

Cohabiting Conception and Marriage Transitions

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Abstract

In this study, we examine the relationship between cohabiting conception and marriage transitions among two cohorts of US women. Using data from waves 1 and 3 of the National Survey of Family and Households (NSFH), we compare cohabitation experiences for women aged 18 to 34 in 1987 and 2001. We explore whether the two cohorts of women have different likelihoods of conception during cohabitation and whether a conception leads to a shotgun wedding. The results indicate that odds of conceiving a child within a cohabitating union have not increased across time. This is most likely due to the large increase in the percentage of individuals with cohabitation experiences. However, we do find that impending parenthood has changed across time. The likelihood of transitioning into a marital union prior to the birth of the child has significantly declined across time. Cohabitators in the most recent cohort are nearly 60% less likely to legitimate a premarital conception and tend to remain cohabitating. These findings may lend some credence to the argument that a cohabitating union is becoming an acceptable venue to raise and bear children.

One of the most profound changes occurred within the family institution has been the dramatic rise in cohabitation. In a span of two decades the number of cohabiting couples increased from 1 million in 1977 to nearly 5 million couples in 1997 (Bumpass & Lu 2000; U.S Census Bureau 2001). In addition to cohabitation's rapid increase over the last few decades there has been a marked increase in the proportion of nonmarital births. In fact, nonmarital childbearing reached an all time high in the US , with 37% of all births occurring to unmarried women, up from 33% in 2000 (Ventura and Bachrach 2000; Hamilton, Martin, Ventura, Sutton and Menacker 2005). Evidence finds that much of the increase in nonmarital childbearing between 1984 and 1994 has been mostly attributed to the increase in childbearing among cohabitating parents. Bumpass and Lu (2000) find that between 1980-1984 29% of all nonmarital births were within cohabitating unions. By 1990-1994 cohabitating households accounted for 39% of nonmarital births.

As the rates of cohabitation and nonmarital childbearing have accelerated, the function of cohabitation within the family has transformed. With over one half of young adults having experienced cohabitation, cohabitation is no longer an unconventional lifestyle embraced by the vanguard of society. As noted by Kiernan (2004), the complexity in the meaning of cohabitation creates a difficult task in defining and understanding this phenomenon, and the meaning of present day cohabitation and its role in the U.S. family still remains elusive.

To date, a substantial share of the research that assesses cohabitation is limited to unions formed in the 1980's and early 1990's. Considering that the number of cohabitators increased by another 71% between 1990 and 2000, and between 1994 and 2005 the share

of nonmarital births among cohabitators increased from 40% to 52%, it remains unclear how the role of cohabitation in the family system has changed across the last decade (Simmons & O'Connell 2003).

In this study our purpose is to explain the changing nature of cohabitation and its role in the family system by examining if and how impending parenthood among cohabitators has changed in the last two decades. Specifically, we examine the relationship between impending parenthood and relationship outcome in two stage process. First, we explore what factors may predict the likelihood of conception within a cohabitating union and if this has changed over time. Next we examine whether cohabiting pregnancy affects whether they marry or in their current union by the time of the birth. In addition, we explore if and how this effect varies by gender.

Previous Research on Cohabitation

The delay in marriage coupled with the dramatic rise in nonmarital cohabitation has led many to frame the role of cohabitation in conjunction with the marital process. Much of the existing literature suggests that cohabitation is either a prelude towards marriage or an increasingly acceptable alternative to marriage. Indeed, nearly 2/3 of the decline in the proportion of young adults married by age 25 can be attributed to the rise in cohabitation (Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin 1991). Because of the traditional function of childbearing within a marital union, it is important to understand the current role of cohabitation in the family process. Under the first perspective, many argue that the short lived nature of cohabitating unions and the substantial number of cohabitations that transition into a marital union, is indicative of an added stage in the marital process.

Indeed, Bumpass and Sweet (1989) find that half of all cohabiting unions end within one year, and only one third will last two years, and nearly 60% of all cohabitations transition into a marital union (Bumpass & Sweet 1989; Bumpass & Lu 2000). Although many young adults are acceptable of cohabitation, the vast majority still desire and plan to get married. In a survey conducted in the Detroit area, respondents in their earlier thirties were asked if living together is acceptable even if there are no plans to marry. The study found that 72% of men and 64% of women agreed with this statement (Thorton & Young-Demarco 2001). Nonetheless, the majority of cohabitators report definite marriage plans (Waller & McClanahan 2005). Bumpass, Sweet, and Cherlin (1991) found that nearly half of never married cohabitators indicated plans to marry their current partner, and they view their unions as a way to assess marital compatibility.

