

COHABITATION IN THE UNITED STATES: An Appraisal of Research Themes, Findings, and Implications

Pamela J. Smock

Department of Sociology and Population Studies Center, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106-1248; e-mail: pjsmock@umich.edu

Key Words family, marriage, union formation, children, gender, social change

■ **Abstract** Cohabitation has risen dramatically in the United States in a very short time. So, too, has the amount of sociological research devoted to the topic. In the span of a bit more than a decade, family sociologists and demographers have produced a large and rich body of research, ranging from documentation of cohabitation to assessment of its various consequences and implications. I first review basic descriptive findings about cohabitation as well as common explanations for its striking increase over recent decades. I next identify the central questions motivating most of the extant research and provide an assessment of past research as a whole. Finally, I speculate about themes that will be central to future research on cohabitation and consider the implications of cohabitation for gender equality in the United States and social science research on families.

INTRODUCTION

Unmarried heterosexual cohabitation has increased sharply in recent years in the United States. It has in fact become so prevalent that the majority of marriages and remarriages now begin as cohabiting relationships, and most younger men and women cohabit at some point in their lives. It has become quite clear that understanding and incorporating cohabitation into sociological analyses and thinking is crucial for evaluating family patterns, the life course of individuals, children's well-being, and social change more broadly.

The number of sociological studies on cohabitation has also escalated in a very short time, with most researchers drawn from the closely allied subfields of family sociology and family demography. This article synthesizes and evaluates this relatively new but burgeoning literature. First, I set the context by briefly reviewing basic descriptive findings about cohabitation (i.e., patterns, trends, and differentials) and then presenting common explanations for cohabitation's dramatic

rise. Next I identify three analytic questions that have either explicitly or implicitly motivated much of the extant research, and I summarize the findings that bear on these questions. Third, I provide a critical assessment of past research as a whole and identify issues that have emerged as key themes in cohabitation research. Finally, I consider the implications of cohabitation for gender equality in the United States and for social scientific research on families.

Throughout the review I attempt to strike a balance between presentation of substantive findings and assessment of the state of research on cohabitation (see Seltzer 2000 for a related review). I give particular weight to identifying the main questions that have motivated research on cohabitation and to considering some of the most important implications of empirical findings. A word about coverage: I focus almost entirely on research on cohabitation in the United States and on studies published after the mid-1980s. The latter is not too restrictive because the vast majority of research on this topic has been published in the last 10 years or so. Additionally, I examine only heterosexual cohabitation. Although family sociologists and demographers are studying gay and lesbian families (e.g. Allen & Demo 1995, Fields & Clark 1999, Kurdek 1993, Patterson 2000, Stiers 1999, Tasker & Golombok 1997, Weston 1991), the topic is beyond the scope of this review.

Basic Facts About Cohabitation

Generalizable knowledge about cohabitation was sparse until the late 1980s (see Macklin 1980 for a review of early research). What was known was based on nonrepresentative samples such as college students or samples of restricted or undefined populations (Blumstein & Schwartz 1983, Clayton & Voss 1977, Macklin 1980, Tanfer 1987, Tanfer & Horn 1985). If one wanted to estimate the prevalence of cohabitation in the United States or assess very basic characteristics of cohabitators, one could use the Current Population Surveys (CPS) or the Decennial Census. But this, too, was problematic because these data sources did not directly measure cohabitation; it was necessary to infer cohabitation based on information on household composition (e.g., Glick & Spanier 1980). Direct measures did not become available in these data sources until the 1990s (see Casper & Cohen 2000 for a review of data issues involved in the study of cohabitation).

Representative surveys based on less restricted populations began to obtain detailed information about respondents' past and current cohabitation experiences around the mid-1980s. These included the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) (Sweet et al 1988), the Detroit Area Study (Thornton 1988), and the National Longitudinal Survey of the High School Class of 1972 (NLS-72). The National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), primarily a fertility survey, ascertained limited information about cohabitation in the 1980s and included complete cohabitation histories in 1995 (e.g., Bachrach 1987).

The NSFH is particularly popular as a source of knowledge about cohabitation. It obtained complete cohabitation histories from a sample of women and men of all

ages and thus is often used as a basis for representative estimates of cohabitation as well as estimates of cohort change in cohabitation. The other surveys focus on particular birth cohorts, have otherwise limited age ranges, include only women, or are based on restricted geographical areas. In addition, the first wave of the NSFH (1987–1988) is unique in oversampling *currently* cohabiting men and women as well as ascertaining a good deal of information about both members of the couple. A second wave of the survey, fielded in 1992–1993, allows researchers to evaluate the trajectories of these cohabitations.

