

**Attitudes about the Transition from Cohabitation to Marriage:
A Qualitative Perspective**

Abstract submitted for consideration for presentation at
the 2004 annual meeting of the Population Association of America

Meredith J. Porter¹

Wendy D. Manning¹

Pamela J. Smock²

¹Department of Sociology and
Center for Family and Demographic Research
Bowling Green State University
Bowling Green, OH 43403

²Department of Sociology and
Population Studies Center
Institute for Social Research
The University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, MI 48106

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades the United States has witnessed changing union formation patterns, including increases in the age at first marriage, nonmarriage rates, and cohabitation rates (Casper & Bianchi 2002). Some of the most dramatic changes have centered on cohabitation. For example, the number of cohabiting unions has increased dramatically since about 1970 (Bumpass, Sweet, and Cherlin 1991; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1998); more than half of all people in their 20s and 30s have cohabited (Bumpass and Sweet 1995); the majority of marriages and remarriages are preceded by nonmarital cohabitation (Bumpass and Lu 2000); and children are increasingly living with cohabiting parents (Bumpass and Lu 2000).

Not surprisingly, there is strong attitudinal support for cohabitation among young adults. The majority of high school seniors (60% of girls and 67% of boys) agree that living together is good idea before marriage to determine compatibility (Thornton and Young-Demarco 2001). This growth in cohabitation, coupled with increasing support for cohabitation, has radically modified the marriage process in the United States. Cohabitation has been linked, directly or indirectly, to the more general issue of the decreasing centrality of marriage in the United States (Smock 2000). Concern about the growth in cohabitation is grounded in beliefs that the rise in cohabitation may contribute to the deteriorating commitment to marriage and family life (e.g., Popenoe and Whitehead 1999). There is also concern for well-being of the estimated 40% of children born in the 1990s who will have spent some time in cohabiting-parent households (Bumpass and Lu 2000).

Cohabitation has sometimes been perceived as representing a threat to the institution of marriage. Despite these concerns, cohabitation has not been decoupled from marriage. The majority (75%) of cohabitators in 1995 expected to marry their partners (Manning and Smock 2002), and this has remained stable since 1987 (Bumpass and Sweet 1989). In addition, cohabitators commonly marry their cohabiting partners. The probability of a first premarital cohabitation becoming a marriage is 58% after three years of cohabiting and 70% after five years of cohabiting (Bramlett and Mosher 2002). However, there appears to be some decline in the transition from cohabitation to marriage (Bumpass 1998).

This research examines beliefs about the determinants of marriage from the perspective of cohabitators themselves. Numeric based or quantitative studies have tackled this question (Brown 2000; Manning and Smock 1995; Sanchez et al. 1998), but they largely focus on socio-economic conditions surrounding the decisions for cohabitators to marry that are available in large-scale surveys. This study moves beyond prior research on the transition from cohabitation to marriage by using a qualitative approach. Open-ended questions allow for the respondents' subjective appraisal of what is necessary for him or her to move from a cohabiting relationship to marriage. We are able to look beyond the often-studied economic factors influencing marriage formation to a broader scope of factors. In this way, we attempt to better understand the processes and mechanisms underlying the decision to marry among young adult cohabitators in the U.S.

BACKGROUND

Researchers have examined the desires, expectations, and plans to marry among both singles and cohabitators. The link between one's attitudes or values and behavior is an important focus of study. "[B]ehavior can be meaningfully interpreted only when we understand the system of beliefs that surrounds that act" (Tucker 2000, p. 166). This includes attitudes, values, and beliefs regarding marital and family processes. For example, individuals who approve of premarital cohabitation are more likely to cohabit than those who do not (Axinn and Thornton 1993), and individuals who have positive attitudes toward marriage marry more quickly than those who do not (Axinn and Thornton 1992). Attitudes and values concerning work, family, leisure time, money, sex roles, and marriage influence the choice between cohabitation and marriage for young adults (Clarkberg, Stolzenberg, and Waite 1995). Similarly, we posit that individuals' attitudes, values, and beliefs of what must be in place in order to marry are related to marriage formation behaviors.

