CIVIC ENGAGEMENT, ADULTHOOD

SEE Volume 2: *Political Behavior and Orientations, Adulthood; Volunteering, Adulthood.*

COHABITATION

Cohabitation is defined by social scientists as two adults of the opposite sex living together in an intimate, nonmarital relationship. Cohabitation has rapidly become a prominent feature on the landscape of American family life. Using the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), Kennedy and Bumpass (2007) estimated that 58% of women aged between 25 and 29 had cohabited at some point in their lives. Moreover, about 40% of children in the United States will spend some part of their childhood in a cohabiting household (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2007). Young people in the United States approve of cohabitation at much higher rates than their older counterparts, so it is likely that cohabitation rates will continue to rise in the United States (Smock, 2000).

In attempting to understand the causes and consequences of the rise in cohabitation, scholars have tried to identify whether cohabitation is an alternative to marriage, a prelude to marriage, or a convenient dating arrangement. Clearly all three forms of cohabitation exist, but most agree that the most common form, at least among young adults, is as a prelude to marriage. However, consensus is growing that cohabitation is still an *incomplete* institution in the United States with wide variations in the meanings and norms associated with it.

COHABITATION OVER THE LIFE COURSE

The 2000 U.S. Census counted 5.5 million households that are maintained by a cohabiting couple. Although this number reflects a substantial increase in the incidence of cohabitation over the previous 20 years, it still underestimates the true prevalence and impact of cohabitation. The Census figure is an underestimate because cohabitations are usually short-lived, either quickly dissolving or progressing to marriage. Thus, at any given time the number of cohabiting couples is very small relative to the number of people who have ever cohabited. By contrast, examining cohabitation trends across the life course can provide a more accurate account of cohabitation's dramatic increase in frequency and impact.

Young adults increasingly delay marriage and many cohabit in the meantime. Data for 2002 indicate that 62% of women's first marriages are preceded by cohabitation either with their spouses or with someone else. Cohabitation is even more common following a divorce and may partly account for observed declines in remarriage rates (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2007). Although cohabitation in later life has received substantially less attention than other life course stages, anecdotal evidence and small-scale studies suggest that cohabitation is on the rise among the elderly as well (Chevan, 1996; Brown, Bulanda, & Lee, 2005). Cohabitation, like marriage, tends to cluster with other important life course transitions, such as job changes, residential moves, and breaks in school enrollment (Guzzo, 2006).

These trends among adults have important implications for children's family experiences. According to 2002 data, about one in three births involve an unmarried mother and of these, about half the mothers are cohabiting with the baby's father. In addition, many mothers cohabit with a man who is not the father of their children, for example, following a divorce. The result is that approximately two in five children spend some time living with a cohabiting parent before they reach age 16 (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2007).

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN COHABITATION AND MARRIAGE

The implications of a societal shift from marriage to cohabitation depend partly on how much these arrangements differ and partly on the ways they differ. Scholars have focused on five dimensions along which marriage and cohabitation differ: stability and commitment, relationship quality, economic security, fertility, and cooperation. Starting with stability and commitment, most cohabiters (about 75%) expect to marry their partner (Manning, Smock, & Majumdar, 2004). Of those who expect to marry, most have *definite plans* to do so. Thus, many cohabiting couples are in committed relationships, but a significant minority is not. Despite the high levels of commitment, cohabiting unions are unstable. Among first cohabiting unions in the period from 1997 to 2001, only about one third resulted in marriage and among those who had not married, fewer than two thirds were still together after two years (Kennedy and Bumpass, 2007). When compared with prior estimates (Bumpass & Lu, 2000), these findings suggest that long-term cohabiting relationships are becoming more common, but cohabiting unions continue to be less enduring than marriages.

Cohabiters also are less satisfied with their relationships than married couples. Importantly, the lower average levels of stability and relationship quality among cohabiters are driven largely by the very low stability and quality levels of the minority who do not plan to marry. Cohabiters with marriage plans, especially those who are in their first cohabiting relationship, enjoy similar levels of relationship quality and stability as those who are married (Brown & Booth, 1996; Teachman, 2003).

