

**Too poor to marry? A cross-national comparison of the SES gradient in marriage and cohabitation.**

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**Extended Abstract for PAA 2007 Submission**

In the United States, long-term cohabitation, and particularly cohabitation that involves childbearing, has a clear gradient with social status. Among those who are in unions, the well-off and well-educated are likely to be married, while the disadvantaged are more often in cohabiting relationships. Indeed, cohabitation is sometimes referred to as "poor man's marriage." This class difference in behavior does not seem to be accompanied by a class difference in attitudes about marriage, at least in the U.S. Indeed, many, if not most, low-income cohabiting couples express a high value for marriage as an institution as well as high hopes that they will eventually marry (Waller 2001). Yet marriage remains beyond reach for these couples, who cite economic obstacles both concrete, such as the cost of a "proper" wedding, and abstract, such as the feeling they have not achieved some minimum picket-fence standard of living that is appropriate for a married couple (Edin 2000). In the United States, at least, when economic prospects are uncertain, the commitment of marriage is less likely.

In this research, we ask whether this socioeconomic gradient is special to the United States, or whether the gradient is a consistent pattern that occurs around the world. Previous research has largely focused on within-country comparisons of married and cohabiting couples, considering the role of each partner's education, employment, and/or income on the decision to form a marital or cohabiting union or the decision to move from cohabitation into marriage (e.g., Smock and Manning 1997; Kravdal 1999; Oppenheimer 2003). By contrast, we plan to compare as many countries as possible, not just in Europe and North America, but also in South America, Africa, and Asia. The innovation of our study is its attempt to take a global look at the issue of socioeconomic status and marriage. Our goal is to describe the global contours of class differentials in marriage and cohabitation, identifying the patterns and the exceptions, which we hope will spur future work into the societal determinants of union status.

One difficulty for conducting such a comparison is that the meaning of cohabitation and marriage may differ substantially not only from one society to another but also across ages within a society. Cohabitation may exist primarily as a precursor to marriage in some countries, as well as among couples in their teens and twenties, while serving as a long-term alternative to marriage in other countries and among somewhat older couples. In addition, higher education itself may have two countervailing effects, tending to be associated both with more liberal attitudes, which increase the likelihood of ever-cohabiting, and with increased earning power, which may increase the likelihood and speed of couples' transition to marriage (Kravdal 1999). We attempt to minimize such differences by focusing on a limited set of couples—those aged 35 to 44—who may be less likely than younger couples to be cohabiting "on their way" to marriage. In addition, we compare the socioeconomic gradient in marriage versus cohabitation for those

who have children in the household (for whom cohabitation seems more clearly a substitute for marriage) and those who do not.

A compelling reason to be interested in the socioeconomic gradient in marriage and cohabitation is its implications for the transmission of inequality to children. In earlier work (Goldstein and Kenney 2001), we argued that the recent appearance of a crossover effect by education in who marries—that is, that those without a college education are now more likely to remain unmarried than those with college—is a matter of concern as it seems likely to intensify inequality, both within and across generations. In the United States, at least, the research on differences in standards of living and child wellbeing between children living with cohabiting versus married parents appears to bear out this concern. Indeed, Manning and Lichter (1996) found that about 20 percent of children in cohabiting households lived in "deep poverty" (below 50 percent of the poverty line) compared to only 3 percent of children in married couple households. However, some prior evidence suggests that this relationship between parental marriage or cohabitation and children's material wellbeing varies across societies in tandem with variation in the meaning of marriage for household economic relationships. Desai (1992) found that in a number of Latin American countries, children's nutritional status was worse when their parents were in consensual unions rather than marriages, but in West Africa, there was little relationship between parents' relationship status and children's nutritional status. Our examination of the educational gradient in marriage vs. cohabitation across countries may contribute to a better understanding of such differences.

We are interested in the following research questions:

1. Is the status gradient in cohabitation universal? How does the steepness of the gradient vary with the characteristics of the society?

2. Is the main divide in behavior between the most-disadvantaged members of the society and everyone else, or are there differences between each gradation of social status?

3. Does the divide increase or decrease with pervasiveness of cohabitation in a society?

### **Measurement of the prevalence of cohabitation**

We use cross-sectional data sources, namely censuses and large-scale surveys. Our primary aim is for geographic coverage, although in some cases, we may be able to look at changes in the SES gradient over time. The international IPUMS samples provide census micro data for many Latin American countries as well as France, the United States, Kenya, Viet Nam, and South Africa. We are exploring further data sets. Further European data can be obtained from the FFS and more recent GGS surveys, which are large enough to detect educational gradients at the restricted age group. Data for other countries will be obtained on a case-by-case basis, whenever possible.

Cohabiting unions are identified either by a direct question on union status, or by inference from the question on relation to household head, which often includes an "unmarried partner" category. Unions with children are identified either from children-ever-born questions or by the presence of children in the household. Because these couples are fairly young, most children will still be in the household.

### **Preliminary Results**

Working only with the international IPUMS data, we computed the proportion of unions that were cohabitations for women aged 35 to 44. In the preliminary tabulations we did not account for the presence, or absence, of children. Our results for Kenya (1999), Mexico (2000), Brazil (2000), the United States (2000), France (1990) and Norway (2001) are shown in the

accompanying Figure 1. (Note: the Norwegian data is from Statistics Norway and is for couples of all ages, with children.)

