

**Cohabitation Then and Now: Changes in Stability, Transition to Marriage, and Partner
Choice**

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Abstract

How has the meaning of cohabitation changed over time? We explore this question by comparing individuals who started first cohabitation in the 1980s with those in the 1990s. Specifically, we compare how cohabitation between the two cohorts differs in stability, in transition to marriage, in partner choice, and in comparison with the married unions. We use data from waves 1 and 3 of the National Survey of Family and Households (NSFH) and analyze union experiences of individuals aged 18 to 34 who started first cohabitation or direct marriage within three years before each interview. Our results reveal that the later cohort individuals are not significantly different from the earlier cohort in union disruption, but cohabitation for the later cohort is less likely to end in marriage compared to the earlier cohort. These results suggest that the transition to marriage has become less an alternative for cohabitators in recent years.

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). Coinciding with the rapid increase in the proportions of young adults entering cohabitating unions, the meaning and role of cohabitation within the family system has also significantly altered. What was once considered a socially “avant-garde” lifestyle has become a normative event for young adults to experience. Yet, the meaning of present day cohabitation and its role in the U.S. family remain dubious. As Kiernan notes (2004), the complexity in the meaning of cohabitation creates a difficult task in defining and understanding this phenomenon. Much of the research documenting and defining the meaning of cohabitation appears to only focus on its meaning in relationship to marriage (i.e. a courtship process or alternative), and ignore the complexity in the meaning and the changing nature of cohabitation (Seltzer 2004). In this study our purpose is to explain the changing nature of cohabitation and its role in the family system by examining inter and intra-cohort differences among cohabiting and married individuals.

For many, cohabitation has been defined as a precursor to marriage or a step in the marital process. The large proportions of cohabiting unions that end in a marriage help to support this view. Nearly half of all marriages after 1985 began as cohabiting relationships (Bumpass & Sweet 1989). Yet, recent data reveal that this may no longer be the case, and one of the prominent features of cohabitation is beginning to change in a relatively short period of time (Smock and Gupta 2002). Studies have documented that the proportions of cohabiting unions that end in marriage have dramatically declined within the last three decades. Smock and Gupta (2002) find that cohabitations that result in a marriage declined by almost 30 % between 1970 and

1990. This has lead some to argue that cohabitation can no longer be identified as a prelude or stepping stone in the marital process, but is now becoming accepted as an alternative to marriage (Bumpass & Lu 2000; Cherlin 2004; Seltzer 2004). Furthermore, the number of first co-residential unions that are cohabitations have risen substantially in the last two decades. Bumpass and Lu (2000) found that among first relationships formed between 1990 and 1994, 54% were cohabiting unions, compared to only 43% formed between 1980-1984.

However, the meaning and complexity of cohabitation cannot be limited to the fluctuations in levels and trends over the last three decades. Few scholars have examined the changing nature and composition of cohabitators across cohorts (see King & Scott 2005; Manting 1996). In its early onset cohabitation was comprised of a select sub-group of individuals that significantly differed from married couples. However, as the state of cohabitation has gradually diffused into mainstream society, and thus less “deviant”, little is known about the changing composition and characteristics of cohabiting couples in comparison to married couples. Research consistently finds that cohabiting couples are more heterogamous than married couples (Blackwell & Lichter 2000; 2004; Schoen & Weinick 1993). Blackwell and Lichter (2000) and Schoen and Weinick (1993) find cohabitators to be less homogamous in respect to age, religion, and race. Yet, with nearly half of all young adults having experienced a cohabitating relationship (Bumpass 2004), the heterogamous differences between cohabitators and marrieds should significantly decrease across cohorts.

Our objective in this analysis is to explore changes in the meaning of cohabitation over time. We achieve this objective by comparing cohabiting individuals who started cohabitation in the late 1980s with those started in the late 1990s. The abovementioned changes in cohabitation have led us to hypothesize that compared to cohabitators from earlier birth cohorts, later cohorts will 1) be less likely to have a cohabiting union that end in a marriage; 2) have a greater percentage of first unions to cohabiting rather than married unions; 3) have partners’ characteristics more similar to those of the married partners compared to the earlier cohort.