Trends and Patterns

The most widely cited fact about cohabitation, a fact replicated with several different data sources, is that it has increased dramatically over the last two decades or so (Casper & Cohen 2000). It has gone from being a relatively uncommon experience to a commonplace one and has achieved this prominence quite quickly. A few sets of numbers convey both the change and its rapidity. First, the percentage of marriages preceded by cohabitation rose from about 10% for those marrying between 1965 and 1974 to over 50% for those marrying between 1990 and 1994 (Bumpass & Lu 1999, Bumpass & Sweet 1989); the percentage is even higher for remarriages. Second, the percentage of women in their late 30s who report having cohabited at least once rose from 30% in 1987 to 48% in 1995. Given a mere eight-year time window, this is a striking increase. Finally, the proportion of all first unions (including both marriages and cohabitations) that begin as cohabitations rose from 46% for unions formed between 1980 and 1984 to almost 60% for those formed between 1990 and 1994 (Bumpass & Lu 1999).

A second widely cited fact is that, for most couples, cohabitation is a rather short-lived experience with most ending it either by terminating the relationship or by marrying within a few years. The most recent estimates suggest that about 55% of cohabiting couples marry and 40% end the relationship within five years of the beginning of the cohabitation (Bumpass & Lu 1999, see also Thornton 1988 for similar estimates using a different data source and Wu & Balakrishnan 1995 for similar estimates for Canada). Only about one sixth of cohabitations last at least three years and only a tenth last five years or more (Bumpass & Lu 1999).

Finally, contrary to popular image, cohabitation is not a childless state. About one half of previously married cohabitators and 35% of never-married cohabitators have children in the household. In most cases (70%), these are the children of only one partner, making the arrangement somewhat akin to step-families, and the rest of the children involved are the biological offspring of the couple (Bumpass et al 1991). And contrary to much of the discourse on single motherhood, a very substantial proportion of births conventionally labeled as “nonmarital” are actually occurring in cohabiting families—almost 40% overall, and roughly 50% among white and latino women and a quarter among black women (Bumpass & Lu 1999). Thus, a large share of children born to supposedly “single” mothers today are born into two-parent households. Moreover, the widely cited increase over recent years

in nonmarital childbearing is largely due to cohabitation and not to births to women living without a partner (Bumpass & Lu 1999).

Differentials

Although researchers have found statistically significant differences between cohabitators and others on a host of traits ranging from ideal fertility to the use of leisure time (Clarkberg et al 1995, Landale & Fennelly 1992, Nock 1995, Rindfuss & VandenHeuvel 1990), there are two overarching factors that consistently emerge as a basis of differentiation. First, cohabitation tends to be selective of people of slightly lower socioeconomic status, usually measured in terms of educational attainment or income (Bumpass & Lu 1999, Nock 1995, Thornton et al 1995). For example, recent data show that the percentage of 19- to 44-year-old women who have cohabited at some point is almost 60% among high school dropouts versus 37% among college graduates (Bumpass & Lu 1999). The other factor can generally be understood in terms of a "traditional" versus "liberal" distinction. Cohabitation tends to be selective of people who are slightly more liberal, less religious, and more supportive of egalitarian gender roles and nontraditional family roles (Clarkberg et al 1995, Lye & Waldron 1997, Thornton et al 1992).

Notably, there are few apparent race-ethnic differences in the likelihood of cohabitation, at least among the groups for which there is adequate representation in surveys. Recent data show that 45% of white and black and 40% of latino women ages 19–44 have cohabited (Bumpass & Lu 1999). This is contrary to the case for marriage; blacks are less likely to marry than whites, and a fairly large sociological literature has emerged examining the possible causes of this disparity (e.g., Lichter et al 1992, Mare & Winship 1991, Raley 1996).

All in all, cohabitation is common in all subgroups, making it important to underscore that any existing differentials are only tendencies. In fact, one could make the case that we ought to invert the framing of past research on group differentials; instead of asking "who cohabits?" we might ask "who does not cohabit?"

WHY HAS COHABITATION BECOME SO COMMON?

In general, the same explanations that have been posed to understand changes in family patterns overall are also used to explain the trend in cohabitation; cohabitation is taken to be just one component, albeit a recent one, of a constellation of longer-term changes occurring in the United States and in Europe (Cherlin & Furstenberg 1988; Kiernan 1988, 1999). Declining fertility levels, increasing age at marriage, rising marital disruption rates, and a growing proportion of children being born outside of marriage are other manifestations of this broader shift. While some trends, including cohabitation in the United States, began in earnest in the 1960s or 1970s, divorce has been gradually rising for over a century, and there is wide consensus that even the most recent trends have quite long-term historical roots (Bumpass 1990, Popenoe 1993).

Scholars emphasize various aspects of long-term social change to explain cohabitation's rise in both the United States and other Western industrialized countries. Some aspects may be labeled cultural. Rising individualism and secularism figure prominently in this category (Lesthaeghe 1983, Lesthaeghe & Surkyn 1988, Rindfuss & VandenHeuvel 1990, Thornton 1989). The former refers to the increasing importance of individual goal attainment over the past few centuries, and the latter to the decline in religious adherence and involvement. A second set of factors is generally labeled economic. This set ranges from broad conceptualizations of the massive social changes wrought by industrialization (Goode 1963) to narrower ones focusing on women's changing roles in the labor market and concomitant shifts in values and attitudes about gender roles (Cherlin & Furstenberg 1988). More proximate and direct sources of cohabitation's rise are also recognized, an important one being the "sexual revolution." As Bumpass (1990) notes, this revolution eroded the main grounds for earlier disapproval of cohabitation (i.e., that unmarried persons were having sexual relations). Once this stigma was removed, cohabitation was free to escalate.