	1960	1970	1980	1985	1990	1992	1994	1996	1998	2000
Total number of unmarried couple households (000s)	439	523	1.589	1.983	2.856	3.308	3.661	3.958	4.236	4.736
Number of unmarried couple households with children under 15 years	197	196	431	603	891	1.121	1.270	1.442	1.520	1.675
Percent total unmarried couples households with children under 15 years	44.9%	37.4%	27.1%	30.4%	31.3%	33.8%	34.6%	36.4%	35.9%	35.4%

SOURCE: U.S Census Bureau. *Current Population Reports*, P20-537. Table UC-1. Washington, DC.: U.S. Census Bureau, 2001 in (2002). *Father Facts 4*. Gaithersburg. MD: National Fatherhood Initiative. Pg 76.

Figure 1. *Number of unmarried couple households by presence of children under age 15, 1960–2000.* CENGAGE LEARNING, GALE.

Other important dimensions along which marriage and cohabitation differ are economic potential and employment security. Generally, cohabitation is more common among couples with lower socioeconomic status. Among men, higher levels of education and earning potential are associated with a lower likelihood of forming a cohabiting union and a higher chance of marrying (Thornton, Axinn, & Teachman, 1995; Xie, Raymo, Goyette, & Thornton, 2003). Further, men's job instability is associated with a couple's decision to cohabit rather than marry (Oppenheimer, 2003). Both qualitative and quantitative accounts of cohabiting families describe economic insecurity as a key factor blocking marriage (e.g. Smock, Manning, & Porter, 2005).

In some European countries, Sweden for example, cohabitation is viewed as an alternative form of marriage (Heimdal & Houseknecht, 2003). One reason why Swedes tend to see cohabitation as similar to marriage is because most children in that country are born to cohabiting couples. In the United States, however, an increasing proportion of children are born outside of marriage. Given the steep rise in cohabitation among single adults, many of these births occur in cohabiting couples, leading some researchers to question whether fertility continues to distinguish marriage and cohabitation. On the one hand, the proportion of pregnant cohabiters who marry before the birth of their children is declining, suggesting that cohabitation is becoming an acceptable context for childbearing. On the other hand, there is no growth in the likelihood that cohabiting couples will become pregnant, indicating that cohabitation is not becoming a preferred arrangement for parenthood. Mexican-American women are an exception to this general pattern. Among cohabiting women, levels of fertility for Mexican Americans are much higher than for Anglo-Americans, suggesting that for this group cohabitation may be a preferred and accepted arrangement (Wildsmith & Raley, 2006). In other words, fertility continues to distinguish marriage from cohabitation, but marriage is becoming less distinct from cohabitation along this dimension, perhaps especially for Mexican Americans.

Two of the foundations of marriage are economic cooperation and specialization. That is, married couples tend to pool resources and, although there is some overlap, husbands typically do different tasks than wives, which may include differential involvement in paid work. The interdependence that specialization creates may serve as a barrier to divorce. This is one way that marriage is distinct from cohabitation. Whereas among spouses having similar incomes is positively associated with the risk of divorce, among cohabiters having similar incomes is associated with stability (Brines & Joyner, 1999). Research on housework provides further evidence that specialization and cooperation are less evident in cohabitation than marriage. The difference in time spent on housework performed by husbands and wives is greater than the difference between cohabiting partners (South & Spitze, 1994). This is not because cohabiting women do less housework than their married counterparts; cohabiting men do more housework than married men do (Davis, Greenstein, & Marks, 2007). In addition, cohabiting couples with a more traditional division of labor move more quickly to marriage (Sanchez, Manning, & Smock, 1998). Taken together, this research supports the idea that specialization and economic cooperation distinguish marriage from cohabitation. This distinction may arise because cohabitation, at least in the United States, is a relatively short lived and sometimes tentative arrangement, which reduces the benefits of specialization and increases the risks associated with pooling economic resources.