The vast majority of adolescents and never-married young adults express the desire to marry and the vast majority do. About 90% of whites and 70-75% of blacks marry (Cherlin 1992; Cherlin 2000). Cherlin (2000, p. 135) states, "The typically short durations [of cohabiting unions] in the United States, along with expressed preferences for marriage, suggest that marriage is still the goal for most young adults and cohabitation is still seen as an intermediate status." A majority of adults (58.4% of women and 72.1% of men) agreed or felt neutrally that married people are happier than people who do not marry (Thornton and Young-DeMarco 1999). Tucker (2000) found

strong pro-marriage values in a sample of U.S. adults, particularly among African-Americans and Mexican-Americans.

Research findings suggest that a large proportion of cohabitators do expect to marry their partners. Slightly less than half of cohabitators have definite plans to marry their partner, and about three-fourths of cohabitators have either definite plans or think they will marry their partner (Bumpass, Sweet, and Cherlin 1991). Only one quarter of cohabitators do not expect to marry anyone (Manning and Smock 2002). These expectations are important because they are tied to actual transitions to marriage (Brown 2000). However, not all cohabitators achieve their plans. Among cohabitators, about 70% of both blacks and whites report marriage plans. Of these, 60% of the whites actually married compared to 20% of the blacks (Brown 2000). There appears to be a large gap between cohabitators' plans for marriage and their behavior. Perhaps measures of plans to marry tap ideal circumstances and do not reflect the reality of cohabitators' lives. We propose to focus on more specific measures, such as which factors must be in place for cohabitators to consider making the transition to marriage. Additionally, we will examine the link between what must be in place to marry and marital plans and expectations.

Theoretical and empirical studies tie economic conditions and marriage (Clarkberg 1999; Lichter et al. 1992; Lloyd and South 1996; Manning and Smock 1995; Oppenheimer 1994; Oppenheimer 2003; Sassler and Schoen 1999; Smock and Manning 1998; Sweeney 2002; Xie, Raymo, Goyette, Thornton 2003). Human capital theory posits that men's earnings potential is positively related to marriage because it increases the gains to marriage through specialization and trade between the partners, while also allowing the male to carry out the breadwinner role (Becker 1981). Greater economic

resources are positively related to marriage for men (e.g. Lloyd and South 1996; Sassler and Schoen 1999; Sweeney 2002). For men ages 18 to 27 from 1979-84, annual income and home ownership are positively associated with the transition to first marriage, while being enrolled in school is negatively associated with this transition (Lloyd and South 1996). Measures of earning potential are strongly and positively related to the likelihood of marriage for men (Xie et al. 2003). A smaller body of research has found a relationship between women's economic conditions and the transition to marriage. For example, Lichter and his colleagues (1992) found that women's economic independence in terms of employment and earnings is positively related to entry into marriage.

Previous research on the transition from cohabitation to marriage has been focused primarily on economic and educational factors as well (Clarkberg 1999; Manning and Smock 1995; Oppenheimer 1994; Oppenheimer 2003; Smock and Manning 1998; Xie et al. 2003). Oppenheimer (2003 p. 127) states, "For a substantial proportion of young men, cohabitation seemed to represent an adaptive strategy during a period of career immaturity, whereas marriage was a far more likely outcome for the stably employed cohabitators and noncohabitators alike." Cohabiting allows couples to maintain an intimate relationship until the male's career matures (Clarkberg 1999; Oppenheimer 1994). Men with higher earnings, higher education, and full-time employment have greater odds of marrying their cohabiting partners and lower odds of separating (Smock and Manning 1997). For whites, current school enrollment is negatively related to the transition from cohabitation to marriage, and full-time employment increases the odds of marriage (Manning and Smock 1995). Men's earnings – but not women's – are positively associated with the transition to marriage (Sanchez, Manning, and Smock

1998). For both cohabiting and noncohabiting men, better long-run socioeconomic prospects are positively related to marrying, particularly for blacks, and recent economic instability has a negative impact on marriage formation (Oppenheimer 2003). However, in contrast to some of the previous studies, Oppenheimer (2003) found that, once men are in cohabiting unions, earnings have little effect on the odds of marrying. Perhaps what are salient are not earnings at the time, but economic potential, as measured in Xie et al. (2003).

