

Not Crossing the “Extra Line”: How Cohabitors With Children View Their Unions

I use qualitative interview data from a sample of 44 cohabiting couples who have children together to investigate how they view their unions and how the presence of children influences the meanings they attach to them. I find most cohabiting parents begin cohabiting in response to a pregnancy but do not believe they should stay in a relationship because of shared children. They view cohabitation as a practical response to parenthood that allows them to coparent and share expenses yet avoid the greater expectations of commitment, relationship quality, and more traditional and scripted family roles they associate with marriage. Cohabiting parents do not believe they should marry because they have a child together but value the symbolic aspects of marriage.

Cohabitation has become an important context for bearing and raising children in the United States. Births to unmarried cohabiting women account for almost all the increase in nonmarital childbearing over the past two decades (Bumpass & Lu, 2000), and the proportion of children born to cohabiting parents has more than doubled since the 1980s, from 6% of births to about 15% in 2000 (Fragile Families Research Brief, 2005). Over the same period, births to married parents have declined (Ventura & Bachrach, 2000).

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Despite the increasing prevalence of cohabitation as a family status, there is still much to learn about the nature of relationships between cohabiting parents.

Although cohabitation has become more common for individuals among all stages of the life course (Casper & Bianchi, 2002; Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004), having children while cohabiting is associated with socioeconomic disadvantage (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Manning, 2001). Also, cohabiting parents' relationships do not last as long as those of married parents, putting their children at a higher risk for poverty and multiple family transitions (Graefe & Lichter, 1999; Manning, 2001). Together, these factors have raised concerns about how life in a cohabiting family affects the well-being of children.

It is difficult to explain or assess these trends, however, without more insight into the nature of cohabiting families and the meanings these relationships hold for individuals who undertake and experience them. This study uses qualitative interview data from a sample of cohabiting parents to address two questions: (a) how do cohabiting parents view their unions? and (b) how does the presence of children influence what cohabitation means to them? In-depth understanding of parent cohabitors' relationships can help explain demographic trends by illuminating individuals' motivations for action and the processes by which they make decisions about their relationships. Because of their status as parents, we might expect parent cohabitors to see their relationships differently from cohabitors without children. For example, children may increase the bond between parents (Seltzer, 2000), encourage parents to cohabit or marry to secure economic

resources for their children, or increase the emotional and financial costs of ending a relationship (Graefe & Lichter, 1999).

Past research on the meanings of cohabitation and unmarried parents falls short in providing the details needed to understand the relationships of cohabiting parents. Most research on cohabitation is based on quantitative studies that compare general populations of cohabitators to married and single individuals. Several recent qualitative studies have begun in-depth investigations into the nature of cohabiting relationships and the relationships of unmarried parents (Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005; Porter, Manning, & Smock, 2004; Sassler, 2004; Smock, Manning, & Porter, 2005). The present study is an attempt to bridge these two literatures. About half of the children of unmarried parents live in a cohabiting family (McLanahan et al., 2003), which makes learning more about cohabiting families a priority for understanding how living with unmarried parents affects children. Also, cohabitation researchers have investigated the meaning of cohabitation by comparing it with marriage and drawing implications on the basis of childbearing behavior in cohabitation. Without a detailed look at parent cohabitators, however, it is difficult to know the nature of their relationships, how they are similar or different from those of nonparent cohabitators, or the effect of children on their relationship decisions.

The current study explores how parent cohabitators see their unions and how the presence of children influences their relationships, using an inductive approach that emphasizes meanings and places them in their social context. Overall, this study will deepen our understanding of cohabiting families, which can help inform research seeking to understand how cohabitation affects the well-being of children, and contribute to the body of knowledge about the meanings of contemporary American family relationships.

BACKGROUND

The rise in cohabitation and unmarried childbearing is generally understood in the context of declining marriage rates and delayed first marriages. There are several arguments about what is driving these trends, including changing economic opportunities for women, men's declining employment and wages, gender relations, increasing divorce rates, and changes in values

surrounding marriage and the importance of intimate relationships.

One argument is that increased women's employment and earnings make marriage less economically necessary for women. Empirical studies show mixed results, with women's employment associated with both discouraging (Gray & Vanderhart, 2001) and encouraging (Cherlin, 2001; Oppenheimer, 2001) marriage and other unions. Another theory is that men's declining employment and earnings decrease marriage rates, especially in low-income, non-White communities (Wilson, 1987). Researchers agree that men's employment and earnings are closely associated with the timing and incidence of marriage (Bachrach, Hindin, & Thompson, 2002).

Changes in gender relations may also contribute to the decline in marriage rates and increase in cohabitation. An unwillingness to take on the "second shift" of extra housework and childrearing responsibilities associated with marriage may make women more wary of it (Goldschneider & Waite, 1991; Hochschild, 1989). Women may choose to cohabit instead of marry in order to avoid traditional gender-specific roles associated with marriage (Clarkberg, Stoltzenberg, & Waite, 1995).

Changes in cohabitation and marriage are also associated with significant shifts in attitudes about the acceptability of premarital sex, cohabitation, and nonmarital childbearing in the United States (Axinn & Thornton, 2000). Also, some scholars argue that cultural changes over the past few decades have led to higher standards for marriage that are hard for low-income couples and minority populations to reach (Bulcroft & Bulcroft, 1999; Clarkberg, 1999; Edin & Kefalas, 2005). In addition, a greater emphasis on self-fulfillment in intimate relationships (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1996; Giddens, 1992) has shifted the meaning of marriage.