THE IMPACT OF COHABITATION ON ADULTS AND CHILDREN

Scientists and policy makers alike are interested in the long-term ramifications of the rise in cohabitation rates. This impact is difficult to study for a number of reasons. First, as indicated already, the meaning of cohabitation is unclear and different groups are likely to understand and be affected differently by it. Second, cohabitation is a *moving target* with the norms and meanings associated with it rapidly shifting over time. Third, many of the purported effects of cohabitation may be due to social selection. In other words, the kinds of people who enter cohabiting relationships may also be disposed to other kinds of behavior so that, for example, what seems to be an effect of cohabitation on relationship quality is actually caused by the characteristics of people who choose to cohabit. Despite these limitations, scholars have compiled an impressive trove of information about the outcomes associated with cohabitation for both adults and children.

As already mentioned, cohabiting relationships in the United States tend to be unstable compared with marital relationships. One way in which the instability associated with cohabitation affects cohabiters is the quality and availability of resources from kinship networks. Some evidence suggests that young adult cohabiters reap fewer benefits from parents compared with married young adults (Eggebeen, 2005). Cohabiters also differ from married adults in the impact of relationship dissolution. Although formerly married men tend to be better off after a divorce, formerly cohabiting men experience little financial change after dissolution and formerly cohabiting women suffer about the same financial loss as formerly married women (Avellar & Smock, 2005). Cohabiting relationships also tend to be more violent than married relationships although this is likely the result of the least violent cohabiting couples choosing to marry and the most violent married couples choosing to divorce (Kenney & McLanahan, 2006). Entering a cohabiting relationship appears to have some risk-reducing benefits, especially for men. Men experience similar reductions in marijuana use and binge drinking whether they enter cohabitation or marriage (Duncan, Wilkerson, & England, 2006).

Cohabiters are less healthy than their married counterparts, likely because cohabiters have fewer coping resources and lower relationship quality (Marcussen, 2005). For example, among older adults, cohabiting men experience significantly poorer mental health compared with married men, but cohabiting and married women have similar levels of mental health. Scholars hypothesize that, among older adults, a population for whom caregiving roles are highly gendered, married men benefit from the security of having a caregiving wife, whereas cohabiting women may benefit from having fewer caregiving obligations (Brown et al., 2005). So overall, although some of the differences between cohabitation and marriage in adult outcomes appear to be due to selection, the relative instability of cohabitation may also contribute to some negative outcomes.

An increasing number of children spend part of their childhoods in households headed by a cohabiting couple. Social scientists have developed a modest literature investigating how children fare in cohabiting households. Cohabitation appears to be a significant source of instability in the lives of some children in the United States. This is especially true when a child's mother (or father) moves in and out of several cohabiting relationships while the child is living in the parental home (Raley & Wildsmith, 2004). Several studies indicate that children (and adolescents) in cohabiting households exhibit more behavioral, health, and educational problems than children living in married households.

What is less clear is whether the presence of two adults in a cohabiting household is better for children than a single-parent household is. Most evidence suggests that factors such as instability, lower socioeconomic status, and poorer mental health among mothers in cohabiting relationships offset any potential gains that children may accrue from having a second adult in the household. Indeed, as some research on stepfamilies has shown, the presence of an adult who is not a biological parent may be a stressor for children (Manning & Brown, 2006; Raley, Frisco, & Wildsmith, 2005; Artis, 2007; Ginther & Pollack, 2004; Brown, 2004; Manning, et al. 2004; Manning & Lamb, 2003). Selection is probably responsible for many of the differences between child outcomes in cohabiting households versus findings in married households. Instability, however, may also contribute to poorer childhood outcomes in cohabiting households.