There has also been some speculation about contemporary causal *processes*. One idea is that "feedback loops" are particularly important for understanding recent trends in family patterns (e.g., Bumpass 1990, Rindfuss & VandenHeuvel 1990). The idea is straightforward: The various trends are mutually reinforcing, with changes in one domain of family life maintaining and perhaps accelerating those in other domains. As one example, high aggregate levels of marital disruption can increase the likelihood that people will cohabit as they learn either through observation or experience that marriage may not be permanent. Empirical tests of feedback loops conceptualized in this way would require information on aggregate characteristics (the prevalence of cohabitation or marital disruption in one's community, for example) in addition to information on individuals, and such tests have not yet been done (JA Seltzer, unpublished observations). A series of papers by Thornton and colleagues, however, illustrates possible ways a feedback process could operate at the individual level. Using data that follow a cohort of children and their mothers over time, the authors find that children whose parents divorced and whose mothers expressed more approval of cohabitation were relatively more likely to cohabit as young adults (Axinn & Thornton 1993, Thornton 1991, Thornton et al 1992). Intragenerational processes may also be important, with the experience of cohabitation changing young people in ways (e.g., attitudes toward divorce) that are likely to increase their chances of eventual divorce (Axinn & Thornton 1992, Thornton et al 1992, but see Clarkberg 1999b).

MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTIONS ABOUT COHABITATION

Research on cohabitation has gone well beyond basic documentation, as important as the latter has been and will continue to be to track evolving patterns. Most of the

remaining research can be organized around the following three questions: “How does cohabitation affect marital stability?” “Where does cohabitation fit in the US family system?” And “How does cohabitation affect children?” The first and the third questions are more straightforward than the second; I argue below that three types of studies offer important, albeit indirect, clues about the second question.

How Does Cohabitation Affect Marital Stability?

Common sense suggests that premarital cohabitation should provide an opportunity for couples to learn about each other, strengthen their bonds, and increase their chances for a successful marriage. In fact, this notion is echoed in the sentiments of cohabitators themselves: Data from the NSFH indicate that over 50% of cohabitators view cohabitation as a way for couples to ensure they are compatible (Bumpass et al 1991). Thus, one would predict that those cohabiting prior to marriage ought to have higher-quality and more stable marriages.

The evidence, however, suggests just the opposite. Premarital cohabitation tends to be associated with lower marital quality and to increase the risk of divorce, even after taking account of variables known to be associated with divorce (e.g., education, age at marriage). Given wide variation in data, samples, measures of marital instability, and independent variables, the degree of consensus about this central finding is impressive (Axinn & Thornton 1992, Schoen 1992, Teachman et al 1991, Thomson & Colella 1992).¹ This pattern characterizes other countries such as Canada and Sweden as well (e.g., Bennett et al 1988, Hall & Zhao 1995, Rao & Trussell 1989).

Most of the research on this issue has been aimed at explanation and not simply documentation (Axinn & Thornton 1992, Booth & Johnson 1988, DeMaris & MacDonald 1993, DeMaris & Rao 1992, Lillard et al 1995, Teachman & Polonko 1990, Thomson & Colella 1992). Two main explanations have been posed to explain the association, and both have received empirical support. The first is what is termed the selection explanation. This refers to the idea that people who cohabit before marriage differ in important ways from those who do not, and these ways increase the likelihood of marital instability. In other words, the characteristics that select people into cohabitation in the first place, such as nontraditional values and attitudes or poor relationship skills, are also those that increase the risk of marital instability. The second explanation is that there is something about cohabitation itself, i.e., the *experience* of cohabitation, that increases the likelihood of marital disruption above and beyond one’s characteristics at the start of the cohabitation. Through cohabitation people learn about and come to accept the temporary nature

¹ A disagreement about this association is whether the effect is due to multiple cohabitation experiences. Two studies suggest that cohabitation negatively affects marital stability only if an individual engaged in more than one cohabiting relationship prior to marriage (DeMaris & MacDonald 1993, Teachman & Polonko 1990). Two studies fail to support this finding (Bennett et al 1988, DeMaris & Rao 1992, p. 187), and the majority do not examine the issue.

of relationships, and in particular that there are alternatives to marriage. Note that the two explanations are not mutually exclusive, the first focusing on the characteristics that select people initially into cohabitation and the second positing that the experience of cohabitation alters these characteristics to make people even more divorce-prone.