At the same time, economic distress has negative effects on marital quality and is positively tied to thoughts of divorce and marital conflict (e.g. Fox and Chancey 1998; Johnson and Booth 1990; Voydanoff 1990; White and Rogers 2000). Thus, economic circumstances may indirectly influence cohabitators' decisions about marriage. Qualitative data will be particularly useful for drawing connections and hypothesizing about potential pathways through which economic factors influence marriage decisions.

Prior studies also investigate how a wide array of non-economic factors are directly associated with transitions to marriage. Some of this work emphasizes the importance of sociodemographic characteristics: race and ethnicity (Manning and Smock 1995); parenthood (Bennett, Bloom, and Miller 1995; Brown 2000; Manning and Smock 1995), and family background (Bramlett and Mosher 2002; Thornton 1991).

Research on transitions from marriage to cohabitation also emphasize subjective attitudes, such as attitudes toward marriage (Axinn and Thornton 1992; Carlson, McLanahan, and England 2003), gender relations (Sanchez et al. 1998; Carlson et al. 2003), quality of the relationship (Brown 2000), and religiosity (Bramlett and Mosher 2002; Carlson et al. 2003). Axinn and Thornton (1992) found that those who feel

positively about marriage marry more quickly than those who do not. Positive attitudes about marriage increase the odds of marriage among low-income mothers and fathers (Carlson et al. 2003). In terms of relationship quality, couples in which neither partner was happy or only the woman was happy have a lower likelihood of marriage compared to couples where both partners were very happy (Brown 2000). Women's time spent in housework is positively associated with transition to marriage, and men's egalitarian attitudes increase the odds of marriage versus remaining cohabiting (Sanchez et al. 1998). Similarly, distrust of the other gender significantly decreases the odds of marriage among low-income mothers (Carlson et al., 2003).

CURRENT INVESTIGATION

The aim of this research is to achieve a more direct assessment of factors influencing cohabitators' decision to marry and how these factors are related to the cohabitators' marital plans and expectations. By using open-ended questions in in-depth interviews, this study allows a better understanding of what cohabiting young adults feel is necessary to be in place in their lives and relationships before they will marry their partners. The qualitative research used in this study provides an important complement to the quantitative research already pursued by family demographers.

A large body of research has resulted in a considerable amount of information on cohabitation. Our understanding, however, is limited to what can be garnered from secondary analysis of existing data sets. We are unlikely to grasp the meaning of cohabitation to young adults from existing survey data alone. There is growing recognition in the demographic research community that qualitative studies on the family,

including cohabitation, in the United States will help interpret and understand family dynamics. This study moves beyond prior research on the transition from cohabitation to marriage by using a qualitative approach.

This paper broadens our understanding of the link between cohabitation and marriage and moves beyond prior work in two ways. First, we are able to look beyond the often-studied economic factors influencing marriage formation to a broader scope of factors. Using our data we can obtain a stronger sense of the prerequisites for marriage. In addition, we will assess how economic and non-economic factors are connected. As Lin (1998) argues, qualitative data can provide us answers to questions about the mechanisms underlying behavior by answering the “how” and the “why” questions.

Second, we can speak to the mismatch between cohabitators’ marriage plans and behavior, as high proportions of cohabitators with marriage plans do not marry their partners. Questions about plans for marriage are commonly used to understand the link between cohabitation and marriage. However, questions about barriers to marriage may be more effective at predicting marriage among cohabitators. Measuring plans for marriage may reflect an idealization rather than a measure that is set in the reality of the cohabitators’ everyday lives. We examine the variability in the meaning of cohabitators’ plans for marriage and explore how plans for marriage are related to what needs to be in place to marry. Using open-ended questions, we allow for the respondents’ subjective appraisal of what is necessary for him or her to move from a cohabiting relationship to marriage. We hope to take respondents’ own words to describe their feelings and attitudes on what it takes to marry to help develop new question items for large-scale surveys.