Increases in cohabitation and unmarried childbearing in the United States, however, have not been distributed equally throughout society. Although women in all racial and education groups are cohabiting more than in the past, the increase in both cohabitation and nonmarital births is most pronounced among Black and Hispanic women and the less educated (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Ellwood & Jencks, 2001; Manning, 2001). Cohabiting mothers have lower education and earnings and are more likely to be

unemployed than married mothers in the United States (Osborne, McLanahan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2004). And it is women who are most socioeconomically disadvantaged, with the lowest levels of education, and who are not working full time who have higher levels of childbearing while in cohabiting relationships (Manning, 2001). There are racial and ethnic differences in childbearing behaviors within cohabitation, with Black and Hispanic women more likely than White women both to conceive and to continue cohabiting, rather than marry, when their child is born (Manning, 2001; Manning & Landale, 1996; Manning & Smock, 1995). In addition, the dissolution rate of cohabiting unions in the United States is higher than that of married couple families (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Raley & Bumpass, 2003), meaning that cohabiting families are at higher risk for becoming a single-mother family and for poverty (Manning, 2001).

As noted by Graefe and Lichter (1999), cohabiting families come in different forms: couples who have children together, couples with children from past relationships but no biological children together, and couples who have both biological and other children. Bumpass reports that about 40% of children living in cohabiting families live with two biological parents and 60% live with one biological parent (Manning, 2002). The considerable literature that distinguishes stepfamilies from biological parent families suggests that the implications of cohabitation for children will vary depending on which type of cohabiting family they live in (Manning, 2002). To date, little is known about differences between biological cohabiting and cohabiting stepfamilies (Brown, 2002). A few studies compare different dimensions of parenting behaviors between cohabiting and married families, and some distinguish between biological and cohabiting stepfamilies (Brown, 2002; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1996; Clark & Nelson, 2000). These studies, however, do not reveal much about how biological and cohabiting families are different from or similar to cohabiting stepfamilies or how parents see their relationships.

Beyond socioeconomic differences, parent cohabitators may be different from other cohabitators in additional ways. Although most researchers agree that the meaning of cohabitation likely shifts and varies according to contexts such as age, stage in the life course, and ethnicity (Seltzer, 2000), most research about the meaning of cohabitation to date has compared general popu-

lations of cohabitators with married individuals. Generally, these studies find differences on several dimensions, including relationship satisfaction, health, violence, alcohol problems, and depression (Manning, 2002).

These studies show that cohabitators experience slightly more conflict, less communication (Thompson & Colella, 1992), and less commitment (Nock, 1995); feel less secure in their relationships (Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin, 1991); and experience more infidelity (Forste & Tanfer, 1996; Waite & Gallagher, 2000) than married couples, all of which suggest cohabitators have lower quality relationships than married couples. Brown and Booth (1996), however, find that cohabitators who plan to marry have similar-quality relationships to married couples. Cohabitators also have more "liberal" values and less traditional gender ideology than married couples (Brines & Joyner, 1999; Nock, 1995; Thompson & Colella, 1992). Rindfuss and VandenHeuval (1990) find that cohabitators are more similar to singles than to married couples in terms of childbearing intentions, schooling, employment, and other characteristics.

Many differences between cohabitators and marrieds are reduced, however, when other individual and relationship characteristics are accounted for. Some portion of the differences can be attributed to selection processes as factors such as violence, unhappiness in the relationship, and anticipated instability are negatively associated with marriage among cohabitators, leaving more individuals with these characteristics in cohabiting relationships (Brown, 2000; Manning, 2002).

Other studies have investigated the meaning of cohabitation by asking whether it is a stage preceding marriage, roughly fulfilling the same function as an engagement (Bumpass et al., 1991) or an alternative to it (Clarkberg et al., 1995; Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Researchers find that young adults view cohabitation as a good way to test a relationship (Axinn & Thornton, 2001; Bumpass et al., 1991; Gibson-Davis et al., 2005) and other studies of cohabitators find that the majority report plans to marry their partners (Lichter, Batson, & Brown, 2004; Manning & Smock, 2002), suggesting that cohabitation is best viewed as a precursor to marriage. In a study of unmarried parents, Waller (2001) finds that when their child is born, over 90% of cohabiting mothers report at least a fifty-fifty chance that they will marry their partner and half report that

they will almost certainly marry their baby's father.

Two recent qualitative studies, however, find that marriage is not necessarily a clear goal in the minds of those entering cohabiting unions. Sassler (2004) finds that finances, convenience, and housing needs are the usual reasons for cohabitation and that couples in her study did not mention wanting to "try out" a relationship before marriage as a reason for moving in together. Plans for marriage were generally abstract and emerged after the couple had been cohabiting for a few years. Manning and Smock (2003) find that most cohabitators see their unions more as an alternative to being single than as a substitute for marriage.

Other qualitative studies of cohabitators and unmarried parents shed light on the meanings of cohabitation by focusing on the nature of cohabiting relationships and the role of cohabitation in decision making about marriage. These studies generally show that most cohabitators want to marry sometime in the future but believe they must overcome both financial and relational obstacles first. Smock et al. (2005), in a study of working- and lower middle-class cohabitators, 55% of whom have either biological or stepchildren with their cohabiting partner, find that cohabitators believe they should marry once they have reached a certain level of financial status. A companion paper using the same sample finds that cohabitators also want to develop aspects of their relationship or individual characteristics such as maturity before marriage (Porter et al., 2004).