There is a reasonable amount of empirical support for the selection argument (e.g., Axinn & Thornton 1992, Booth & Johnson 1988, also see DeMaris & MacDonald 1993), and at least two studies have suggested that selectivity entirely explains the association between premarital cohabitation and marital instability (Lillard et al 1995, Thomson & Colella 1992). Of course, the studies vary in their ability to precisely test the selectivity argument, often due to data limitations at the time of the research (e.g., having only cross-sectional information or only measures of perceived marital instability rather than actual separation or divorce). Still, the consensus is impressive especially because selectivity has been conceptualized and operationalized in quite different ways. For example, Axinn & Thornton (1992) conceptualize selectivity in terms of attitudes towards divorce and marriage. One attitude item they use is the following: "Divorce is usually the best solution when a couple can't seem to work out their problems" (Axinn & Thornton 1992, p. 363). Booth & Johnson (1988) conceptualize selectivity as also including certain personal characteristics that would make one less than an ideal partner (e.g., alcohol abuse, personality problems, and fiscal irresponsibility). Thomson & Colella (1992) elaborate on several different kinds of selectivity, one of which is that cohabitators tend to define marriage in more individualistic rather than couple terms (pp. 260–61).

The second explanation has received less attention: that the experience of cohabiting further increases the risk of marital instability by changing people's characteristics. This is probably because data requirements are somewhat steep. One needs comparable data on attitudes and other factors both prior to and following cohabitation. One exception is the work of Axinn & Thornton (1992), who examine whether the experience of cohabitation between the ages of 18 and 23 significantly alters young men's and women's attitudes toward marriage and divorce. They find that it does, with cohabitation changing people's attitudes in ways that make them more prone to divorce (see also Axinn & Barber 1997, Clarkberg 1999b).

Where Does Cohabitation Fit Into the US Family System?

There has been an effort to determine "where" cohabitation fits into the family system in the United States. What is the *meaning* or significance of cohabitation in the United States? This is a complex and rather ambiguous question; cohabitation researchers have thus attempted to frame it in more tractable terms. Two main possibilities have been posed: Cohabitation is either a stage in the marriage process (i.e., a form of engagement that culminates in marriage) or a substitute for marriage. According to the first view, marriage as an institution is not threatened by cohabitation. As part of the process leading to marriage, cohabitation plays

much the same role as engagement. The large proportions of cohabitators that subsequently marry or have plans to marry generally support this notion (Brown & Booth 1996, Bumpass 1990). The second view—that cohabitation is an alternative to marriage—implies that marriage as an institution is threatened and losing its centrality in the United States. A third and less common view, advanced by Rindfuss & VandenHeuvel (1990), is that cohabitation is more appropriately viewed as an alternative to singlehood than to marriage. The authors argue that cohabitation represents an extension of dating and sexual relationships and that its ideology does not include permanence.

Three types of studies are relevant to this issue, all of them being comparisons of one kind or another. The first are those that compare various characteristics of individuals or couples in different statuses (i.e., married, cohabiting, or single). In this case, research is often explicitly motivated by the question of the meaning of cohabitation. The second type includes studies of mate selection. These studies evaluate partner similarity in marriages and cohabitations. Assuming that partner homogamy tells us something about the nature of marriage, the reasoning goes, then one can learn about the meaning of cohabitation by comparing patterns across union type. The third type includes studies on childbearing and how it varies among cohabiting, single, and married women. While this research has often been primarily motivated by a demographic interest in fertility, many authors use findings to speculate about the meaning of cohabitation.

General Comparisons There appear to be differences on a range of characteristics between cohabitators and both married and single people. Rindfuss & VandenHeuvel (1990) compared childbearing intentions, schooling, home ownership, employment, and other characteristics between the three groups and found that cohabitators are more similar to single than married people in virtually all of the comparisons. For example, 33% of single and cohabiting males were homeowners compared to 80% for married men, the bivariate relationship remaining statistically significant when a number of background factors were controlled (p. 716). These comparisons lead the authors to conclude that cohabitation is not an alternative to marriage, but an alternative to conventional singlehood.

Other studies of this type emphasize *relationships* rather than individual traits (Brines & Joyner 1999, Brown & Booth 1996, Nock 1995). Nock (1995), for example, argues that cohabitation and marriage differ not necessarily because of the type of people drawn into each, but because cohabitation is less institutionalized than marriage. As Nock states, “Cohabitation is an incomplete institution. No matter how widespread the practice, nonmarital unions are not yet governed by strong consensual norms or formal laws” (p. 74). The weak institutionalization of cohabitation, Nock argues, has several implications. For example, there are fewer obstacles to ending a cohabiting relationship than a marriage, cohabitators are less likely to be integrated into important social support networks, and there is much more ambiguity about what it means to be a cohabiting partner than to be a spouse. Consistent with this conceptualization, Nock finds that cohabitators

report lower levels of commitment and lower levels of relationship happiness than do married people (see also Thomson & Colella 1992). Brines & Joyner (1999) examine the factors that promote stability in the two types of couples, finding that egalitarian gender roles (based on similarity in employment and earnings of the two partners) reduce the risk of break-up among cohabiting but not married couples. Their findings suggest that the two types of relationships may operate on different principles, with cohabiting unions operating on a principle of equality.