DATA AND METHODS

We rely on data collected as part of the Cohabitation and Marriage in America (CMA) project. The project contains three components: (1) in-depth interviews with young adults with cohabitation experience, (2) focus group interviews with young adults with a range of cohabitation and marital experiences, and (3) interviews with dating, cohabiting, and married young adults. The data we draw on for this paper are part of the first portion of the project.

Our in-depth interviews include 115 young adults who are currently cohabiting or have recent cohabitation experience. The respondents were interviewed in 2002, primarily between October and April. We focus on young adults who are between 21 and 35 years old, although a few respondents are less than 21 or slightly older than 35. Our sample is divided such that we have at least 15 interviews with each gender and race/ethnic group (White, Black, Latino), permitting us to explore possible gender and racial/ethnic variations.

The respondents all live in the vicinity of Toledo, Ohio. The population of Toledo is quite similar to the distribution of the population in the nation with regard to race, marital status and income. Our sample is largely working class and lower middle-class (i.e., generally high school graduates and those with some college or technical school training). The educational breakdown is as follows: less than high school (11.4%), high school (25%), some college (44.7%); college graduate or more (18.4%). The vast majority of our respondents are currently employed (82%), although a few are enrolled in school full time, and some are both employed and enrolled in school part time. Yearly

incomes range from approximately \$15,000 to \$50,000, with most reporting incomes in the \$20,000 to \$40,000 range.

Analyses for this study entail searching for instances in which the respondent discussed what would have to be in place or changed in order to marry his or her partner. While the interviewer asked specific question on “what needs to be in place to marry” and “plans for marriage,” the marriage topic was pervasive during the interviews. Therefore, information was elicited throughout the interviews on what respondents deemed to be necessary in order to marry their partners. A number of dominant themes emerged in the interviews, which will be discussed in the next section.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Economic Factors

Consistent with previous research (e.g. Clarkberg 1999; Lloyd and South 1996; Manning and Smock 1995; Oppenheimer 1994; Oppenheimer 2003; Sassler and Schoen 1999; Smock and Manning 1998; Sweeney 2002; Xie et al. 2003), economic factors need to be in place in order to transition from marriage to cohabitation. In a number of cases, money or financial security in general was required.

R: ‘Cause we don't have the, I feel like we don't have the money, I feel like we don't have the resources. I mean he lives here, and my mom always says you know, "If you want to get married, you can live here and it wouldn't matter," 'cause, but I, I wouldn't feel right. I feel like if you get married, you need to go out on your own, and start your own life, and I'm not ready for that right now. And neither is he.

[Hispanic female office clerk, age 19]

I: How then, like what would have had to been in place for you to have gotten married?

R: Money.

I: Ok. Tell me a little bit about what does that mean?

R: Money means um...stability. I don't want to struggle, if I'm in a partnership then there's no more struggling and income wise we were still both struggling.

[Black female supervisor, age 36]

For these cohabitators, marriage was a commitment that should be made only after achieving a certain financial state. This more secure financial state was part of their overall picture of how marriage would or should be. At times, the presence of children was an important factor in the necessity to establish financial security prior to marriage.

R: Exactly. We have a big family. We have- I mean we're struggling right now, you know what I'm saying? So for me to take- to say you know, "I wanna get married," I want to make sure. I mean if something was to happen to me, I want him to be able to take care of me and my kids. If I can't work anymore. I already have injuries to my body that prevent me from working, you know? So I have to know that he can take care of us, you know? And if he can be able to stand on his own, you know?

[Black female unemployed, age 25]

More often, however, money was a necessary precursor to something else that had to be in place for the marriage transition, including a home or a wedding.

