

**Breaking Up or Tying the Knot:
A Longitudinal Qualitative Analysis of Union Transitions among
Cohabiting Young Adults**

Pamela J. Smock
Department of Sociology & Population Studies Center
4079 Fleming Building, 503 Thompson Street
The University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, MI 48109
734-763-1290
pjsmock@umich.edu

Wendy D. Manning
Department of Sociology &
Center for Family and Demographic Research
Bowling Green State University
009 Williams Hall
Bowling Green, Ohio 43403-0001
419-372-2850
wmannin@bgsu.edu

This research was supported by grants from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (R03HD039835 and R01HD040910). This research also benefited from support provided by the Population Studies Center at the University of Michigan and the Center for Family and Demographic Research at Bowling Green State University, which both receive core support from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (R24 HD41028 and R24 HD050959). We thank Jessica Cohen, Gayra Ostgaard, Claudia Vercellotti, and Jessica Wyse for their assistance in this research.

I. Abstract

Drawing on two waves of data from in-depth interviews with men and women who were cohabiting at the first interview, this paper explores the factors and decision-making processes that lead young adults to marry, remain cohabiting, or dissolve their unions. While several quantitative studies based on survey data have examined transitions out of cohabiting unions, we have little direct evidence about why cohabitators decide to change the status of their relationship or to remain cohabiting. The richness afforded by longitudinal qualitative data is likely to lead to an enriched understanding of an increasingly common family form by tapping cohabitators' perceptions, feelings, and cognitions. Additionally, this paper is based on the premise that qualitative data are vital to move beyond the knowledge afforded by quantitative analyses to include a broader set of influences not always measured in large-scale surveys.

II. Background and Current Investigation

Cohabitation clearly remains on an upward swing. Recent data from the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) suggest that over 60% of women ages 25-39 have cohabited at least once (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2006). Comparable figures for the same age group from the 1995 NSFG, just seven years earlier, is 47-49% (Bumpass and Lu 2000). A change of this magnitude in such a short period of time is striking. Indeed, cohabitation has become an integral part of the courtship process, and even adolescents are expressing an interest in cohabiting at some point in the future (Manning, Longmore, and Giordano 2007).

This project draws on roughly in-depth interviews with roughly 50 working-class and lower middle-class cohabiting men and women, who were subsequently re-interviewed a year and half to two years after the baseline interview. Our central research goal is to gain an in-depth understanding of why some cohabitators go on to marry, some break-up, and others remain cohabiting.

While there have been some quantitative studies examining the outcomes of cohabiting unions using longitudinal or retrospective data (Brown 2000; Duvander 1999; Manning and Smock 1995; Oppenheimer 2003; Osborne 2005; Osborne et al. forthcoming; Sassler and McNally 2003; Smock and Manning 1997; Wu and Pollard 2000), we have little direct evidence about why cohabitators decide to change the status of their relationship. That is, what lies behind the associations between various independent variables available via survey data and cohabitators' decision-making processes? The richness afforded by longitudinal qualitative data is likely to lead to an enriched understanding of union transitions and the perceptions and cognitions underlying them. As Lin (1998) argues, analyses based on quantitative data can often provide us with the *what* – that two or more variables are related and that there may be a credible causal story – but it cannot necessarily provide us with the *how* and the *why*.

Note that we are just as interested in the stability of cohabitation as in transitions out of cohabitation. Cohabitation is not a steppingstone to marriage, the modern equivalent of a

formal engagement, for all couples. Manning and Smock (2002), focusing on women who were living with a boyfriend in 1995, find that one-quarter of them explicitly state that they do *not* expect to marry him. Further, there is also evidence that cohabiting relationships are increasingly likely to dissolve and less likely to lead to marriage, suggesting the importance of not focusing solely on marriage as the critical outcome of interest (Manning and Smock 2002; Raley and Bumpass 2003).

Our paper makes at least three other contributions to knowledge about cohabitation in the United States. First, we aim to move beyond the scope of quantitative surveys to include a broader set of factors not always measured in large-scale surveys.

Second, unlike the few studies drawing on qualitative data to address our general topic (as well as some quantitative studies), our sample is not restricted to new parents (e.g., Edin, Kefalas, and Reed 2004; Gibson-Davis, Edin, and McLanahan 2005; Osborne 2005). It contains childless men and women as well, offering a potentially less restrictive understanding of what spurs cohabitators to the altar, to remain living together, or to dissolve the union. Including individuals who are childless is also important because it echoes the composition of cohabiting couples today. Approximately 60% of cohabiting unions do not include children (Fields and Casper 2001).

Finally, we are sensitive to possible differences in processes by race and ethnicity. Although all racial-ethnic groups are equally likely to experience cohabitation, African-Americans are less likely to transform that cohabitation into marriage (Brown 2000; Manning and Smock 1995; Raley and Bumpass 2003). While some of this difference has been attributed to economic factors, residual differences remain.

III. Data and Methods

Our data are drawn from interviews with young adults who were cohabiting when first interviewed in 2002, largely between April and October (n=54). Of these, we successfully re-interviewed 46, with the follow-up interviews occurring 18 to 24 months later. By the time of the re-interview, 11% were married, 39% broken up, and 50% were still cohabiting.

In terms of basic sociodemographic characteristics, our analytic sample is 59% female, 41% male, 28% White, 37% Black, and 35% Latino or Latina. Roughly 28% have a high school degree, 46% some college, and 9% college or more; 85% are employed. Nearly 80% are 18-29 years-old, with slightly over 20% being in their early to mid-thirties.

