

Cross-Cohort Changes in Attitudes about Intimate Relationships: Growing Liberalization, or Polarization?

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Once relatively uncommon as a family form, cohabitation is becoming increasingly widespread, with growing convergence by race, educational levels, and marital status (Bumpass and Lu 2000.) Today, more than half of all American couples live together before marriage, and considerable shares cohabit without subsequently marrying that partner (Lichter, Qian, and Mellott 2006; Sassler and McNally 2003). Because of the proliferation in popularity of cohabiting unions, what once was deemed an “alternative” arrangement has now become a normative part of the courtship experience (Bumpass, Sweet, and Cherlin, 1991; Bumpass and Lu, 2000).

An extensive body of research explores how those choosing to reside with partners outside of marriage differ from those who do not. The consensus of these studies is that cohabitators differ from those who do not live together prior to marriage in significant ways (Brien, Lillard, & Waite, 1995; Schoen and Weinick, 1993; Thomson & Collelo, 1993). Cohabitators may pursue different kinds of relationships than do those who marry directly, or those who date without living with partners. For example, cohabitators express more egalitarian gender role ideologies (Clarkberg, Stolzenberg, and Waite 1995; Denmark, Shaw, and Ciali, 1985; Kaufman, 2000; Sassler and Goldscheider, 2004), and have greater parity in both earnings and the amount of housework performed than do married couples (Brines and Joyner, 1999; Shelton and John, 1993). Women who enter cohabiting unions express stronger work orientations than do those who marry directly, but for men the relationship is reversed (Clarkberg et al., 1995; Schoen 1989).

To date, the bulk of these studies are based on data from cohabitators drawn in the late 1980s or even earlier – a time when far smaller proportions of young adults entered into shared living arrangements and when such unions were more likely to result in marriage (Bumpass and Lu 2000; Lichter et al. 2006; Sassler and McNally 2003). Yet as once uncommon behaviors diffuse and become more mainstream, their meaning may change (Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001). Individuals entering into cohabiting unions today may do so for rather different reasons, and their values and goals may also diverge from earlier cohorts of cohabitators. Furthermore, Americans in general have become more tolerant of new family forms (Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001), regardless of class background (Sayer, Wright, and Edin 2003), suggesting that the attitudes of contemporary young adults may not vary greatly across union type. Nonetheless, a sizable minority of Americans continue to express very traditional views regarding family roles and sexual activity (Glass and Nath, 2006; Thornton and Young-DeMarco, 2001). It is time, then, to reconsider whether and how attitudes towards cohabitation, non-marital parenting, and divorce have changed over the past few decades, as well as between generations.

In this paper, we use newly released data from the National Survey of Families and Households to examine changes in young adults' attitudes towards marriage, cohabitation, sexual involvement, and non-marital births. By focusing on inter-cohort and intra-cohort differences we seek to determine whether cohabitators' attitudes have become more liberal over time, as well as if the attitudes of cohabitators and others are converging. Data are from Waves 1 and 3 of the National Survey of Families and Households. Utilization of this data source enables us to explore intergenerational changes in views towards intimate relationships. Data for the first time period comes from young adults (under age 35) who were the main respondents in the initial

wave of the NSFH, gathered in 1987-1988. For the more contemporary perspective we rely on the focal children of the Wave 1 main respondents; Wave 3 was gathered in 2001-2002, when these focal children were young adults themselves (between the ages of 18 and 34.) We utilize questions regarding young adults' global and individual attitudes towards marriage, cohabitation, non-marital sexual activity, and non-marital childbearing at both time periods and across relationship statuses.

This study addresses three primary questions: One, have general attitudes towards cohabitation, marriage, and non-marital sex changed over time? Two, do attitudes vary by individual's own relationship experience or type, and if so has there been change over time in this dispersion? For example, do cohabitators express significantly different views than do married individuals, or young adults who are not married but also not living with a partner? Do the responses of cohabitators who were not married at the time of their interview differ from married respondents who had lived with their partner prior to tying the knot? Three, what factors predict more or less traditional or liberal attitudes at both time periods, and have these predictors shifted given the growing liberalization of attitudes towards cohabitators? The answers to these questions will help family scholars gain a clearer perspective on the moving target that is cohabitation.

Data and Methods

Data are from two waves of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH). Initially conducted in 1987-1988, the NSFH is a national probability sample of 13,008 individuals aged 19 and over, plus an over-sample of minorities, single parent families, recently married couples and cohabiting couples (Sweet, Bumpass and Call 1988). The third wave of data collection was completed in 2001-2002, when extensive interviews with the focal child of

the main respondent were conducted (Sweet and Bumpass 2002). We utilize data from the first and third wave of data collection; these two samples are separate, though related.

Data from the first wave of NSFH is drawn from respondents who were under the age of 35 at the initial survey. Wave 3 respondents are the focal children of Wave 1 respondents (supplemented with some new interviews at the 2nd wave of children not included in the initial sample) who were between the ages of 18 and 34 at the time of their interview. These groups represent two generations coming of age in widely different time periods. The sample size at Wave I for this group of young adults is 5,256, while the more restrictive sample from Wave 3 accounts for 1,859 young adults.