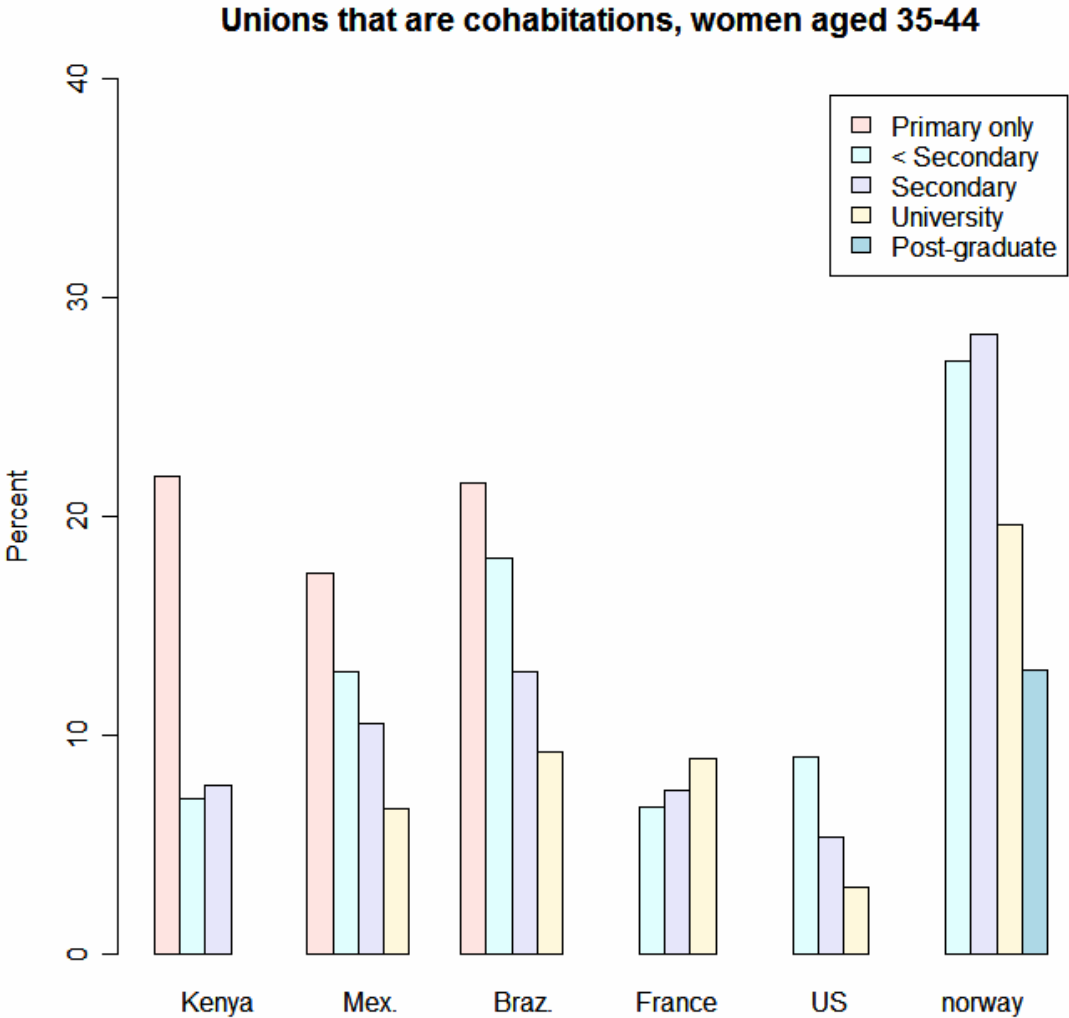
We find that there are indeed many other countries that share the strongly negative status gradient to cohabitation found in the United States. Indeed, in the developing countries of Mexico, Brazil and Kenya, the differences between the least and most educated are at least as stark as in the United States.

On the other hand, we find that there is a slightly positive status gradient to cohabitation in France. It will be interesting to see if this is mostly due to childless couples, or if it also applies to couples with children.

The reversed status gradient is not a universal European feature, as shown by the appearance of the gradient in Norway. The proportions given are from published census tables, which were not broken down by age. Here, only couples without children are considered. The gradient is powerful even in a society where cohabitation is high for all social classes. The gradient is even visible at the highest ends of the educational ladder, with those with advanced degrees cohabiting less than those with "only" university degrees.

The proposed paper plans to cover the rest of the EU countries as well as to explore the early stages of increasing cohabitation in Asian countries. Canada, Australia and New Zealand would also be interesting to factor in. Where possible, we hope to see if education differentials persist after controlling for other relevant factors such as religion, presence of children, relative education of males and females in union, and even income. Such analyses will use individual-level census micro data. If we are able to assemble enough countries, we also hope to map our results, so that geographic patterns are more apparent. We plan to look at within-society gradients, where this will be of interest, for example in countries with multiple

languages/ethnicities. Also, when micro-data for multiple censuses are available for a single country, as is the case in many of the Latin American countries, we will examine how the gradients are changing over time.



**Figure 1: Percentage of cohabiting and marital unions that are cohabitations.**

Source: Authors' tabulations from IPUMS international and from Statistics Norway. Note:

Norwegian data is for couples of all ages, with children.

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