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). 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. Given the dramatic changes in 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 consists of couples that entered a cohabiting union or direct marriage within the 36 months prior to the survey date. We exclude unions formed more than three years ago in order to reduce bias associated with selectivity, particularly among cohabiting unions. Because the focal children sample are between the ages 18 to 34, we use the same age range for the older cohort for comparability.

Our goals are to compare how cohabitating unions between the two waves differ in stability, in transition to marriage, in partner choice, and in comparison with the married unions. One of the goals is accomplished with event history analysis techniques. Presented below are the preliminary results comparing stability and transition to marriage for cohabiting individuals between the two waves. Figures 1 and 2 are derived from multiple decrement life table estimates. These individuals started their first cohabiting unions within three years prior to the interview. Thus, for the earlier cohort, they started first cohabitation between 1984 and 1988, and for the later cohort, they started first cohabitation between 1997 and 2002. There are several findings by comparing the two figures: 1) Cohabitation for the later cohort is more stable than for the earlier cohort. 2) Cohabitation for the later cohort is much less likely to end in marriage compared to the

earlier cohort. It is evident that later-cohort individuals tend to stay in cohabiting unions not because they are less likely to break up, but because they are less likely to marry compared to earlier-cohort individuals. These results suggest that cohabitation may have become more institutionalized over the years.

Our multivariate competing-risks Cox regression models support our descriptive findings. In this analysis, we also include first marriages formed within the three years before the interview. Model 1 shows that cohabiting individuals in the later cohort were 38% less likely to transition into marriage compared to those in the earlier cohort. Transition to marriage is about 5% more likely with one-year increase in schooling. Given that the later cohort individuals are more educated than the earlier cohort individuals, lower likelihood of transition to marriage for later-cohort cohabitators is even more remarkable. The results in Model 1 also show that cohabiting unions are 7.77 times as likely as married unions to end the relationship. Clearly, the union started as marriage is more stable than the one started as cohabitation. Interestingly, the later cohort individuals are not significantly different from the earlier cohort individuals in union disruption. Clearly, the transition to marriage has become less an alternative for cohabiting individuals in recent years.

Model 2 introduces interactions in the model. The focus is to see how cohort interacts with the variables of our interest. One interesting result shows that earlier cohort cohabitators are less likely to marry when age increases, but the opposite is true for the later cohort cohabitators.

Our results so far are preliminary, but demonstrate clearly the differences in cohabitation across the cohorts. For this part of the analysis, we will refine our sample selection and include more variables in our analysis. We will also conduct the analysis to test other hypotheses. The primary goal of our paper is to provide a comprehensive comparison of the cohabiting unions between the two waves, the first wave when cohabitation was less common and the third wave when cohabitation has become common. This goal will help us better understand the complexities and the changing meanings of cohabitation.

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Figure 1
Type of Disruption Among First Cohabiting Unions:First Wave