At the same time, a study by Brown & Booth (1996) suggests instead that there may essentially be two types of cohabiting couples: those who have plans to marry and those who do not. They show that the former are quite similar to married couples in terms of several dimensions of relationship quality (e.g., happiness, conflict management); it is only cohabiting couples without plans to marry who report significantly lower-quality relationships. These findings lead the authors to speculate that cohabitation is similar to marriage for the majority of cohabitators; about three quarters of cohabitators in their NSFH sample report plans to marry their partners. It is important to note that this study relied on one partner's report of marriage intentions and relationship quality even though agreement between partners on these topics is by no means universal (Brown forthcoming, Sanchez et al 1998). For example, one partner expects marriage while the other does not in about one fifth of cohabiting couples (Bumpass et al 1991). However, Brown & Booth find that taking partner disagreement about marriage plans into account does not substantially alter their results

Mate Selection Studies Assortative mating, or the propensity of people to marry those like themselves, is a well-established area of sociological research (Kalmijn 1998, Mare 1991). Studies most commonly investigate similarity between spouses in terms of race-ethnicity, educational attainment, religion, and age. Recently a few researchers expanded the scope of this literature by examining similarity between cohabiting partners and comparing it to that of spouses (Blackwell & Lichter forthcoming, Qian 1998, Qian & Preston 1993, Schoen & Weinick 1993). The underlying idea is that difference (or similarity) in mate selection patterns between the two kinds of couples ought to tell us something about whether cohabitation resembles marriage. Schoen & Weinick (1993) clearly state this reasoning: "Patterns of partner choice can provide insight into how cohabitations are similar to, or different from, marriages" (p. 412).

Overall, married couples appear to be somewhat more homogamous in age, religion, and race-ethnicity, although findings are mixed regarding education (Blackwell & Lichter forthcoming, Schoen & Weinick 1993). Schoen & Weinick's (1993) study suggests that cohabiting couples are more homogamous with respect to education than married couples, whereas Blackwell & Lichter's findings (forthcoming) suggest the opposite; this discrepancy is likely due to some very substantial differences between studies in data, samples, methodological approach, and even the coding of education.

At the same time, however, homogamy tends to characterize couples in both cohabiting and marital unions. As Blackwell & Lichter take care to emphasize, any differences are mainly a matter of degree. It is illustrative in this regard to consider the implications of Qian's (1998) study. He examined trends over time in mate selection patterns in the two types of relationships. Focusing on the period between 1970 and 1990, Qian's findings indicate that by 1990 partner choice patterns were similar in cohabiting and marital unions. The vantage point of time thus reinforces the interpretation that differences are a matter of degree.

Childbearing Studies If we assume that a main purpose of marriage is, or at least has been, reproduction, then examining the fertility behavior of cohabitators and comparing it to that of married or single women can offer clues about the meaning of cohabitation. That is, if cohabitation is increasingly the arena for reproduction, then one might conclude that cohabitation is not merely a step in the process leading to marriage but perhaps an alternative to it.

An example of a relevant fertility study is Manning (1993). She evaluates the likelihood that an unmarried, pregnant woman will marry before the birth of her child, a topic traditionally called "legitimation" in fertility research. Her main empirical question is: Do cohabiting and noncohabiting single women have *equal* tendencies to marry before childbirth? While oversimplifying here, the answer varies for black and white women, even after controlling for socioeconomic status, and this variation suggests possible differences in the meaning of cohabitation. Essentially, she finds that for white women in their twenties cohabitation (relative to living alone) increases the likelihood of marriage before childbirth. Presumably, if the cohabiting women considered cohabitation an acceptable context for childbearing, there would be no differential and cohabiting women would remain cohabiting in response to a pregnancy. Manning thus concludes that, for white women, cohabitation is a stage in the marriage process.

The main conclusion emerging from studies of this type is that there are race-ethnic differences in the relationship between pregnancy, cohabitation, and marriage and thus possibly race-ethnic differences in the meaning of cohabitation. The overall interpretation of most of the authors is that cohabitation is more an alternative to marriage (at least in terms of childbearing) among black and mainland Puerto Rican women² and more a precursor to marriage among non-latino white women (Landale & Fennelly 1992, Landale & Forste 1991, Loomis & Landale 1994, Manning 1993, 1995, 1999, Manning & Landale 1996, Manning & Smock 1995, Oropesa 1996, Raley 1999).

At the same time, it is important to keep these findings and interpretations of them in perspective. The majority of women in the United States overall do not at this time conceive or give birth during cohabitation. Only about 11% of all children are born into cohabiting households, and about 40% of nonmarital births occur in

²There is often an insufficient number of cases in surveys to examine this issue for other race-ethnic groups.

cohabiting unions (Bumpass & Lu 1999). The key point is that patterns vary by race-ethnicity. Astone et al's (1999) study of a cohort of black men in Baltimore attests to the fact that a good deal of fatherhood among black men is occurring in the context of cohabitation. Assigning these men the label of "unwed fathers" based on marital status obscures that they are, in fact, co-resident parents.