Yet, recent studies find that cohabitations have become less likely over time to transition into marriage (Bumpass & Lu 2000). Smock and Gupta (2002) find that cohabitations that result in a marriage declined by almost 30 % between 1970 and 1990. This has led some to argue that cohabitation can no longer be identified as a prelude toward marriage, but is now becoming accepted as an alternative to marriage (Bumpass & Lu 2000; Cherlin 2004; Seltzer 2004). This is further supported by the substantial rise in the number of first co-residential unions that are cohabitations. Bumpass and Lu (2000) find that among first relationships formed between 1990 and 1994, 54% were cohabiting unions, compared to only 43% formed between 1980 and 1984. Furthermore, the increasing prevalence of children within cohabitating households has led some to argue that cohabitation is becoming an accepted arrangement to raise and bear children (Musick 2007). With over 2/5 of children expected to spend a portion of their lifetime in

a cohabitating union, scholars have begun to investigate the degree to which cohabitation is becoming an acceptable avenue for childbearing (Musick 2001; Sassler and Cunningham 2005). Over 50% of nonmarital births now occur within a cohabiting household (Ryan et al 2006), and approximately 40% of all children will spend a portion of their lives in a cohabitating family before their 16th birthday (Bumpass and Lu 2000). Furthermore, in the last few decades the number of women that legitimate a premarital conception has dramatically declined (Akerlof ,Yellen and Katz 1996; Bachu 1999). Reports indicate that among white women the number of “shot gun” marriages declined from 61% to 29% and 27% to 10% among black women (Akerlof et al 1996; Bachu 1999) in the last few decades. Are they US data? If not, point out. Otherwise, our findings

The increasing share of non-marital births to cohabiting couples, and the decreasing rates of marriage among cohabitators, even if a pregnancy occurs (Bachu 1999; Manning 1993), suggests that cohabitation has become an accepted alternative to marriage and the meaning and place of cohabitation in the family system is beginning to shift (Sassler & Cunningham 2005). However, the growing number of cohabitating parents may not necessarily be indicative of an outright refusal of the marital process (Oppenheimer 2003; Musick 2007). Oppenheimer (2003) contends that the rise in cohabitation is not so much an alternative to marriage, but as an adaptation to the delaying of marriage. As men’s economic standing declines and women’s economic opportunities rise, young adults are postponing marriage until one or both careers have matured. Therefore, cohabitation may be a response to career uncertainties by providing an intimate and economical advantageous relationship until the man’s or both individuals career stabilizes. Musick (2007) notes that marriage still may be the preferable context

for raising and bearing children, but if a couple perceives a marital union as an unfeasible option, cohabitation may provide an adequate arrangement.

Fertility Status and Cohabitation Outcome

Traditionally, the event of a nonmarital conception resulted in a legitimation of that birth- - even among cohabitators. Research has shown that the occurrence of a non-marital conception hastens the marital process among US cohabitators, suggesting that impending parenthood triggers cohabitators to finally legalize their union. In addition, research finds cohabitation increases the rate of intended childbearing (Musick 2007). Manning and Smock (1995) find that among cohabitating individuals, the presence of children and/or a non-marital conception have no effect on the chance of separation, but increases the probability of marriage. Brien et al (1999) examine the effect of a non-marital conception on union formation (both cohabitation and marital) and find that a premarital birth does hasten marriage but this effect weakens considerable immediately after the birth of the child. They found a similar pattern among those that enter to a cohabitation instead of marriage but the overall effect was much smaller.

In Raley's (2001) notable work on the second demographic transition, she examines the increasing proportion of births that occur within a cohabitating union and if this increase is indicative of a growing acceptance of cohabitation as an alternative location to raise and bear children. Though she finds that single non-cohabitating women who become pregnant are as likely to enter a cohabitating union as they are to marry, the growing proportion of births in cohabiting unions are a result of the increase in the percentage of women entering cohabiting unions and not a shift in the meaning and function of cohabitation in the family setting.

Among studies outside of the US the meaning and function of cohabitation within the family realm varies considerably. For example, among British young adults, Berrington (2003) finds the likelihood of marriage following a cohabiting conception declined by more than half from 8% to 3%. In addition, the author finds the likelihood of having a birth during the first four years of cohabitation has more than doubled. Similarly, Steele et al (2006) find that among British cohabitators, parenthood and the presence of children has changed over time. In particular, the proportion of cohabiting women who marry before a birth has decreased and the risk of dissolution among cohabitating women has declined if a pregnancy occurs. Now that data is available among more recent cohabitating unions in the US, it is important to explore if and how the meaning of cohabitation as an acceptable context for childbearing has changed.