Porter et al. (2004) also find that the actual or anticipated effect of children on a cohabiting relationship is different for parent and nonparent cohabitators. Nonparents tend to see cohabiting relationships as a space for developing and testing their relationships before marrying and having children. In contrast, cohabitators who already have biological or stepchildren acknowledge that a pregnancy may speed up the marriage process for them, but few think they should marry simply because children are involved in the relationship. This echoes a previous finding suggesting that unmarried parents usually disapprove of "shotgun" marriages (Edin, England, & Linnenberg, 2003).

A recent study by Gibson-Davis et al. (2005) exploring barriers to marriage among unmarried parents provides important context for the present analysis. Both studies use samples drawn from

the Time, Love and Cash in Couples With Children study. Although Gibson-Davis et al. do not limit their sample to cohabiting couples, about three fourths of their unmarried parents are cohabitators, making the samples quite similar. On the basis of interviews conducted shortly after their child's birth, Gibson-Davis et al. find unmarried parents have a high regard for marriage and would like to marry yet feel they need to overcome financial obstacles and reach a high level of relationship quality first. Fear of divorce is an additional barrier to marriage. The authors also note that unmarried parents view cohabitation as a test for marriage and that children are not mentioned in their parents' discussions about marriage.

Although Gibson-Davis et al. (2005) provide several valuable insights about how unmarried parents view marriage and barriers to marriage, they do not directly address the questions of how unmarried parents make sense of cohabitation and how the presence of children influences this process. Cohabitation among parents is important to study because it is increasingly common and virtually the only route to marriage for unmarried parents. My analysis offers a detailed picture of what cohabitation means to unmarried parents, using 4 years of interview data about their beliefs and experiences related to cohabitation, relationship histories, and relationship quality in addition to marriage. I explore how cohabitation relates to marriage and why it is an increasingly popular family arrangement among unmarried parents. I also address how children figure into their parents' relationship decisions beyond marriage and suggest ways in which parent cohabitators are different from nonparent cohabitators.

METHOD

The data for this analysis come from the Time, Love and Cash in Couples With Children study, a qualitative, longitudinal, intensive interview study of 48 unmarried and 26 married couples who had a child together in 2000. This study is a subsample of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, which investigates nonmarital births in the urban United States. The analytic sample for the present study consists of 44 couples who were cohabiting around the time of their child's birth. I draw on 4 years of interview data for this analysis.

Sample Recruitment

The Time, Love and Cash in Couples With Children sample was recruited as part of the process for selecting respondents for the larger Fragile Families survey. Couples were recruited and interviewed for Fragile Families in 75 hospitals in 20 U.S. cities shortly after giving birth. Respondents were recruited for the Time, Love and Cash in Couples With Children study in three of these hospitals, one in each study city, selected for the demographic composition of births taking place there. Participants were limited to couples who were married or romantically involved at their child's birth, who had household incomes of less than \$60,000, and who spoke English. These constraints meant that 70% of the Fragile Families sample was eligible to participate in the qualitative study, which had a response rate of 83%. All of the sample completed baseline couple interviews, and 91% completed individual interviews. As the study progressed, response rates stayed above 80% for individual interviews and diminished to around 70% for couple interviews for later waves.

Characteristics of the Analytic Sample

Forty-nine percent of the analytic sample are African American, 44% are Hispanic, and 7% are White. All have moderate to low incomes that average less than 140% of poverty, and almost half received some type of public assistance in the year before the baseline survey. About 60% have completed high school. Their average household incomes are around \$20,000 per year. Respondents' average ages are 23 years for women and 26 for men. Forty-one percent of women and 36% of men have children from previous relationships, and 23% of couples already have one child together at baseline. Respondents represent two types of cohabiting families, often simultaneously. All are biological parent families, and 43% are also cohabiting stepfamilies. At the end of the study, 4 years after their child is born, 31% of the couples who were unmarried at baseline have broken up, 24% have married, and the rest remain in cohabiting relationships. Most breakups occurred in the child's first year, and the majority of mothers whose relationships ended went on to form new relationships.

Interviewing Respondents

A team of carefully trained interviewers interviewed each couple together and individually

2 months after the birth and again at 14, 26, and 50 months. Most interviews took place in respondents' homes and typically lasted 2–4 hours each and generated about 150–200 pages of transcripts per couple. All were audio recorded. We tried to make interviews resemble conversations as much as possible. All interviews covered the same predetermined topics, but interviewers were trained to vary the exact wording and timing used to introduce them and to probe for more specific information. Interviewers were also trained in various techniques of listening, asking questions, and using body language in order to build a rapport with the respondents. We asked couples about their relationship history, quality, stability, and ideals; marriage and cohabitation; the circumstances around the pregnancy; investments of time and money by mothers and fathers; bargaining; emotional work and skills; gender-related norms and behaviors; and the child support and welfare system.

