expect that, controlling for age and duration of the relationship, these two measures will be more similar for single and cohabiting individuals for Whites and for married and cohabiting individuals for Blacks and Mexicans.

For section two, the comparison of current fertility intentions, I expect that Black and Mexican cohabitators will be more likely to report that they are currently seeking a pregnancy than

White cohabitators. I expect differences between Black and Mexican cohabitators to emerge in this section. I expect Mexican cohabitators to have the highest reports that they are currently seeking a pregnancy compared to Black and White cohabitators. For the second stage of the analysis that compares cohabitators to married and single individuals I expect that the current fertility intentions of White cohabitators will more closely approximate those of White single individuals than White married individuals. I expect that the current fertility intentions of Black and Mexican cohabiting individuals will more closely resemble those of married Black and Mexican individuals than never married individuals.

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