How Does Cohabitation Affect Children?

Simply because a child isn't born to cohabiting parents does not mean he or she will not experience a parent's cohabitation at some point during childhood. This latter happens when a child has been living with one parent, typically the mother, and that parent enters a cohabiting relationship.

Just how pervasive is parental cohabitation in children's lives? Cross-sectional statistics indicate that only a small proportion of children live in cohabiting households at any one point in time. Data from the 1990 Public Use Microsample of the Census show that about 13% of children in single-parent families were actually living with cohabiting parents, which translates into just 3.5% of all children (Manning & Lichter 1996). However, the proportion of children who will *ever* live in a cohabiting household during childhood is estimated to be a substantial 40%, underscoring the importance of understanding the effects of parental cohabitation on children (Bumpass & Lu 1999). As Bumpass & Lu write, "... now that about two-fifths of all children spend some time living with their mother and a cohabiting partner ... we simply cannot address the changing family experiences of children while ignoring cohabitation" (1999, p. 21).

Past studies have identified two important issues regarding children's experience of parental cohabitation. The first is that children already disadvantaged in terms of parental income and education are relatively more likely to experience this family form (Bumpass & Lu 1999, Graefe & Lichter 1999). This finding is consistent with other research showing that, on average, cohabiting households tend to be less well-off financially than married-couple households (e.g., Manning & Lichter 1996) and that good economic circumstances increase the likelihood of marriage among both cohabiting and noncohabiting individuals (e.g., Clarkberg 1999a, Lichter et al 1992, Smock & Manning 1997).

Second, children experiencing parental cohabitation are also more likely to undergo further transitions in family structure. Graefe & Lichter (1999) estimate that most children who are born or ever live in a cohabiting family will experience a change in family structure within a few years. These findings do not bode well for children's well-being. A large body of literature has established that family structure has important effects on children, with deleterious ones for children who grow up without both biological parents (McLanahan & Sandefur 1994, Seltzer 1994). While some of this effect is due to income and other factors, there is evidence that the *number* of changes in family structure is particularly important. The fewer the changes, the better for children (Wu & Martinson 1993, Wu 1996). While children in cohabiting households may in fact be living with two biological

parents, although more typically one parent and a “step-parent,” they are quite likely to experience future family transitions.

To date, however, we have very little direct knowledge about the possible effects of cohabitation on various aspects of children’s well-being relative to other family structures. A study by Thomson and colleagues (1998) is an important exception (see also Thomson et al 1994). Using the two waves of the NSFH, they examine the impact of a single mother’s entrance into either a cohabitation or a remarriage on mothering behaviors. They generally find few differences in the effects of the two union types. The authors note, however, that small sample size precludes conclusive interpretation (p. 16). It appears that not even the oversample of cohabitators in the NSFH provides a sufficient number of cases with which to fully examine the relationship between parental cohabitation and children’s well-being (Bumpass & Lu 1999).

ASSESSMENT OF PAST RESEARCH AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

A first observation is simply that an enormous amount has been accomplished in a very short time. Just 15 years ago very little was known about cohabitation. Since then family sociologists and demographers have rapidly created a solid base of generalizable knowledge about cohabitation in the United States. We know a good deal not only about overall trends, differentials, and patterns but also about the effect of cohabitation on marital stability, the nature of differences between cohabitation and marriage, and the role of cohabitation in nonmarital childbearing. Often in the guise of the latter two issues, researchers are also developing an understanding of the significance or meaning of cohabitation. Notably, too, appreciation of the importance of cohabitation has seeped into other strands of sociological research; witness Brines & Joyner’s (1999) paper on couple cohesion and recent studies of assortative mating (Blackwell & Lichter forthcoming, Qian & Preston 1993, Qian 1998).

A second observation concerns comparisons between cohabitation and marriage, and in particular, the attempt to gauge the meaning of cohabitation by comparing it to marriage (i.e., some comparison studies and mate selection studies). What is sometimes omitted from studies of this ilk is full acknowledgment that the meaning of *marriage* is dynamic and undergoing radical change. In the last few decades, for example, women have been playing increasingly important roles as income providers (Bianchi 1995). The underlying issue is whether we can gauge what cohabitation means if we are using a standard that is also changing. To say that cohabitation is like or unlike marriage is useful only to the extent that we have adequate knowledge of what marriage is indeed “like.”

A related issue is the emphasis in some past research on differences between those who cohabit and those who do not. It is probably time for most research on cohabitation to begin from a premise that the majority of men and women will

cohabit, prior to marriage or afterwards, and that the cohabiting couples studied today are the married couples of tomorrow. Certainly, many researchers are already well aware of this issue (e.g., Blackwell & Lichter forthcoming, Clarkberg et al 1995, Nock 1995, 1998).