Goals and Hypotheses

Our objective in this analysis is to explore changes in the role of fertility in cohabitating unions. We achieve this objective by comparing cohabitation experiences of individuals who cohabitated between 1979-1988 with those between 1992-2001 when they were 18 to 34 in 1988 and 2001. In this study we explore the following questions:

- 1) What factors are most likely to predict a cohabitation conception? Specifically, we examine if and how time has changed the likelihood of conceiving within a cohabitation. Given the increasing normality of cohabitation, has the percent of conceptions within a cohabitation increased over time?

- 2) In addition, as the number of “shot gun” marriages has substantially declined over the last three decades are cohabitators in the most recent cohort less likely to marry if a premarital conception occurs?

Data

For this study, we use data from the first wave (1987-1988) and third wave focal children (2001-2002) of National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH). The NSFH is a national probability sample of 13,007 respondents, including 9,643 main respondents aged 18 and over, plus an oversample of minorities, single parent families, recently married couples and cohabiting couples (Sweet, Bumpass & Call 1988).

Detailed information on current partner and previous first spouse was also collected. Of the 3429 ever-married respondents 2950 full partner information is available. Because data are not available on previous cohabiting partners, we are unable to examine how partnering of cohabiting individuals affects cohabitation outcome. Recently, the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) completed data collection on a third wave of data (2001-2002), and conducted extensive interviews of the focal child of the main respondent (Sweet & Bumpass 2002). Detailed marital and cohabitation histories were collected from the focal child, now aged 18-34. Current and previous partner information is also available among the focal child data. Nearly all partner information is available among the focal child data.

Given the dramatic changes that have occurred within the past two decades in both the process and meaning of cohabitation, these samples prove ideal with a nearly 15 year span between the two cohorts. The study sample restricts cohabitation event to

respondent's cohabitation experience prior to their first marriage in order to reduce bias (Brown 2000; Manning 2004). Because the focal children sample is between the ages 18 to 34, the same age range is used for the older cohort for comparability and resulting in a final N=6641.

Methods

The empirical analysis for this study proceeds in two steps. In the first step, we apply Cox Proportional Hazards models to predict whether a cohabiting individual would experience a conception. To reduce the potential bias associated with nonmarital childbearing, we restrict the sample to individuals who had no children at the beginning of a cohabitation episode. Some individuals are likely to experience multiple cohabitations without childbearing. For them, we include their most recent cohabitation episode in our analysis. We examine a set of covariates we hypothesize to influence the hazard rates of a cohabiting conception among cohabitating individuals. The dependent variable is the duration from the beginning of a cohabitation episode to a conception (event is coded 1) or to be censored (event is coded 0). Date of conception is calculated based on date of birth. NSFH does not have detailed information on miscarriages or abortions. Thus, we are only able to include conceptions that result in live births. Censoring includes those who dissolve their cohabiting unions without conceptions or are still in cohabitation at the time of interview. Duration is measured in months.

The next step of the analyses is limited to those who experienced a conception during cohabitation. We examine whether the birth of the child occurred within the cohabitation or a marital union. We use a logistic regression model to estimate the probability of transitioning into a marriage or remaining in a cohabitation. There are

cases where births occurred when the respondent was single after cohabitation ended. These cases are too few to be included in multivariate analyses.

Independent Variables. We include both current and childhood demographic measures. These measures include **number of prior cohabitations and the order of the current cohabitation**, education, school enrollment, race, parental divorce, receipt of welfare during childhood. Education was coded into four mutually exclusive categories: less than a high school diploma; high school degree; some college; bachelor's degree or more. School enrollment examines if the respondent is currently enrolled in a post secondary institution 1=yes. Race was coded into three categories: Black; Hispanic; White/other. Parental divorce was coded 1=parents divorced by age 18 and 0=no parental divorce prior to age 18. Welfare receipt was coded 1= family received welfare during childhood 0=no welfare received during childhood.

Results

In order to understand the changing nature of cohabitation across the last two decades, we present the characteristics of all respondents from both cohorts. As displayed in Table 1, both cohorts are similar in average age and sex composition. However, individuals in the most recent cohort were more likely to be white, have greater levels of education than the older cohort, and were twice as likely to be currently enrolled in school. Respondents from the earlier cohort experienced higher rates of parental divorce but were similar in the percentage that received public assistance during childhood.