R: Probably the biggest thing of all which is me always was a just a financial stability before we would jump into something like that. I didn't want to get married and go living in apartment or townhouse. I wanted to save on up to you know borrow a home, start a family.

[White male beverage equipment salesperson, age 28]

R: Like I said, the financial stability of being able to pay for a big wedding.

I: So, if she wanted to, if she said "Robert, lets just go do a JP [Justice of the Peace] marriage..."

R: Yeah, we could do the Justice of the Peace if she wants to.

I: Right now?

R: Right, I just think she wants to, I just think she wants the whole thing. Yeah.

[Black male supervisor, age 28]

Employment

Another trend described in quantitative literature is the positive relationship between male employment and the transition to marriage (Clarkberg 1999; Manning and Smock 1995; Oppenheimer 1994; Oppenheimer 2003; Smock and Manning 1998). Employment was viewed among cohabitators as a necessary precursor to marriage. For many, it was the key to economic stability. Furthermore, it often signified a level of maturity that was also needed in oneself or one's partner.

R: A steady job. I would want him to have a steady job; I wouldn't want him to be like he is right now with no job.

I: Is he without a job for uh, lack of try, or for lack of there just isn't anything available?

R: Uh, a little bit of both.

R: He doesn't want to work at McDonald's you know, stuff like that. He doesn't really know where to go. He never really had any direction before, he just always had everything handed to him, but now it's like, "Well you need to get a job, you need to be responsible," and he just doesn't know what to do.

[Hispanic female office clerk, age 19]

While the majority of those citing employment as necessary required it for the male partner, a few females discussed the need to establish themselves in careers before they would be willing to marry. In some cases, this was seen as a safety net, should anything go wrong in the marriage.

R: I wanted to be graduated from college, have my undergrad degree. I wanted to have a job. My own job. Even though it was a pathetic little job, it was still my job....But I wanted like, my job, and I wanted, and I wanted my own education. He doesn't put my stock in degrees at all. And so, I wanted to like, if I knew, that if anything happened, or if he died or something, or we did end up getting divorced somewhere down the line, that I wouldn't be destitute. That I'd be able to function on my own. So it was really important that I finished my degree and that I had a job.

[White female school teacher, age 25]

Education

Current school enrollment is negatively associated with the transition to marriage for white cohabitators (Manning and Smock 1995). It stands to reason then, that completing one's education is seen as a necessary step before marriage. Our study supports this notion. For some cohabitators, completing education was tied directly to a secure economic future. Other respondents expressed the idea that education was a part of the broader picture of their adult lives – a necessary step.

R: In my mind, as far as dreaming, my steps were to graduate from college, to get a job, to you know, somewhat get rooted, and then get married, and then have children. That was the step process; I wasn't going to settle for anything else.

[White female salesperson, age 32]

Economic and educational factors were quite salient in cohabitators' required precursors for marriages. They did not, however, compose the entire picture. In fact, in many cases, emotional, cognitive, and interpersonal factors played a larger role.

More Time

A large proportion of the respondents expressed the need to spend more time in their cohabiting relationships before marrying. They expressed a need to check compatibility, to work on relationship problems, and to "be sure" about their partners before committing to marriage.

R: Just to iron out the wrinkles in our relationship, when you bring two people together, especially living in the same household. He has different ways than I do, we both have different ways. And then we both have children. And you know, just ironing out those things that need to be worked out.

[White female housecleaner, age 29]

R: I have to work on my relationship and iron out problems and make things smoother before I take a leap like that...I'm not going to go out because I've been drinking booze or alcohol and I feel good say, "Oh lets get married. I

love you.” And then tomorrow you’re arguing and fighting and you’re divorced. That’s what happens.

[Black male unemployed, age 24]

Along with this desire to “iron out the wrinkles” was the idea that if one committed to marriage too quickly or too rashly, there would be inevitable problems, including divorce. Cohabitors expressed the desire to avoid divorce or later conflicts in their relationships by remaining in a cohabiting relationship until they felt they were sure about their partner and their decision to marry.