At baseline, respondents all lived in the vicinity of Toledo, Ohio, with the population of Toledo being quite similar to the nation as a whole with respect to racial composition, average education, median income, and marital status. We recruited by means of personal contacts, and through encounters with potential respondents at various community venues (e.g., in the laundry mat, grocery store, restaurants). Given our goal of obtaining a diverse sample, some respondents were recruited from areas in the

community where the pool of prospective participants had a greater probability of being a specific race/ethnicity or gender.

We used semi-structured interview techniques. While this technique provides some structure, it also allows the interviewer to probe with follow-up questions and pursue additional lines of inquiry. Generally, in-depth interviews are an excellent method for exploring perceptions, behavioral patterns, and their cognitive justifications; essentially, they provide data at a greater level of detail than closed-ended survey questions, reveal linkages among meanings, decision-making, and behavior, and ultimately help to illuminate the causal processes that quantitative social science seeks to uncover (Weiss 1994). In short, semi-structured interviews attempt to understand complex social behaviors without imposing categories that may prematurely limit not only the inquiry but also the answers (Fontana and Frey 1994).

The baseline and re-interviews were extensive, each lasting two hours on average. To illustrate the scope of content, we asked in the baseline interviews about issues ranging from how respondents came to the decision to cohabit, to a number of aspects of the process of moving in together, to feelings about marriage when respondents began living with their partners, to multiple aspects of the relationship itself (e.g., conflict, children, multiple partner fertility, relationship expectations, relationship quality). The re-interviews focused on eliciting narratives from respondents to learn more about what “happened” in terms of various aspects of the relationship since the baseline interview (e.g., what might have caused the breakup, motives to marry and perceptions about how things changed since marriage and/or since the baseline interview, why the relationship ended).

Our analysis plan centers on coding for main themes as well as to uncover variation. Coding is a way to capture meaning in the data and is the basic building block for our analyses. Essentially, coding applies a meaning or interpretation to a segment of data -- in our case, textual data from the focus group and in-depth interviews. Coding consists of creating categories (i.e, groups of concepts/categories that represent phenomena) and identifying the range along which properties of categories vary. Segments of the data are marked with codes; a single paragraph or sentence may have one code or several and these may be overlapping.

IV. References

- Brown, Susan L. 2000. “Union Transitions Among Cohabitators: The Significance of Relationship Assessments and Expectations.” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 62:833-46.
- Bumpass, Larry and Hsien Lu. 2000. “Trends in Cohabitation and Implications for Children's Family Contexts.” *Population Studies* 54:29-41.

- Duvander, A. 1999. The Transition from Cohabitation to Marriage: A Longitudinal Study of the Propensity to Marry in Sweden in the Early 1990s. *Journal of Family Issues* 20:698-717.
- Edin, Kathryn, Maria Kefalas, and Joanna Reed. 2004. "A Peek Inside the Black Box: What Marriage Means for Poor Unmarried Parents." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 66: 1007-1014.
- Fields, Jason and Lynne Casper. 2001. *America's Families and Living Arrangements: Population Characteristics*. Current Population Reports, P20-537. Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau.
- Fontana, Andrea and Frey, James. 1994. *Interviewing: The Art of Science*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Gibson-Davis, Christina, Kathryn Edin, and Sara McLanahan. 2005. "High Hopes But Even Higher Expectations: The Retreat from Marriage among Low Income Couples." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 67:1301-1312.
- Lin, Ann Chih. 1998. "Bridging Positivist and Interpretivist Approaches to Qualitative Methods." *Policy Studies Journal* 26:162-80.
- Manning, Wendy and Pamela J. Smock. 2002. "First Comes Cohabitation and Then Comes Marriage." *Journal of Family Issues* 23:1065-87.
- Manning, Wendy D. and Pamela J. Smock. 1995. "Why Marry? Race and the Transition to Marriage Among Cohabitors." *Demography* 32:509-20.
- Manning, Wendy, Monica Longmore, and Peggy Giordano. 2007. "The Changing Institution of Marriage: Adolescents' Expectations to Cohabit and to Marry." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 69:559-575.
- Oppenheimer, Valerie. 2003. "Cohabiting and Marriage During Young Men's Career Development Process.:" *Demography* 40:127-149.
- Osborne, Cynthia. 2005. "Marriage Following the Birth of a Child among Cohabiting and Visiting Parents." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 67:14-26.
- Osborne, Cynthia, Wendy Manning, and Pamela J. Smock. "Married and Cohabiting Parents' Relationship Stability: A Focus on Race and Ethnicity." *Journal of Marriage and Family*. Forthcoming.
- Raley, Kelly and Larry Bumpass. 2003. "The Topography of the Divorce Plateau: Levels and Trends in Union Stability in the United States after 1980." *Demographic Research* 8:245-259.

- Sassler, Sharon and James McNally. 2003. "Cohabiting Couple's Economic Circumstances and Union Transitions: A Re-examination Using Multiple Imputation Techniques." *Social Science Research* 32:553-578.
- Smock, Pamela J. and Wendy D. Manning. 1997. "Cohabiting Partners' Economic Circumstances and Marriage." *Demography* 34:331-341.
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. 2005. *Fertility, Family Planning, and the Health of U.S. Women: Data from the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth*. Series 23-25: National Center for Health Statistics, Hyattsville, MD.
- Weiss, R. S. 1994. *Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*. New York: Free Press.
- Wu, Zheng and Michael Pollard. 2000. Economic Circumstances and the Stability of Nonmarital Cohabitation." *Journal of Family Issues* 21:303-328.