Coding and Analysis

The formal coding procedures for the Time, Love and Cash in Couples With Children study involved a number of steps in which coders first worked together to establish a common codebook and then worked individually to prepare transcripts for entry into an electronic database, Microsoft Access. There are eight databases total: one couple and one individual database for each of four data waves. The databases are organized much like a quantitative database in a case by variable format, with each "cell" consisting of portions of text about a particular topic. The databases were designed to facilitate analysis of and manage large volumes of data by allowing researchers to locate and sort portions of interview text about particular topics.

I based my analysis on extensive additional coding of interview data that I drew from the database and from complete transcripts of couple and individual interviews. I used the database to locate material that corresponded to interview questions from four data waves about respondents' relationship and fertility histories, their experiences cohabiting with their partner, their expectations about cohabitation and marriage, their ideal relationship, their ideals about marriage and cohabitation, whether they are considering marriage, and how they are making decisions about marriage. Most of these questions were asked during individual interviews.

I also sometimes referred to complete transcripts to better contextualize portions of text drawn from the database. Although I use material from couple interviews in this study, I rely on them to supplement information from individual interviews and do not use them to examine couple-level processes and decision making.

I use narrative analysis to explore the meaning of cohabitation for couples who have a child together. Narrative analysis has multiple meanings among qualitative researchers (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). The version I refer to here is based on standard procedures for coding qualitative data and consists of analyzing data through close readings and comparisons of text as well as considering each case in context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). There are three general steps in this inductive and interpretive process. The first is to define general categories and their dimensions and properties by reading transcripts and organizing portions of text into particular categories. Most categories emerged from the data on the basis of responses to open-ended interview questions, although some were based on constructs from the literature. The next step was to investigate the relationships between different categories and explore their dimensions. The final stage was to develop a "story line" that related and integrated the earlier categories, expanding and collapsing them where necessary (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Narrative analysis emphasizes building hypotheses and theories inductively from the data, and a strength of this method is that it allows researchers to discern common patterns and processes and respondents' stated motivations toward courses of action as well as beliefs and normative expectations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The frequencies reported in the study come from tracking responses in portions of transcripts that correspond to particular topics. Although interview topics largely remained consistent from year to year, additional topics were added after baseline on the basis of themes introduced by respondents and research in progress. Therefore, different frequencies come from different data waves, and some use multiple waves in order to include as many responses as possible. Most of the themes related to how parent cohabitators see their relationships emerged spontaneously during interviews in response to general questions about marriage and cohabitation. This makes it difficult to report accurate frequencies about how often

respondents took up these themes in their discussions because all respondents were not asked directly about all of them. When possible, however, I provide the reader with this information.

RESULTS

I begin this section by describing the close links between cohabitation and pregnancy for parent cohabitators observed in this study and putting their relationships in context. Next, I discuss the meanings parent cohabitators attach to their relationships. Parent cohabitators illustrate what cohabitation means to them by contrasting and comparing cohabitation to marriage, and I follow their lead here by presenting the results in a similar fashion. Finally, I consider how parent cohabitators' beliefs about cohabitation and marriage intersect with their real-life situations.

Contextualizing Meanings: The Pregnancy, Cohabitation, and Couple Relationships

There is a close relationship between pregnancy and cohabitation for couples in this study. Although all couples are living together around the time of their child's birth, a substantial majority, 73%, began their cohabitation experience with a "shotgun" cohabitation, moving in during their first pregnancy together or just after the child's birth. For them, cohabitation was not a "relationship decision" but rather a response to pregnancy. Most of these pregnancies were not intended. Just over half of the respondents, 51%, report that they did not want to have a baby at the time of the pregnancy with the focal child. Another 29% report having ambivalent feelings about whether they wanted a child right then. Only 20% report wanting to have a baby around the time they got pregnant.

Because of the strong link between pregnancy and cohabitation, the timing of the pregnancy was closely related to when couples began living together. Over 60% of first pregnancies occurred within 9 months of starting the relationship, with 33% occurring within 3 months. It was most common for shotgun cohabitation to begin toward the middle or end of pregnancy. When they first began living together, 62% of couples moved in with family members rather than into an independent household. It was more common for women to move in with their partner's family than vice versa. Over time, however, several couples went on to establish independent households.

A few months after having a child together, most respondents in the Time, Love and Cash in Couples With Children study report that they highly value marriage, plan to marry their partner, and feel they need to be financially stable and to have a high-quality relationship in order to marry (Gibson-Davis et al., 2005). Tiffany, a 24-year-old African American woman, says that to marry, couples need to have “love, trust, be honest, and don’t go cheating because that’s the biggest problem.” In an ideal marriage, she says, couples are “true to each other, help each other out with things . . . basically it’s just when that person needs you just be there for them.”

Most parent cohabitators, however, have not achieved these goals when they move in together. In addition to inadequate financial resources, most cohabitators with a new baby experience significant, serious problems in their relationships. Infidelity, mistrust and jealousy, frequent arguments, substance abuse, jail, and domestic violence are not uncommon. At baseline, 36% of couples report at least one incidence of infidelity, 54% say they mistrust their partner, 33% report substance abuse as a problem in their relationship, and 38% report instances of domestic violence. In all, 73% of cohabiting parent couples report at least one of the above as a problem in their relationship, and several acknowledge that their situation is tenuous. Ron, a 24-year-old Black father, says that in his relationship, “it could be any little speck of a thing that will make everything fall down like crumbs, come straight down to the ground.”