R: I think Scott and I, we both knew that we wanted to get married, but he's from a broken marriage and I'm from a broken marriage. You know, we both had things that we had to agree on before we could get married. And I don't know if everybody does that, but I hope everybody does that. The divorce rate is very high, and that's just very scary that you can go into something and build something, a family, a unit, in a matter of a smack on the gavel, everything's done and over with. I mean cohabitation is important to know that person and their habits and their tendencies. Plus I think that your mindset in the direction that you're heading is very different, like you have to be on the same page.

[White female salesperson, age 32]

R: I'm not going to get married to somebody unless I am absolutely sure that, that I can have a marriage with a person for the rest of my life.

[White male computer technician, age 33]

R: Um, I just wanted to make sure that he was ready and I was ready. We still fought and everything, and I just wanted to make sure all of that was out before we got married, otherwise we would have had problems later on during the marriage.

[Black female retail marketer, age 21]

Finally, this checking of relationship compatibility often involved being sure that there was not a better alternative to the relationship out there.

R: To know that the feelings will stay the same or increase, while you're together, and not, I don't know...

I: You're doing fine.

R: Um, I really don't know. Um, to know that I'm content with the way I feel and that, that I want to be with that person forever and that, that there's not something else that'll make me more happy and not necessarily a person, but some other lifestyle, or some other place, or...

[White female case manager, age 32]

I: Ok. Um...in terms of his views on marriage does he feel you should all wait because why?

R: We haven't been together long enough. He wants to make sure that this is what we both want.

I: Ok.

R: And not rush into it.

[Black female restaurant hostess, age 18]

Respondents and their partners wanted to be certain that marriage with their particular partners was what they definitely what they wanted.

Relationship Qualities

A number of respondents saw their cohabiting relationship as a venue for developing qualities within their relationship that they found necessary for marriage. An example of this is the development of trust and fidelity.

R: Um, what would make me ready? Knowing that I could provide and she's faithful....Like, I truly love you and I'm not going to cheat on you, and I feel the same way about you. I mean, I feel you're not going to do that to me.

[Black male laborer, age 27]

R: I feel I'm not ready for marriage.

I: What would make you ready? Like what would be ready?

R: I have to trust her more than what I do 'cause I really don't have that trust.

I: Because of something she's done or said, or you just don't trust people in general, or what is it?

R: I just don't trust females.

[Black male side cook, age 18]

This need for need for the development of trust was, at times, a result of violations of trust in previous relationships or in the current relationship.

R: I wanted to make sure that it was right. I mean I wanted to make sure that obviously I could trust them because I have certain trust, I mean not really trust issues with Kerry, but just trust issues that ya know, I had been burned once before so I really wanted to be sure.

[White male railroad conductor, age 30]

R: Oh, it would take a lot for me to ever think about getting married.

I: Ok, but hypothetically even to Kenny, in this relationship, what would it take?

R: A lot. Um...it would have to be years of trust, 'cause there's just a lot. The trust you have to have. I've never broken my trust to him, but he's broken it with me and that's very hard for me to have and not be able to trust somebody.

[White female bartender, age 30]

A relationship skill cohabitators wanted to develop before marrying their partner was better communication.

R: Yeah, he needs to communicate better, but I think that we're working on that in uh, well, actually, he needs to communicate like a mature adult and actually listen to what I'm saying and not skew everything I'm say to what he thinks it means. And that's something that we're working on in counseling. So, if he never gets it right, then I won't marry him. If he finally works that out, then we're okay.

[White female computer technician, age 32]

R: Um, just to make sure our communication skills are there, making sure that we, we most definitely want to live together forever, being with her or whatever I mean...

I: And you don't feel like they're in place now, communication?

R: No.

[White male landscaper, age 25]

R: Openness. I think greater openness, greater ability to talk about emotions. Just the ability to be-to be emotional. Um. And to tell people, tell someone how you feel and to um, and reciprocate and to, and to be on the same page moving forward, whether that be to talk about kids or to talk about whatever. We were never at that level. We could never after all those years talk about things like that. They were too... they were avoided. And I knew there was always something missing because of that.