Consistent with the literature on the prevalence of cohabitation, almost half (45%) of those in the most recent cohort have experienced a cohabitating union compared to only 31% of the older cohort. In addition, the number respondents that have entered into multiple unions is more than double among the most recent with 11% having entered more than one union, compared to only 04% among the early cohort. Lastly, and very interesting we show the percent of respondents that conceived their first child within a cohabitating union is nearly the same among both cohorts of individuals.

In Table 2 we display the characteristics of cohabitating individuals that experienced a within union conception to cohabitators that did not conceive while in a union. Consistent with previous findings, Blacks and Hispanics from both cohorts had higher rates of union conceptions than that of Whites. Similarly, respondents with lower levels of education and those not currently enrolled in school had higher rates of conceptions across both cohorts. The receipt of public assistance during childhood is also higher among those that experienced a union conception. Lastly, among those that did conceive within a cohabitation, Table 2 suggests that the legitimization of that birth has changed across time. The number of cohabitations conceptions that were legitimated by a marital union has declined substantially (41 % vs 28%). While those that remain in the cohabitation during the birth has risen.

Table 3 presents the hazard ratios of the parameter estimates from the final models for the total sample and for men and women. We display the hazard ratios conceiving relative to not experienced a conception within a cohabitation. Educational attainment and race appear to be the strongest factors in predicting conception among cohabitators. As shown, individuals with a college degree are 74% less likely to conceive

while cohabitating compared to those with a high school diploma. In addition, educational enrollment reduces the likelihood of conceiving by nearly half compared to those not enrolled in school. This finding lends credence to the Oppenheimer's (1988) argument that educational enrollment delays the timing of certain family formation events i.e. marriage and/or childbearing and cohabitation is more suitable for students with less mature careers. In addition, Black and Hispanic women are 1.5 to 2 times as likely to conceive while cohabitating. This findings is in support of the previous literature that posits cohabitation may be an end itself to Black and Hispanic mothers, but a step towards the marital process for White mothers (Manning etc.. Musick 2007).

Cohort is not significantly associated with the likelihood of a cohabiting conception. This is different from our expectation that childbearing may have become more common in recent years among cohabiting unions. The finding, however, is not surprising because proportionately more people are in cohabiting unions for the recent cohort than in the earlier cohort. The cohort effect is attenuated because of compositional differences between the two cohorts, as evidenced in Table 2. In other words, we would expect a strong cohort effect if the individuals in the later cohort had the similar compositions as those in the earlier cohort. The data also show that the greater number of cohabitations an individual has entered the propensity to conceive while cohabitating reduces by nearly 30%. Multiple cohabitators may be less committed in a relationship and unlikely to conceive compared to those with fewer cohabitation experiences. However, our sample may be biased because the likelihood of being included in our sample for multiple cohabitators is zero if they had children in the earlier cohabitation episodes. Lastly, childhood background does appear to be associated with

the likelihood of conceiving within a cohabitation. Respondents that received public assistance during childhood are 1.3 times more likely to conceive than that did not receive any public or government assistance while growing up.

We also conducted the analysis separately for men and women. As shown, the impact of educational attainment on the propensity to conceive is significantly greater for women than it is for men. Highly educated women are nearly 80% less likely to conceive while cohabitating relative to women with a high school diploma. Whereas highly educated men are roughly 60% less likely to conceive relative to men with a high school diploma. We further find differences by race and childhood background between cohabitating men and women. However, some coefficients failure to reach significance may be due to underreporting by male respondents.

In the next stage of our analysis we examine the outcome of cohabitating partnerships among those who did experience a within union conception and how this has changed across time. Cohabitors may either experience a pregnancy legitimated by a marriage prior to the birth of the child, a pregnancy that results in a cohabitation birth, or they may separate prior to the birth of the child. Due to the fact that only 8% of cohabitors separated prior to the birth of their child we only examine the likelihood of legitimating a non-marital conception versus remaining in a cohabitating union following a conception.

Due to small sample size many of the coefficients fail to reach significant however, Table 4 does show that the likelihood of marrying following a cohabitation conception has declined by nearly 60%. In addition, we find educational attainment to be

a significant factor as well. Highly educated cohabitators are 3 times as likely to legitimate the birth of a cohabitation conception compared to those with a high school diploma. Consistent with previous work, Hispanic and Black cohabitators are significantly less likely to marry following a nonmarital conception relative to white cohabitators. In fact, Black cohabitators are over 90% less likely to legitimate a conception. In sum, we find that cohabitation is becoming an increasingly accepted avenue to bear and raise children among the more recent cohort.