Our primary dependent variables are measures of attitudes towards marriage, cohabitation, premarital sex, and non-marital childbearing that were asked at both Wave 1 and 3. We attempted to limit the attitude questions to those that had identical wording, though in some instances we settled for similar meanings (noted in text). We examine one question regarding marital permanence, two about whether or when non-marital cohabitation is acceptable, and one question about the suitability of non-marital sex for 18 year olds; all of these are global questions, in that they ask for general responses. Questions asking about the acceptability of cohabitation and non-marital childbearing focusing on the individual respondent were also asked, though in Wave I only a restricted sample responded to those questions.

The first question, about marital permanency, asked individuals the extent to which they agreed with the following statement: “Marriage is a lifetime relationship and should never be ended except under extreme circumstances.” For the sake of consistency, responses to the question on marital permanency were reverse coded, to make interpretation consistent with that

for the other measures¹. Two global questions regarding the acceptability of cohabitation were asked of all respondents under age 35. The questions differ with respect to the role played by marriage in the determination to cohabit. The first question asks the extent to which respondents agree or disagree with the following statement: “It is all right for an unmarried couple to live together, even when they have no interest in considering marriage.” The second question modifies the initial query slightly, asking agreement with this statement: “It is all right for an unmarried couple to live together as long as they have plans to marry.” Respondents were also asked similar questions for themselves *personally*, though at Wave I these were asked only of unmarried respondents who were not currently living with a partner. The 3 questions asked for responses to the following scenarios: “It would be all right for ME to live with someone without being married . . . a) even if we had no interest in considering marriage; b) to find out whether we were compatible for marriage; and, c) if we were planning to get married.

The third attitudinal measure we examine assesses views about premarital sexual activity of youth, asking the extent of agreement with the following statement: “It is all right for unmarried 18 year olds to have sex if they have strong affection for each other.”

We also explore views regarding non-marital fertility, though questions were not completely parallel across survey waves. Respondents were asked about non-marital fertility, in several ways. In Wave 1, currently unmarried respondents (who could also be cohabiting) were asked for responses to the following scenarios: “It would be all right for ME to have children without being married . . . a) even if I had no plans to marry the father/mother; or, b) if I had definite plans to marry the father/mother. At Wave 3, *all* respondents were asked the following two questions: a) It is all right to have a child without being married; and b) It would be all right for ME to have children without being married.

¹ Still to be done

All of the questions asked the extent of agreement with particular views, and possible responses ranged from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). Respondents who answered “don’t know” were set to the middle category (neither agree nor disagree), while those who refused to answer the question were excluded. Higher scores indicate greater levels of disagreement with the question, or less liberal views.

Independent Variables

Our primary independent variable of interest, union status and experience, relies on information about current marital and union status, as well as relationship histories. We disaggregate between those who are not cohabiting at the time of their interview, those who were living with a romantic partner, and those who were currently married. For those who were married at the time of their interview, we determined whether they had cohabited with their spouse. For the sake of parsimony we do not disaggregate the groups further, such as into respondents who had lived with partners in the past but were no longer; instead, we include controls for such characteristics in our multivariate analyses.

Other controls include respondent’s family structure while growing up, maternal education, individual attributes such as age, race/ethnicity, and own educational attainment. Finally, to assess how personal experiences may shape views, we will also control for age at sexual debut, prior cohabitation experience, and prior marital experience.

Because respondents at Wave 3 are the children of Wave 1 respondents, we are also able to append to them information on their own parents’ union transitions, and whether they experienced a parental cohabitation as a child. As a further refinement of the family structure while growing up measure, additional analyses will explore parental union experiences if parents experienced a divorce. This allows us to maximize information on parental relationship histories

(drawing on data from Waves 1 and 2). If parents experienced a divorce, we determine from their relationship history data (at either Wave 1, if they were divorced at the initial interview, or Wave 2 if they divorced between survey waves) whether they entered into another coresidential union, and if it included a cohabitation. We will distinguish between parental cohabitation with each other, and parental cohabitation following a divorce; we are not able to determine whether both parents cohabited with someone other than their spouse prior to the marriage.

Analytic Approach

Our analysis proceeds in two stages. First, we examine mean responses by union type, across cohort, examining whether there are significant inter- and intra-cohort differences. Next, we utilize Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression to examine factors shaping these attitudes, and test to determine if different factors account for variation across the groups.

Preliminary Results

Table 1 presents means and standard deviations for responses to the global attitudes towards marital permanency, cohabitation, and non-marital sex, by group and across cohorts. The results highlight considerable disparity between groups at both Waves 1 and 3. However, focusing on intra-cohort change suggests a growing polarization of attitudes. While most groups of focal children expressed significantly more liberal views than did their parent generation towards cohabitation, young adults in Wave 3 who married without first cohabiting appear to be substantially more conservative than their counterparts in Wave 1. These findings suggest a growing polarization in attitudes towards family formation, living arrangements, and sexuality among contemporary young adults.