A third issue is that there are strong indications that *cohabitation* is changing in significant ways, even over the last few years. Consider these examples. First, there is evidence that the inverse relationship between premarital cohabitation and marital stability is diminishing. The effect, if any, is trivial for recent birth cohorts (Schoen 1992). Second, between 1987 and 1995 there has been significant change in cohabiting couples' trajectories: lower proportions are marrying and more are breaking up (Bumpass & Lu 1999). Third, Raley (1999) shows that there has been a significant shift in the relationship between fertility and cohabitation between the early 1980s and 1990s. Pregnant women are increasingly likely to cohabit or remain cohabiting rather than to marry in response to a premarital pregnancy, suggesting perhaps that cohabitation is becoming more a substitute for marriage as time goes on. Finally, the proportion of cohabitations with children present increased from 40% to 50% between 1987 and 1995 (Bumpass & Lu 1999).

Whatever the substantive implications, this assortment of facts illustrates the point that cohabitation is changing in substantial ways over very short spans of time. A continuing task for researchers will thus be simply to keep pace with developments; as new data become available new descriptive studies will be needed.

Future work on cohabitation is likely to elaborate on at least two existing themes in the literature. The first is the effect of cohabitation on children's well-being. This question follows a long line of research on the effects of family structure on children and engages an ongoing concern of policymakers and funding agencies. Given that currently available data are inadequate for discerning the effects of cohabitation versus other family structures (Bumpass & Lu 1999), there will likely be new data collection efforts as well as new content on existing surveys.

It is also probable that future research will pay relatively more attention to diversity than in the past, consistent with the fact that cohabitation has just about become a majority phenomenon; this will complement research that focuses on central tendencies. In particular, there will be a continuing effort to understand whether and how cohabitation's "meaning" may vary across subgroups given that past studies imply that there are at least race-ethnic differences in this meaning (e.g., Manning 1993). Raley's (1999) findings suggest the importance of ongoing temporal change in the meaning of cohabitation as well.

Finally, virtually all sociological knowledge about cohabitation in the United States has been based on quantitative analysis of survey or census data. Certainly, this approach has taught us a great deal about cohabitation in a very short time. Yet the broader question of the meaning of cohabitation remains difficult to address. To begin to answer it and similar questions, it would be useful additionally to be able to draw on qualitative data that ask people what cohabitation means to them. This approach could increase our understanding of possible diversity in the meaning of cohabitation by gender, social class, or race-ethnicity. More generally,

it would provide the sort of in-depth data important for nuanced assessments of recent and possible future changes in family patterns. A practical payoff is that it would provide a basis for new survey content.

IMPLICATIONS OF COHABITATION

Below I briefly consider the implications of cohabitation for gender equality and for research on families. Although cohabitation of course bears on many issues, I've selected these two due to their centrality for broader sociological concerns.

Gender Equality

Blumstein & Schwartz's book *American Couples* (1983), pioneering in its inclusion of nontraditional couples, provided suggestive evidence that cohabiting couples were substantially more gender-egalitarian than their married counterparts. This was not true in all respects, but certainly in many, and particularly in cohabiting couples' tendency to eschew the traditional male breadwinner role. While Blumstein & Schwartz made no claim to having representative data, their findings were widely cited and probably formed part of the basis for many family scholars' expectation that cohabitation might provide the setting for enactment of less differentiated gender roles.

Are cohabiting couples indeed at the forefront of a revolution in gender roles? Blumstein & Schwartz conducted their research in the mid- to late 1970s, even more reason to suspect that the answer might be "yes."

Only a handful of studies are directly relevant to this question, and all in all, the evidence is quite mixed. On the one hand, cohabitators profess somewhat more liberal gender-role attitudes than do married people. Clarkberg et al (1995) found that young people with liberal gender-role attitudes are more likely to select cohabitation rather than marriage as their first union (see also Shelton & John 1993). There also may be somewhat different factors promoting cohesion in cohabiting versus married couples. Cohabiting couples are more likely to stay together when the two partners have similar income provision roles; this factor is unimportant for married couples (Brines & Joyner 1999).

On the other hand, cohabitators do not differ substantially from married couples in terms of their division of household labor. Cross-sectional data show little difference in the average number of housework hours men and women perform in the two unions, particularly for men (Shelton & John 1993, South & Spitze 1994). South & Spitze (1994), for example, report that cohabiting men do about as much housework as married men (19 and 18 hours per week for cohabiting and married men, respectively) while cohabiting women do 31 hours of housework per week compared to 37 for married women. Thus, women perform the vast majority of housework in both contexts.

Additional evidence emerges from one study that uses longitudinal data and analysis. Drawing on data from the two waves of the NSFH, Gupta (1999) tracks changes in men's and women's housework hours over roughly a five-year period.

