

Introduction and Background

The changing American family and implications for well-being of adults and children is one of the central themes of recent family studies. Recent changes in family formation patterns, including the rise in nonmarital cohabitation and childbearing (Bumpass and Lu, 2000), have prompted numerous studies that have aimed to describe and understand how family patterns have changed and what are the implications of these changes (Lichter, Qian & Mellott; 2006). One branch of this work examines the dynamic nature of individual's family experiences across the life course for both adults (Moffitt and Rendall, 1995) and children (Graefe & Lichter, 1999). This study contributes to this area of study by examining patterns of union formation and dissolution in early to mid adulthood among recent cohorts of American women, highlighting differences between rural and urban women.

Numerous recent studies have examined family structure and formation differences among recent cohorts of rural and urban populations (Snyder & Brown; 2004; Snyder & McLaughlin, 2004; Brown & Snyder, 2006). Historically rural women engaged in sexual activity, pregnancy and childbearing, and marriage at earlier ages than urban women (Brown, 1981; Heaton, Lichter and Amoentag, 1989; McLanahan and Lichter, 1993; Meyers and Hastings, 1995). More recent studies examining rural/urban differences in cohabitation find that family formation differences persist. Rural women remain more likely to marry both as a first union type and a first birth context and marry approximately one year earlier than urban women (Snyder, Brown & Condo, 2004; Snyder, 2006). Rural women's cohabiting unions are also of shorter duration (Brown & Snyder, 2006). In general, these studies find that even though are narrowing, significant differences remain in union formation experiences of rural and urban women.

When considering union dissolution, however, very little is known about differences between rural and urban populations. Brown and Snyder (2006) examined transitions out of first cohabiting unions among rural and urban women, but beyond that few have examined union dissolution among rural populations. Although numerous prior studies have used large national data sets to examine trends in female headship and note similar patterns and levels between rural and urban (mostly suburban) populations (Snyder & McLaughlin, 2004; Snyder, McLaughlin & Findeis, 2006), to our knowledge none have examined marital dissolution and remarriage patterns in recent years.

In this study we attempt to fill these identified gaps and build upon the prior work that has been done. We attempt to take a more comprehensive view of family patterns by examining all union transitions (formation and dissolution patterns for cohabitation and marriage) among rural and urban women in early to mid adulthood. This study will add to this important research area by providing a more comprehensive overview of family formation and dissolution patterns in rural and urban America in recent decades. The following research questions are addressed:

1. What are the patterns of union formation (cohabitation, marriage, remarriage) and dissolution (ending cohabiting unions, divorce) among recent cohorts of American women? An examination of patterns includes the type of union formation and

- dissolutions and also the timing in these patterns. We will develop a typology of union formation and dissolution patterns overall, and separately for rural and urban women.
2. How do rural and urban women differ in their patterns of union formation and dissolution with regards to both the type and timing of these patterns?
 3. What factors predict specific patterns of union formation and dissolution?

Data and Methods

We use data from the 2002 cycle of the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), a large national probability sample of 7,643 women aged 15-44 in 2002. The NSFG was designed to obtain information on the health and well-being of U.S. women and contains extensive retrospective data on women's union formation and dissolution patterns (including marital and cohabiting unions), and fertility behaviors. In this study we use the retrospective union formation and dissolution variables to examine patterns of family formation and dissolution among American women prior to age 45. The NSFG measures the length of cohabiting and marital unions in century months, beginning the month the union begins and ending the month the cohabiting or marital couple separates, the cohabiting union ends through marriage or separation, or the cohabiting or marital union remains intact with the case censored at the interview month. We use specially created event history files of the 2002 NSFG that capture first unions and all subsequent unions, so it is possible to observe patterns of multiple cohabitation, marriage and remarriages, and patterns that transition from cohabitation to marriage, and so forth. The 2002 NSFG contains data on 7,643 women who contributed 957,567 retrospective person months for observation to the event history files we created.

Preliminary Results

We've invested a large amount of time coding all union transitions among the main female respondent file in the 2002 NSFG. Table 1 contains some preliminary results that begin to capture some of the patterns of union formation and dissolution in the sample. Panel 1 uses the person-month file and describes the number and percent of person-months in the file that are spent in single, married and cohabiting states. The single state contains the most person months, 44.7%, followed by the married state (41.4%) and the cohabiting state (13.9%). These figures record the number of person months spent in all spells in each state, so these include all months in first and higher order spells of singlehood, marriage and cohabitation. Future analyses will flush out these differences.

Panel 2 in Table 1 used data from the flat file (n=7,643 women) and describes the number and percent of women who experienced none, one, two, three and more than three union transitions. As shown at the top of Panel B, 29% of the women in the 2002 NSFG were single during the entire observation period and experienced no union transitions. Approximately 23% experienced only one transition (single to cohabitation or single to marriage); 21.9% experiences two transitions; 7.5% experienced three transitions; and 18.5% experienced more than three union transitions. All transition types are described in Panel B of Table 1. Future analyses will use life tables and latent class analysis to examine the timing of these transitions, and attempt to develop more meaningful latent classes that describe these union transition patterns.

Finally, Panel 3 in Table 1 again uses the person file and describes the percent of

transitions that involve marriage and those that involve cohabitation. As shown, in Panel A, although a larger number of person months are spent in the marital state, a larger number of union transitions in women's lives involve cohabitation (47.4% involve cohabitation and 37.7% involve marriage). These findings have implications for how we understand the meaning of cohabitation in the lives of American women.

Table 1. Union History and Transitions of American Women in 2002

Panel A: Union Type^a	Person Months Spent in Union Type
Single	44.7% (n=427,997)
Married	41.4% (n=396,721)
Cohabiting	13.9% (n=132,849)

Panel B: Number and Type of Union Transitions^b	Number
No union transitions—single only (n=2,220; 29.0%)	2,220
One Transition (n=1,766; 23.1%)	
Single to marriage	1,322
Single to cohabiting	444
Two Transitions (n=1,671; 21.9%)	
Single to cohab; cohab to marriage	934
Single to marriage; marriage to single	252
Single to cohab; cohab to single	474
Single to cohab; cohab to cohab	11
Three Transitions (n=574; 7.5%)	
Single to cohab; cohab to mar; mar to single	244
Single to mar; mar to single; single to mar	94
Single to cohab; cohab to cohab; cohab to mar	12
Single to cohab; cohab to cohab; cohab to single	16
Single to mar; mar to single; single to cohab	54
Single to cohab; cohab to single; single to mar	57
Single to cohab; cohab to single; single to cohab	97
More than Three Transitions (n=1,412; 18.5%)	1,412

Panel C: Marital and Cohabiting Transitions	Percent of Transitions
Transitions Involving Marriage	37.7%
Transitions Involving Cohabitation	47.7%

^aSample includes 957,567 person months of observation of women aged 20 and older in the 2002 NSFG

^bSample includes 7,643 women aged 20 and older in the 2002 NSFG