Sexual mistrust and infidelity together are the most common relationship problems and are also most frequently implicated in breakups among unmarried parents (Reed, 2005). Sexual mistrust and suspicions of infidelity result from actual knowledge of past infidelity, women’s general distrust of men (Edin et al., 2003), and continued social contact with a partner’s “other baby mama” or “daddy”—the parent of a partner’s children from a previous relationship—or former girlfriends or boyfriends.

These interactions are especially a source of tension for respondents who have children with other partners. Forty-three percent of the sample are cohabiting stepfamilies where one or both partners have outside children. Interestingly, it is when “step” children do not reside with the focal couple and have involved fathers that additional problems seem more likely to arise. In these cases, mothers may fear renewed or contin-

ued sexual involvement with their partner’s “other baby mama.” Some also resent the time, money, and energy fathers spend on their other children, especially when visits occur away from the household.

Contrasts Between Cohabitation and Marriage

Most parent cohabitators see living together as a natural response to pregnancy, as long as the relationship seems to be going well. Coparenting is a strong motivation for cohabitation in response to a pregnancy. Respondents explain that cohabitation allows them to share parenting responsibilities and expenses. Fathers report it allows them to spend more time with their child. David, a 32-year-old Black father, says that living with his baby’s mother “puts the baby in the best situation.” Dawn, a 20-year-old Black mother of two, says, “a single parent can do it, but it’s better when its two.”

Thomas, a Black 22-year-old new father, says that if he and his baby’s mother were not living together, “I wouldn’t get to see my daughter as much. I wouldn’t be a part of her everyday living. That’s important . . . at least, for the first year or whatever.” LaShawnda, a Black 19-year-old new mother, says that moving in together after having a child is a good idea, “cause all the bills would be put together and you would get help with them.” Margaret, a White 18-year-old first-time mother, says that things are easier with the baby because she and her baby’s father are living together, “he can help me with the baby and we get to spend more time together, even though we argue a lot.” Omar, a 23-year-old Black father of two, sums it up by saying that having a baby

took our relationship more from just a boyfriend/girlfriend situation to a family situation. We’re not married . . . but we are a family. She’s the mom. I’m the dad. And although we’re not married and it’s not legal or anything, we do care for each other and we want to be with each other. [My baby’s mother] is someone I do want to marry someday, I just don’t feel like right now is the time.

His partner agrees, saying, “we’ve talked about it and we both want to be a family . . . [but] right now a lot just depends on the circumstances.”

As the dominant cultural frame for family relationships, marriage is an important reference point for respondents’ discussions about what cohabitation means to them. About 60% of respondents make statements in their individual

interviews that explain how cohabitation is different from marriage. In contrast to cohabitation, having a child together is not a good reason to get married. This echoes findings from other studies (Edin et al., 2003; Porter et al., 2004). Although one third of respondents told interviewers that children are a reason why some people get married, no respondents thought they should marry simply because they had a child with someone. Jason, a White father of one, says, "I want to keep [our son] completely out of it. We should get married because mommy and daddy love each other not because we have [him]." Respondents believe that marriage is a serious commitment that should not be taken lightly and that a marriage in response to a pregnancy or birth has little chance of survival. Ruben is a 31-year-old Puerto Rican father of three. He says,

So I really want to make sure that it's the right thing [getting married]. I don't want to do it because we have [a child] or because we live together and we're not married. You know because most people look at it [marriage] and say "yo it's just a piece of paper . . ." but it's a lot more than a piece of paper. It's trust, it's honesty, it's being there when you're sick or dying. It's a lot.

Cohabiting parents also associate marriage with a set of rules and roles that are missing or less pervasive in cohabitation. If they were married, respondents feel a spouse could demand more control over their behavior and "tell [them] what to do" with more authority than a baby's mother or father could. Several parent cohabitators associate marriage with more traditional family roles. Dawn, a 20-year-old African American mother of two, says,

Now, just because [we] live together, don't mean I'm gonna iron your clothes and cook all the time. You [partner] gonna do some of the stuff too. Now, if we married, then I'll iron your clothes. Yeah, sometimes, I'll cook for you.

Jesus, a 26-year-old Hispanic father, says, "some people around here, they get married if they think they can put their man on lock down, or they think their girl can stay in the house cooking."

Women who worry about jealous partners fear the situation will worsen with marriage as "some men turn out to be possessive." Andrea, a 32-year-old Black mother of six, says of her partner, "he's real jealous, so I can't go nowhere unless he is with me. I don't think I'm ready for that. I just need my space, and if I marry him, it'll be worse

than it is now." Some men worry that they will need to assume more of a provider role if they marry. Jason, a 25-year-old Black man with four children, says that if he were to marry, he would have to "provide for a whole family" and would "have to" work.

Men who wish they had "a little more freedom" now fear they will have even less after marriage. They fear their baby's mothers might be more demanding of their money, time and even "romantic attention" as wives. Some men find adjusting to living together with a partner difficult, which makes them doubly cautious about marriage. Alex, a 23-year-old first-time Hispanic father, says that "once we moved in together it was different . . . when I wanted to go out, I couldn't go out, because she asks me questions where I'm going, this and that." On the whole, men tend to think marriage would be "a lot more serious" than cohabitation.