[White male computer technician, age 33]

Finally, cohabitators expressed the need to have stronger love and emotional involvement in place before they would marry their partners.

R: There would have to be mutually respect and true honest love, unconditional love. You know she would have to know um, how to put me first and not put her first. You know I put her in front of everything and everyone but I feel like I'm second to her, even to her baby's daddy, and I don't know if I can accept that.

[Black male stripper, age 28]

Again, many cohabitators wanted to “be sure” that the love and emotional involvement really was present.

R: I guess in a sense to see how much she loved me.

I: What does that mean exactly?

R: Um...to see if she's actually going to be willing to stick it out like I would be willing to stick it out.

[Hispanic male prevention program worker, age 21]

From the perspective a large number of respondents, the cohabiting relationship is a site in which to develop specific relationship qualities that must be in place prior to marriage.

Age/Maturity

A common theme among the cohabitators' responses was the need for oneself or one's partner to be older or more mature. For some, there was a specific age that specified readiness for marriage.

R: I think I would've just wanted to have been older. Um. I always wanted to not get married until I was 35. I didn't want to have any kids until I was that age. You know I just had this whole plan of what it was I was going to do. And it's like when it, when things stop going that way I - I just, you know I mean? Of course you accept what's happening, but I always just had this goal of what I wanted or what I thought I wanted my life to be.

[White female associate buyer, age 34]

R: I just don't right now – I think the best time to get married, and this is me personally you know what I'm saying, is like when you're older and you did - you did live a little bit, you know, and learned or made or whatever who are you with.

I: What would older, what constitute age?

R: I would like to be married like around 30. I think at around 30 is a good time to get married. So not 20 or 18 or I think that's too young I mean.

[Black male unemployed, age 24]

Others had more general ideas about the age or level of maturity that was necessary.

R: Uh, maybe I wasn't mature, maybe that goes along with thinking about what is going on in your life, or what direction you want to go goes along with the level of maturity. Maybe I just didn't reach that level yet, the maturity where you think about things, think about getting married and having a family. So, as far as having anything else in line, like career or school, that had already been in my...been set up. So, other than emotionally, I wouldn't...nothing else needed to be in line.

[White male surgical technologist, age 34]

R: I think that we both needed to grow up more, definitely.
[Black female retail marketer, age 21]

For these cohabitators, marriage should only be undertaken when one has reached a certain level of maturity, life experiences, or age.

Substance Abuse/Violence

A number of respondents spoke of their own or their partner's substance abuse as hindering the transition to marriage. An end to this substance abuse was seen as necessary before committing to marriage.

R: I had to stop being dependent on any kind of substance. That was my main goal, and after that everything else fell into place when I stopped. Then I stopped doing some of the other things, you know, and like waking up in people's garages, I'll just use that as an example. I mean my main thing was to get off substances and to let Jennifer see me for who I truly was.

[White male sanitation and recycling city worker, age 34]

R: Probably, she would probably have to get her shit together.

I: What does get her shit together mean? That's your words.

R: She has problems that she turns into a bottle and she'll party all night, all day, make it

to work you know amongst other things that she's doing. I know she smokes pot, that don't bother me. I prefer her not to, you know, but I can't straighten up someone - you're going, I could give her an ultimatum but she um, she's talking the other night that she realizes that the problems are still there the next day.

I: So she would have to, work out all her mental health issues.

R: I believe so.

I: See a counselor.

R: Counselor, somebody to talk to.

I: Sure.

R: Quit drinking a little, slow down, maybe not quit completely.

[White male furniture store employee, age 30]

R: Right now, our only problem is drinking. He don't hit me no more, I mean I think he knows better because, he knows how like, when he used to hit me it's not like he hit me

and I did nothing, I sat there. I'd hit him back, and maybe him going to prison helped him some in not hitting me...