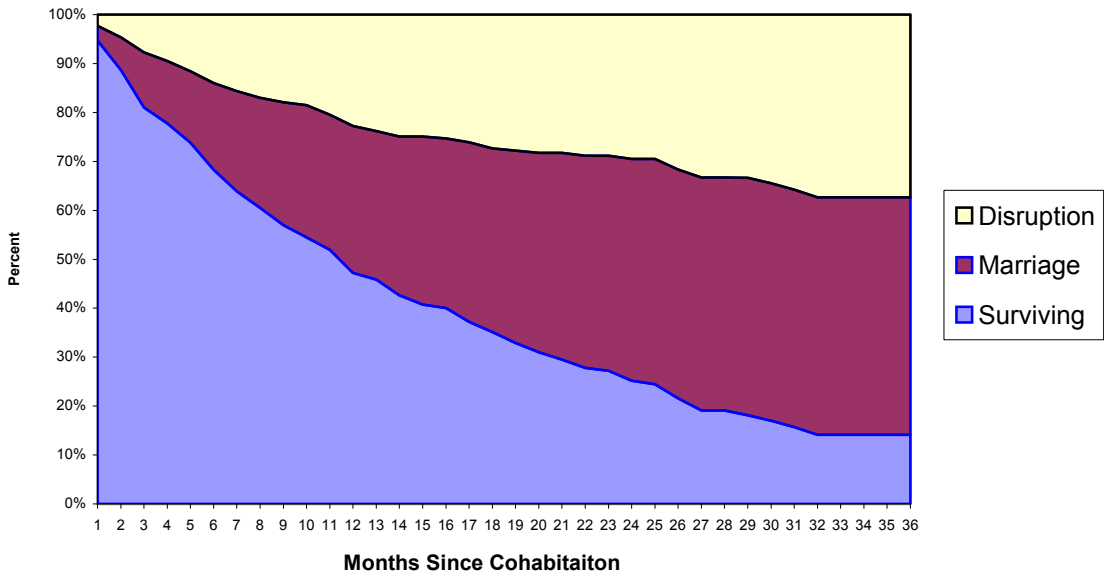


Figure 2
Type of Disruption Among First Cohabiting Unions: Third Wave

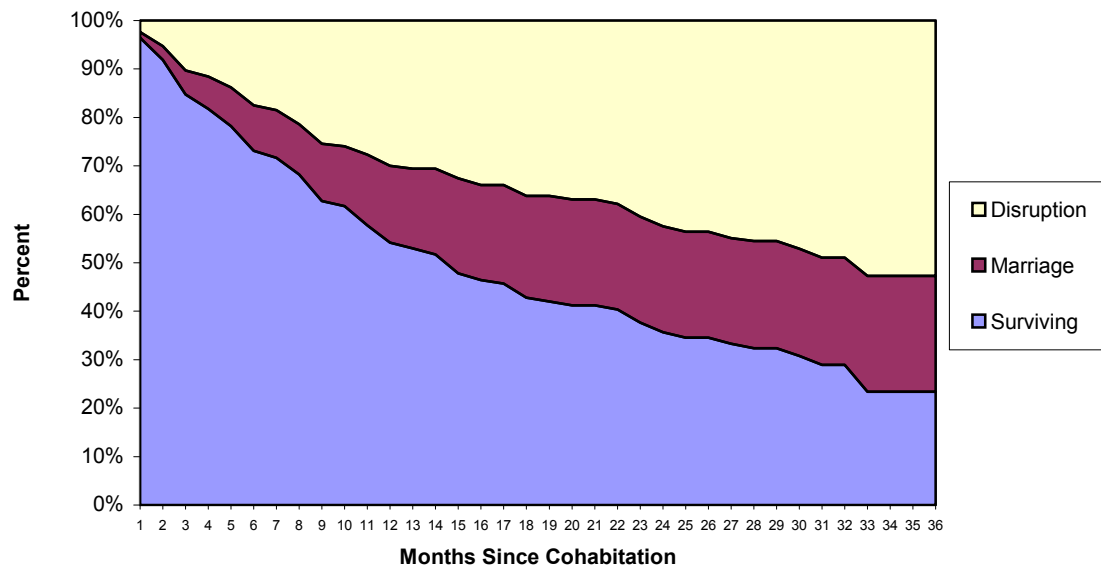


Table 1. Parameter Estimates of Cox Regression Models Predicting Transitions to Marriage for Cohabiting Individuals and Transitions to Disruptions for Married and Cohabiting Individuals.

| | Marriage | Disruption | Marriage | Disruption |
|---|----------|------------|----------|------------|
| | Model 1 | | Model 2 | |
| Later Wave | 0.62*** | 1.22 | 0.57*** | 1.56 |
| Cohabiting ^a | -- | 7.77*** | -- | 7.97*** |
| Female | 0.89 | 0.87 | 0.88 | 0.98 |
| Age | 0.99 | 0.94*** | 0.97** | 0.96 |
| Schooling | 1.05** | 0.98 | 1.05** | 0.97 |
| Interactions | | | | |
| Wave*cohabiting | | | | 0.87 |
| Wave*female | | | 1.08 | 0.75 |
| Wave*age | | | 1.09** | 0.95 |
| Wave*schooling | | | 0.99 | 1.02 |
| N=1162 ^a Married *** $p < .001$ ** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$ | | | | |