The biggest difference cohabiting parents see between cohabitation and marriage is that they view marriage as a lifelong commitment to stay in one relationship and to work through the ups and downs of life together and cohabitation as a situation they may leave when unsatisfied. Destiny, a 21-year-old Black mother, expresses the difference between cohabitation and marriage this way. She says, "with me and Sergio, we have a commitment, but he can still decide, this is not working for [him] . . . but if you go as far as getting married, there you need to know you're really with the person." Ceci, a Hispanic 22-year-old mother with one child, says,

if you're married you have to . . . really put some thought about getting a divorce. Like if you're living together, you don't have to . . . think about it too much . . . I feel like probably if we ever get married, I feel like I owe it to work on something like that [the relationship] . . . I won't feel as free, like I do now.

Leonte, a 26-year-old Black father, states that "most people feel like with their boyfriend or girlfriend, when they get into an argument they can just leave . . . when you're married, you can't just walk away and leave like that." The freedom to end a cohabiting relationship and the greater level of autonomy involved means that most respondents feel they have little to lose and perhaps much to gain by cohabiting. Denise, a 20-year-old Black mother, says, "you can [live together] for a couple of months and see if it'll work. If it don't work, you can just back out of it."

Although having a child together is usually the impetus for parent cohabitators to move in together and perhaps begin to think about marriage, it is unusual for respondents to report feeling they should stay in an unhappy cohabiting relationship because they have a child together. They believe that one can always “just back out” of a cohabiting relationship, even when children are involved. Several respondents mention that they believe it is better for unhappy couples to split up rather than expose their children to frequent arguments or physical fights. Lucia, a 24-year-old Hispanic mother, says,

If it gets to a point that you cannot live together no more, I think it would be better to go separate ways, [than] to be fighting in [front of] the kids and all that Even if you have kids, it would be better, they're going to grow up healthier . . . without the father . . . and the things [fighting] happening around them.

Parent cohabitators took advantage of their ability to end unsatisfactory cohabiting relationships. At the end of the study, 4 years after their child was born, 31% of cohabitators had broken up, with the majority of breakups occurring in their baby's first year (Reed, 2005). An additional 16% experienced a breakup at some point during the study but later reconciled.

Similarities Between Cohabitation and Marriage

Although parent cohabitators see several contrasts between marriage and cohabitation, they also view them as quite similar in terms of day-to-day life. For this reason, most parent cohabitators see living together as a good way to “really get to know a person.” The majority of parent cohabitators think that couples should live together before they get married, and almost a third of respondents spontaneously told interviewers that they believed cohabitation was a good test of a relationship before marriage. As noted by Gibson-Davis et al. (2005), most unmarried parents believe couples should live together for a few years before deciding to marry. By living together, they think one can see if “you can in fact handle these differences” in living habits sure to arise, such as “dirty socks” or “lingerie hanging in the bathroom,” and if the couple can get along on an everyday basis and “wake up together every morning.”

Another benefit to living together before marriage is that it allows couples to verify their partner's character over time. Because the majority of parent cohabitators have known their partner for less than a year before they have a child together and many report mistrusting their partners, they want to find out if a partner may change “for the worse” or be different from the image he or she has projected. As Roger, a 23-year-old Hispanic first-time father, says, “you think you know the person pretty well, but when you live with them, it's like a different story.” Alicia, a 24-year-old Hispanic mother, adds that

You could be together for 7, 5, or 6 years and if you're not living together you still don't know each other . . . but as soon as you move in together, you're going to find out a whole lot of real different things that you just did not know.

When asked to consider how their lives would change if they married their partners, respondents reveal that the importance of marriage for them is largely symbolic and has more to do with attitudes and behaviors surrounding the relationship rather than instrumental factors. They simultaneously believe that nothing and everything would change if they married, reflecting a dual view of marriage and how it would change their lives, a big and small picture of marriage.

The small picture has to do with the daily routines of life and the fact that couples are already living together. Their day-to-day lives would not change if they were to marry. Tammy, a 21-year-old Black mother, explains this by saying, “I don't think it would be any different because we already act like we're married. We live in the same house. We sleep in the same bed. We, you know, we eat—sometimes from the same plate.” The big picture, however, has to do with how couples think about their relationship and the standards that apply to it and is another dimension of how parent cohabitators see marriage and cohabitation as different types of relationships. Although getting married may not change the routines of their lives much, it would change the way they think about their relationship and what couples would require of one another.

Nathan, a 28-year-old Black father, explains the difference this way:

It [getting married] would solidify the situation, make it concrete . . . I don't think any of the day-to-day functions would change, or any of your issues would change, I think it's just as far as

commitment goes to this person, as far as your dedication to that person, I think that would probably be the only thing that changes . . . you're still going to be that same person that you were, you just might be looking at things from a different angle.

Destiny, a 21-year-old Black mother, says,

It's like we're married now anyway because we live together, and we help each other out with the bills, and if he needs something I'm there for him to buy him something. He's there for me. We have a child together. It's kind of like being married. People that are married go through, I don't know, it's different.

Magda, a 22-year-old Puerto Rican mother living with her partner and their two children, says,

well, we'd have a bigger bond together, if [we]'re married. I mean it would be great. Like I say, if you have that special relationship, if you're married and have kids—for the relationship itself, I mean, does anything change? I don't think anything changes. Just the point that he's really a husband. I really don't know how to explain it, but that's how it is.