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Table 1: Survey Respondent Characteristics Among ALL Respondents

	TIME 1		TIME 2	
	% / X	S.D	% / X	S.D
Age	26.734	4.419	25.297	4.331
female	0.579	0.494	0.531	0.499
Race				
White	0.721	0.449	0.807	0.395
Black	0.186	0.389	0.139	0.346
Hispanic	0.092	0.289	0.052	0.222
Educational Attainment				
Less than a high school degree	0.144	0.351	0.063	0.242
High School Diploma	0.411	0.492	0.293	0.455
Some College	0.272	0.445	0.417	0.493
BA or more	0.173	0.378	0.223	0.417

Currently Enrolled	.112	.316	.237	.425
Family Background				
Welfare Receipt during Childhood	0.140	0.347	0.135	0.342
Parental Divorce	0.383	0.486	0.269	0.444
Cohabitation Experience				
ever cohabited	0.314	0.675	0.448	0.771
cohabited more than once	0.042	0.201	0.113	0.317
Conceived during a cohabitation	.039		.048	
N=	4687		1774	

Table 2: Characteristics of ONLY those that conceived in a cohabitation

	TIME 1				TIME 2			
	CONCEIVED		DID NOT CONCEIVE		CONCEIVED		DID NOT CONCEIVE	
	<i>X/%</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>X/%</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>X/%</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>X/%</i>	<i>SD</i>
Respondent Demographics								
Age	25.634	3.451	26.415	4.047	25.360	3.620	26.278	4.093
female	0.613	0.488	0.478	0.500	0.570	0.498	0.511	0.500
Race								
White	0.696	0.461	0.852	0.355	0.802	0.401	0.886	0.318
Black	0.194	0.396	0.099	0.298	0.116	0.322	0.074	0.262
Hispanic	0.110	0.314	0.049	0.216	0.081	0.275	0.038	0.191
Educational Attainment								
Less than a high school degree	0.267	0.444	0.108	0.310	0.163	0.371	0.051	0.219
High School Diploma	0.461	0.500	0.353	0.478	0.488	0.503	0.267	0.443
Some College	0.199	0.261	0.323	0.468	0.291	0.457	0.399	0.490
BA or more	0.073	0.400	0.216	0.411	0.058	0.235	0.280	0.449
Currently Enrolled	0.037	0.188	0.122	0.328	0.058	0.235	0.166	0.372
Family Background								
welfare	0.242	0.429	0.117	0.321	0.233	0.425	0.105	0.306
Parental Divorce	0.505	0.501	0.412	0.492	0.349	0.479	0.352	0.478
Cohabited More than once	0.105	0.307	0.165		0.209	0.409	0.265	

N=	191	975	86	554
Birth Location of Union Conception				
Remain in cohabitation	51		61.45	
Married by time of birth	41		28.92	
split from partner by time of birth	8		9.64	
Conception occurred in which Cohabitation				
	1	89.5	79.1	
	2	10.5	13.95	
	3		5.8	
	4		1.2	

Table 3: Likelihood of conceiving within a cohabitation. First births only.

	ALL		WOMEN		MEN
Female	1.455	**			
cohort	1.023		1.132		1.014
Age	1.493	+	1.401		1.667
age2	0.992	+	0.994		0.989
cohabitation order	0.734	*	0.54	*	1.01
Educational Attainment					
less than high school	1.34	+	1.634	*	0.855
some college	0.569	***	0.48	***	0.736
BA +	0.257	***	0.189	***	0.399 *
currently enrolled	0.523	*	0.512		0.46
Race					
Black	1.418	*	1.259		1.9 *
Hispanic	2.04	***	2.552	***	1.737
Parental Divorce	0.97		0.919		0.982
Welfare receipt during childhood	1.43	*	1.73	***	0.989

N=	1805	935	870
LR chi2	147.057	116.45	39.515

Table 4: Reported Odds Ratio of Birth Location (1=Marriage; 0=Cohabitation)

	ALL	
Female	0.84	
Cohort	0.433	**
Age	1.844	
Age sq	0.989	
Cohabitation order	0.528	+
Less than High School	0.712	
Some College	1.294	
College	3.711	*
Currently Enrolled	1.206	
Black	0.085	***
Hispanic	0.485	+
Parental Divorce	0.731	

Welfare Receipt	0.821
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N=	257
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Log Likelihood	45.72