His focus is on the impact of entering and exiting unions (either marriage or cohabitation) on changes in housework hours. Gupta's key finding is that men substantially reduce both their housework time overall and time doing "female-type" tasks specifically (e.g., preparing meals, house cleaning, washing dishes) when they enter *either* marriage or cohabitation. Women increase theirs under the same circumstances, and the magnitude of these gender-specific effects is about the same for the two unions.

As Gupta states, "... the results show that entry into cohabitation induces changes in housework behavior that are no less gender-typical than does entry into marriage . . . the fact of entry into a coresidential union is of greater consequence for housework time than the form of that union" (p. 710). Moreover, given evidence that cohabiting couples are less likely to pool income than married couples (Blumstein & Schwartz 1983), the findings of these housework studies imply that cohabiting women are—in a very important sense—worse off than married women (LJ Waite, unpublished observations).

Finally, two studies show that the enactment of traditional gender roles increases the likelihood that a cohabiting couple will marry (Sanchez et al 1998, Smock & Manning 1997). One of these studies found that only the male partner's income, education, and employment status significantly affect the likelihood of marriage, implying asymmetry in the importance assigned to men's and women's economic characteristics (Smock & Manning 1997). The other study found that the amount of time the female, but not the male, partner spends doing housework is positively associated with the odds of marriage (Sanchez et al 1998). That these findings emerge even among cohabitators, a subgroup less traditional in terms of attitudes toward gender roles, suggests the intractability of a division of labor that assigns breadwinning to men and homemaking to women.

Research on Families

The literature on cohabitation challenges at least two aspects of sociological research on families. The first pertains to categories used by researchers and the second to prominent substantive issues in sociology.

Until recently much sociological research ignored the complexity of living arrangements; this was true even when studying the causes and consequences of family structure (Manning & Smock 1997). The literature tended to use simpler measures of family structure mostly framed by *marital* status. Thus, for example, a "two-parent" family included married couples but ignored cohabiting couples with biological children. In addition, the term "single parent" was generally applied not only when a mother was living with a cohabiting partner but even when the partner was the biological father of the child. These practices were in part due to lack of available data, given the lag between rapid social change and data collection geared to understand the change.

Bumpass and colleagues clearly demonstrate how continued reliance on simpler measures can distort our understanding of family structure in the United States. Almost one fifth of the estimated time that children spend in supposedly

“single-parent” families is actually spent with a parent and her cohabiting partner (Bumpass & Raley 1995). And if one includes cohabitation in the definition of step-family, then almost *one half* of all step-families are cases of a biological parent and his, or, more typically, her cohabiting partner (Bumpass et al 1995).

The literature on cohabitation also transforms our understanding of some prominent sociological research questions. For example, there is a large literature focusing on the retreat from marriage in the United States, and particularly why that retreat has been more dramatic for blacks than for whites (e.g., Lichter et al 1992, Mare & Winship 1991, Wilson 1987). For the most part, cohabitation has been neglected in this literature. But Raley (1996) shows its potential importance. She finds that the black-white gap in union formation, tapped by estimates of the average age at entry into any coresidential union, is only about half that of the gap in marriage. Given the prevalence of cohabitation, that blacks and whites are about equally likely to cohabit, and that large proportions of cohabitators go on to marry their partners, it is clearly important to examine the factors that predict marriage among cohabiting couples to attempt to explain racial differences in marriage (Manning & Smock 1995). Interestingly, Brown (forthcoming) finds that while black and white cohabiting couples are about equally likely to *expect* to marry, blacks are substantially less likely to actually do so.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In just a decade or so the amount of research on cohabitation in the United States has skyrocketed. Cohabitation has not only been the central focus of a relatively large and growing body of literature but has also been incorporated into various other strands of sociological research. These include assortative mating (Blackwell & Lichter forthcoming, Qian & Preston 1993, Schoen & Weinick 1993), theories of couple cohesion (Brines & Joyner 1999), and the division of domestic labor (Blair & Lichter 1991, Gupta 1999, Shelton & John 1993, South & Spitze 1994). Ten years ago in his address as president of the Population Association of America, Bumpass (1990) said that the remarkable rise in cohabitation ought to result in drastic changes in how scholars think about and measure family events. This review suggests that it has and will continue to do so.

Overall, cohabitation indicates how family life in the United States is being transformed, some argue radically, with legal marriage losing its primacy as the manifest center of family ties. While this review has highlighted several important research questions about cohabitation, the issue motivating all of these questions, and the researchers asking them, is the larger one of social change and how family patterns both express and contribute to such change.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research was supported by a grant from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (R01-34391). I am foremost grateful to

Wendy D. Manning for our ongoing intellectual exchange and collaboration and to our many teachers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison for demonstrating the value of such an exchange. Thanks go to Sanjiv Gupta and Mary Noonan for helping to carry on this tradition and providing me with another forum for lively discussions about families, gender, and social change. I also thank Judith A. Seltzer and Linda J. Waite for their (as usual) insightful comments and Mari Ellis of the Population Studies Center for her assistance in preparation of this manuscript. All errors and omissions are my own.

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