Rogelio, a 20-year-old Puerto Rican father, says that “for me, [marriage] wouldn't be nothing different, but it's gonna be a lot of responsibility . . . its hard to explain it.” Diane, a 21-year-old Black mother, says, “I think it will be the same, except we'll have more of a spiritual bond.” And Diego, a 21-year-old Hispanic father, explains, “Everything would be the same except she'd be happier.” Although they believe nothing would change on the surface of daily life, marriage could transform the inner workings of the relationship.

Ideals Versus Real Life

A strong theme throughout parent cohabitators' discussions about the similarities and differences between cohabitation and marriage are the gaps between what respondents feel is the ideal way to go about things and the actual decisions they make on the basis of their real-life situations. For example, most respondents report that they believe it is better to be married before having children. In addition, although pregnancy is the primary motivation for the majority of parent cohabitators to begin living together, respondents rarely mention pregnancy when speaking about how couples should ideally approach cohabita-

tion. In contrast to their own experiences, most respondents say they would recommend waiting at least a year before moving in with someone and until both partners are financially stable enough to afford their own place. As Jackie, a 21-year-old first-time mother, says, “not have a child, and then move in . . . we did it completely opposite.”

The difficulties and problems most parent cohabitators experience on a daily basis collide with their ideals about what a marriage should be like and the kind of marriage they want to have. In the face of financial and relationship troubles, uncertainty about a partner, and the greater commitment and more inflexible roles they associate with marriage, cohabitation is an attractive option for parents. It allows them to share some expenses, more convenient parenting, companionship, and an escape route if the relationship sours. It also allows them to live together when their relationships are not up to the standards they have for marriage.

Moving in together, usually in response to a pregnancy or birth, satisfies couples' practical needs as new parents, opens up new possibilities for a relationship, and yet does not make respondents feel locked into anything. If things go well, they could eventually marry. If not, as Vanessa sees it, “if you don't get together as a couple, or it doesn't work out as a couple . . . You can learn something from it.” Megan, a 27-year-old White mother who lives with her baby's father, explains how cohabiting couples think about the future when she says,

It's kind of a waste of time to move in with somebody if you're never going to think of marrying him at some point . . . Maybe it's not even in the front of your head, maybe you're not thinking about it right now, I'm sure it's in the back of your head.

Although life is similar on the surface, the stricter standards of marriage do not apply to cohabitation. Couples have not said the vows that activate the expectations and commitment required in marriage. As Kevin, a 34-year-old White first-time father, puts it, “living with somebody is the same as being married to somebody without crossing that extra line.” Denise, a 20-year-old Black mother, explains her approach to cohabitation by saying,

You and the person need to come up with some type of agreement saying that you could just try it

out for a couple of months to see if it works; if so you can continue, but if not just go your separate ways.

DISCUSSION

Cohabiting parents see living together as a practical response to their often unanticipated situations as new parents. They largely believe there is not much to lose but perhaps much to gain by cohabiting. The desire to coparent motivates parents to move in together in response to a pregnancy. By living together, they can share expenses and parenting responsibilities and get to know each other better. If things go well, they could eventually marry. If the relationship sours, they have made no permanent commitment and feel they gave the relationship and coparenting an attempt at success.

Because cohabiting parents already share the benefits of coresidence, they see little instrumental value to marriage. Instead, it is the symbolic aspects of marriage, such as the idea that it represents an enduring, committed, and fulfilling romantic relationship, that assume the most importance. Parent cohabitators express this by having what I call a “big” and “small” view of marriage and how it would change their lives. Although their day-to-day lives would not change, marriage would change the way they thought about their relationship and their level of commitment to it and their partners.

Cohabiting parents associate marriage with rules and roles absent in cohabitation, such as more traditional family roles and expectations for women and men, and a lifelong commitment to a partner. Nock (1995) argued that cohabitation is an “incomplete institution” (Cherlin, 1978) compared to marriage because of the relative lack of consensus about commitment, roles, and relationships between partners and children. This study shows that the incompleteness of cohabitation—the flexibility in roles and expectations, the ability to end a relationship, and the lack of formal commitment—is central to defining the meaning of cohabitation for parents and is indeed part of its attraction.

Despite valuing the incompleteness of cohabitation, cohabiting parents are at the same time strongly oriented toward marriage. Gibson-Davis et al. (2005) show that most unmarried couples in the Time, Love and Cash in Couples With Children study highly value marriage, and a majority

have plans to marry their partner around the time of their child’s birth. On the surface, these findings appear contradictory. How can cohabiting parents both strongly desire and plan for marriage and at the same time value the flexibility, lack of formal commitment, and lower standards they associate with cohabitation?

The findings can be bridged by considering the context of cohabiting parents’ relationships around the time their child is born. This study shows that the majority of couples report experiencing at least one serious problem that may threaten their relationship. More than half of the couples did not plan their pregnancies, and most have recently begun living together. They likely do not yet live in an independent household, and they face financial obstacles. They do not feel they know enough about their partners or how they function as a couple to make a lifetime commitment. They value marriage largely as a symbol of having achieved a certain type of romantic relationship and financial status. Together, these factors help explain that parent cohabitators value cohabitation for the flexibility it offers during an uncertain time.