[Hispanic female unemployed, age 19]

Along with substance abuse, some respondents stated that an end to physical abuse was required before marrying a partner.

R: Um, I mean I think if he wasn't so, if his temper and his attitude wasn't so harsh then I think maybe we could have gotten married but I mean with all the attitude and loudness and abuse you know, because I'm too beautiful...
[Black female cashier, age 32]

Wedding

For a number of respondents, the issue of marriage was closely tied to specifics of their desired wedding.

R: Well I was a little too young, but you know as time has went on I always tell him, I'll be like, "We're not getting married," and he'll be like, "Yes we are." He wants to do the whole downtown thing, and I don't want to get married downtown you know at the courthouse.

I: You want to have a church wedding?

R: Yes I do, and he wants to do the whole get it over with thing, just like a man [giggles].

I: Okay.

R: So that's what I'm waiting for is for him to change his mind [giggles] about the church, and until he does we just won't get married. I'm not going downtown. My cousin went downtown. It's not special enough, everybody sees, my mom had the big church wedding, and I was already born when she got married so, he has to want the big wedding. That's what I say, "You don't want a big wedding, we're not going to get married."

[Black female home health aide, age 22]

R: It did, but both him and I had talked about marriage several times, and we said we're only doing it once so we're gonna do it right. So, we wouldn't rush a wedding like, let's just go get married justice of peace so that we can be happy that we're living together. We want to have a big wedding. We want to have, you know both of our families enjoy it. We want to both and we had talked about that several times over the course of the four years and whatever and that's why we said, "No, we'll just live together and save money."

[Black female customer service representative, age 25]

R: Um, I think I would want family participation. I would want a traditional Mexican wedding, and that would be hard because most of my relatives, I would say 85% of my relatives live in either Arizona or Texas, so I would want them here so my friends could come and the time that, it's just a lot of planning, probably several years away.

[Hispanic female administrative assistant, age 29]

Cohabitors stated particular requirements for their weddings, which could not be presently met. Related to this was often the idea that marriage is a big event that should only occur once, so it ought to be “special.”

Children

The topic of children was pervasive throughout many of the interviews and many of the themes. Whether cohabitators already had children or not, consideration of children was tied to many the respondents’ ideas about marriage and what must be in place for marriage. Especially prevalent was the idea that marriage would lead to children and a family. Consequently, cohabitators felt pressure to have specific things in place – many of which are mentioned above – in order to provide the right environment for children.

R: Well I mean, we still have to grow, regardless. I mean everybody grows, but I mean, established means as, ready for kids. ‘Cause when there’s marriage, there’s kids, and if we had kids right now we wouldn’t be able to support them. So that’s why I said we’d have to be more established, more financially stable for marriage.

[Black male grocery store clerk, age 19]

R: Church. We don’t go to church a lot and I think we should go to church more. And um you know to have a better background for our kids if we decide to have kids one day. I want them to be in a safe environment, and I want them to know the difference between right and wrong.

[Black female home health aide, age 22]

For female cohabitators with children, there is often the view that they are a “packaged deal,” as expressed by the one respondent.

R: If your intentions don’t add to mine then, and if you change support me and the three kids and the dogs, the two dogs then and ready for us to be married, period. This is a packaged deal.

[Hispanic female office clerk, age 27]

Children, whether present or anticipated in the future, often bring about added expectations and requirements for marriage.

SUMMARY

These results represent preliminary findings from the project, and we have at least three more analytic tasks. First, we will investigate how economic considerations and non-economic factors are tied together. Our preliminary results imply that financial difficulties have indirect effects on relationship stability and the transition to marriage via conflict and relationship quality. Second, we will further examine what needs to be in place to marry by focusing on how marriage plans are connected to cohabitators' views about what it takes to marry. We hope to “unpack” the meaning of responses to questions about plans to marriage. Third, we plan to pursue distinctions according to race and ethnicity as well as parenthood status. Our work contributes to prior work by utilizing qualitative data to develop an understanding of how a broad array of factors are linked together to influence the transition from cohabitation to marriage.

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