COHABITATION OUTSIDE THE UNITED STATES

Cohabitation is on the rise in many parts of the world. As in the United States, the role of cohabitation in the family systems of many of these nations is unclear. In a few countries, such as Sweden, cohabitation appears to be a stable and entrenched alternative to marriage (Heimdal & Houseknect, 2003). In others, such as New Zealand, cohabitations are short lived and unstable, similar to cohabitations in the United States. Cohabitation has spread rapidly throughout much of Europe, including the United Kingdom, but the practice has been slow to spread in Italy and Spain (Heuveline, Timberlake, & Furstenberg, 2003; Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004; Seltzer, 2004). In Latin America, cohabitation has a long history, because *informal unions* have long existed as an alternative to marriage. Some

evidence, however, suggests that in countries such as Mexico, cohabitation is becoming a normative precursor to marriage as well as an alternative (Heaton & Forste, 2007). Less research has been conducted on cohabitation in Asia, where rates have been generally lower. Some evidence in Japan indicates that increases in cohabitation may be forthcoming, as Japanese young people report accepting cohabitation as a legitimate precursor to marriage at much higher rates than older people do (Rindfuss, Choe, Bumpass, & Tsuya, 2004). Little is known about cohabitation in the Middle East, although it is presumably low in traditionally Muslim countries. Cohabitation rates have risen in sub-Saharan Africa in recent years, with some countries, such as Botswana, exhibiting dramatic growth (Mokomane, 2007).

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

High rates of cohabitation have a number of policy implications. Lawmakers and business leaders will need to formulate policies that account for cohabitation. Some states and many large corporations already allow adults to nominate domestic partners as beneficiaries and, as cohabitation rates climb, access to health benefits for cohabiters is likely to increase. The welfare of children in cohabiting relationships is another important policy issue. Research showing that children fare worse in cohabiting relationships than marital relationships has been used by some lawmakers to help pass marriage promotion policies. Some scholars are skeptical about marriage promotion legislation, contending that the negative association between cohabitation and child well-being is largely due to the characteristics of people who decide to cohabit. They argue that simply getting cohabiters married will not solve children's' problems and the money would be better spent on addressing underlying problems such as poverty, poor health care, and substandard education (Smock & Manning, 2004). These and other issues will continue to be debated as cohabitation rates rise.

Future research will demonstrate whether cohabiting unions in the United States become stable like the unions observed in parts of Europe and, if so, whether more stable cohabiting unions produce better outcomes for adults and children. Researchers will also find fruitful ground for investigation in the cohabiting unions of older adults, especially if current youth maintain their positive attitudes toward cohabitation as they age. Although it is often assumed that cohabitation fits somewhere between marriage and noncoresidential romantic relationships (or *dating*), very little is known about the diversity and character of modern noncoresidential romantic relationships. As researchers fill this knowledge gap, scientists will be able to make valid and useful comparisons between cohabitation and dating. Finally, there is much more room for understanding how the forms of cohabitation vary by socio-economic status and race and ethnicity.

CONCLUSIONS

Cohabitation rates are rising around the world, prompting some scholars to suggest that a major demographic transition is underway, one in which cohabitation will become a normative alternative to marriage (Van de Kaa, 1988). In the United States, the most recent evidence suggests that cohabitation is mostly a prelude to marriage and is still far from the stable alternative to marriage observed in some European nations. The relative instability of cohabiting relationships in the United States likely contributes to poorer outcomes for both adults and children in cohabiting households compared with married households. After nearly 30 years of rapidly rising cohabitation rates, cohabitation has become an important family form with potential impacts at every stage in the life course.

SEE ALSO Volume 1: *Transition to Marriage;* Volume 2: *Dating and Romantic Relationships, Adulthood; Divorce and Separation; Family and Household Structure, Adulthood; Gays and Lesbians, Adulthood; Marriage; Mate Selection; Remarriage;* Volume 3: *Singlehood; Widowhood.*

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COMMUNITARIANISM

Communitarianism is a sociopolitical philosophy that views individual character virtues and social bonds as central to the lives of social actors. Communitarians believe that social groups—particularly communities—must strive to balance individual freedoms and the welfare of the collective. Elements of communitarian thinking can be found in sociological, philosophical, and political writing and teaching. Contemporary proponents of this movement include Amitai Etzioni (b. 1929), Robert Bellah (b. 1927), Philip Selznick (b. 1919), and Daniel Bell (b. 1919), but aspects of communitarianism are traceable to earlier theorists such as Karl Marx (1818–