This study echoes others that argue marriage is increasingly valued for its symbolic significance. Parent cohabitators seem to be following these larger social and cultural trends. Cherlin (2004) argues that people view marriage as a marker of prestige and personal achievement and that marriage has become something to work up to, rather than the foundation for adult life. Edin and Kefalas (2005) report that unmarried mothers value marriage as a way to express their achievement of a high-quality couple relationship. Bellah et al. (1996) argue that an increasing emphasis on personal growth and self-fulfillment has transformed marriage from an institution that is based on roles and obligation into one based on personal satisfaction and psychic rewards. Giddens (1992) argues that historical and cultural shifts in gender relations and the idea of romantic love have transformed marriage and other unions into relationships that are based on personal fulfillment and intimacy.

The relationships of cohabiting parents described here resemble in important ways the picture we have from quantitative research about cohabitators in general. Although they are drawn from a small sample with limited generalizability, the findings support those of several other studies (Clarkberg et al., 1995; Nock, 1995; Thompson & Colella, 1992; Waite & Gallagher, 2000) in

showing that, like other cohabitators, parent cohabitators feel less committed to their relationships than they would be to a marriage and they value the flexibility from specific roles that cohabitation provides.

An important finding of this study is that the majority of parent cohabitators began living together in response to a pregnancy or birth, rather than as a result of a relationship decision or a gradual process of "drift" (Manning & Smock, 2003). What used to be shotgun marriages have turned into shotgun cohabitations. A couple moving in together in response to a pregnancy was much more common than a pregnancy occurring after a couple had moved in together for other reasons. This pattern is supported by research showing that an increasing proportion of single women are cohabiting in response to a pregnancy (Raley, 2001).

This is significant because it distinguishes parent cohabitators from other cohabitators, and especially because it suggests that parenthood prompts couples to construct their relationships in a new way and orient them around the child. Parent cohabitators report that their desire to coparent is part of what makes living together a logical response to a pregnancy. Cohabitation in response to a pregnancy implies that pregnancy makes a relationship more serious, that couples believe a shared child is a reason to try and stay together, and that cohabitation itself at minimum represents an initial commitment to the relationship and to having both parents in the child's life.

My findings suggest that children influence the meaning of cohabitation for parents in a somewhat paradoxical way. On the one hand, children do not seem to influence their parents' views about when it is appropriate to marry or about when to end a relationship. It is striking how seldom their status as parents comes up in respondents' discussions about how they make decisions about their relationships. On the other hand, the fact that most cohabiting parents started living together in response to pregnancy shows that shared children are very important in how these same couples define their relationships. In this sense, cohabitation among parents indicates they believe that children warrant a greater commitment to the relationship. Once couples begin cohabiting, however, children seem to lose their power to bring couples together. Cohabiting parents do not see their child as a reason to stay in a relationship that is not working out. A shared child alone is not a reason to make a long-term

commitment if the other elements cohabiting parents believe are necessary for marriage are not in place.

The degree to which they think about marriage when they move in together is another likely difference between parent cohabitators and cohabitators without children. Although parent cohabitators are emphatic in their opinions that having a child together is not a good enough reason to get married, the high marital aspirations reported by these couples suggests that having a child together signals to the couple that they should be at least considering marriage. In contrast, marriage does not seem to loom as large in the minds of cohabitators in other qualitative studies (Sassler, 2004; Manning & Smock, 2003). This could be the result of a cultural lag between attitudes and behaviors surrounding marriage and parenthood. Several respondents referred to the traditional link between marriage and parenthood when they mentioned that "other people" or "society" think that couples should marry when they have a baby.

One implication of this study for future research is to underscore that the meanings of cohabitation vary for different groups of individuals at different stages of the life course (Manning & Smock, 2003; Sassler, 2004; Seltzer, 2000). This study shows that parent cohabitators likely differ from other cohabitators in how they decide to live together and in the extent to which they are thinking about marriage when they do so. It would be valuable for future studies to focus more attention on the social and economic context surrounding cohabiting relationships in order to understand more about how the meaning of cohabitation shifts for couples in different circumstances. Another implication of my results is that the prevalence of shotgun cohabitation suggests that the two-parent family is still valued, despite the decoupling of marriage and parenthood observed over the past few decades. An interesting direction for future research would be to further explore the practical and cultural dimensions of the two-parent family ideal in the context of increasing relationship instability among cohabitators. Parents point to practical reasons for living together, but their propensity to think about marriage and to move in together despite their tendency to experience serious relationship problems suggests there is a strong cultural script at work here as well.

This study has several limitations. It features a small sample drawn from only three U.S. cities.

Although it is linked to a national survey, the results cannot be extended and generalized to the larger national sample of cohabiting parents. The small sample size also precludes making reliable comparisons by race and ethnicity, which other researchers have found important in explaining variations in the meaning of cohabitation (Smock, 2000). There are no nonparent cohabitators in the sample, so I cannot directly compare parent and nonparent cohabitators. In addition, all families represented here are biological cohabiting families, and 43% are also stepcohabiting families. Nationally, most cohabitators with children are in cohabiting stepfamilies (Manning, 2002).

In sum, my results point to several conclusions about how children influence the meaning of cohabitation for parents. They show that most parent cohabitators are living together because they have a child and that cohabitation is a practical response to pregnancy and a way to give coparenting a chance. Yet once a couple has moved in together, their child does not push them to stay in an unsatisfactory relationship. Having a child makes parent cohabitators more strongly oriented toward marriage than they might be otherwise but is not enough to lead them to marry. The differences cohabiting parents see between marriage and cohabitation offer further support for the idea that the importance of marriage is now largely symbolic.

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