Focusing first on differences across union types at Wave I, what is apparent is that cohabitators express significantly more liberal views towards divorce, cohabitation, and sexual

relationships among unmarried 18 year olds, than do single non-cohabiting young adults, and (in three of four instances) those who lived with their spouse prior to marriage. Married respondents who cohabited with their spouse prior to tying the knot are even more likely to legitimate their behavior than are current cohabitators, though. Respondents who cohabited with a partner prior to marriage also express more liberal views than do those who married without cohabiting.

Turning to the Wave 3 respondents reveals some moderation in group differences. Cohabitators and singles do not express significantly different views towards marital permanency and sexual relationships among unmarried 18 year olds, and in fact over time they have become somewhat more conservative than their Wave 1 counterparts. Furthermore, married respondents who did not cohabit first express far less approval of alternative union formation and involvement patterns than respondents who married after first living with their spouse, and appear even more conservative than their counterparts at Wave I.

Responses to individual questions are presented in Table 2. Focusing only on results assessing group differences at Wave 3 highlights diverging views that are even more evident than for the more global responses. Young adults' responses to these individualized questions also differ significantly from the answers to the global questions (results not shown).

Additional Analyses

We are constructing the independent measures for the Wave 3 respondents. The next steps are to run the OLS regressions for Wave I respondents, and then conduct parallel models for the Wave 3 respondents; we will then construct additional models utilizing information from the focal children's parental data. We also intend to merge the data sets, including in a year dummy, so we are able to conduct interaction terms by cohort. We intend to have the analyses completed by early December. And final draft of the paper will be finished by late January.

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Table 1. Global Attitudes Towards Marriage, Cohabitation, and Sex

		WAVE I ATTITUDES							
		Not Currently Cohabiting		Currently Cohabiting		Currently Married W/O Cohab		Currently Married, Cohabited First	
		Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
Attitudes									
GLOBAL ATTITUDES									
Towards Marriage									
Marriage is a lifetime relationship and should never be ended except under extreme circumstances (1=SA, 5=SD).									
	Sig. Dif?	2.141	1.109	2.305	1.031	1.925	0.999	2.131	1.028
a,b,c									
Towards Cohabitation									
It is all right for an unmarried couple to live together, even when they have no interest in considering marriage (1=SA, 5=SD).									
		2.986	1.161	2.422	0.876	3.428	1.127	2.626	0.951
a,b,c									
It is all right for an unmarried couple to live together as long as they have plans to marry (1=SA, 5=SD).									
		2.956	1.026	2.662	0.841	3.422	1.033	2.753	0.868
a,b									
Towards Sex									
It is all right for unmarried 18 year olds to have sex if they have strong affection for each other (1=SA, 5=SD).									
		2.826	1.077	2.691	0.862	3.538	1.082	2.91	0.918
a,b,c									
N		2,214		463		1,631		948	

*** p ≤ .001; ** p ≤ .01; * p ≤ .05; + p ≤ .10.

Note: a denotes significant difference between single non-cohabitators and cohabitators (p ≤ .05) at Wave1.

b denotes significant differences between marrieds who did not and did cohabit first (p ≤ .05) at Wave 1.

c denotes significant differences between current cohabitators and those cohabiting prior to marriage (p ≤ .05) at Wave 1.

Table 1. Global Attitudes Towards Marriage, Cohabitation, and Sex

Attitudes	WAVE 3 ATTITUDES								
	Not Currently Cohabiting		Currently Cohabiting		Currently Married W/O Cohab		Currently Married, Cohabited First		
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	
GLOBAL ATTITUDES									
Towards Marriage									
Marriage is a lifetime relationship and should never be ended except under extreme circumstances (1=SA, 5=SD).	2.125	1.098	2.114	1.082	1.587	0.765	1.950	1.037	
Towards Cohabitation									
It is all right for an unmarried couple to live together, even when they have no interest in considering marriage (1=SA, 5=SD).	2.754	1.206	2.279	0.977	3.668	1.191	2.613	1.059	
Towards Sex									
It is all right for an unmarried couple to live together as long as they have plans to marry (1=SA, 5=SD).	2.687	1.052	2.430	0.938	3.538	1.073	2.471	0.871	
It is all right for unmarried 18 year olds to have sex if they have strong affection for each other (1=SA, 5=SD).	2.880	1.124	2.768	1.023	3.821	1.120	2.983	1.044	
N	987		279		234		359		

*** p ≤ .001; ** p ≤ .01; * p ≤ .05; + p ≤ .10.

Note: d denotes significant difference between single non-cohabitators and cohabitators (p ≤ .05) at Wave 3.

e denotes significant differences between marrieds who did not and did cohabit first (p ≤ .05) at Wave 3.

f denotes significant differences between current cohabitators and those cohabiting prior to marriage (p ≤ .05) at Wave 3.

Note: Higher scores indicate more disagreement.

Note: Weighted means, unweighted Ns for data from Wave 1. No weighting applied to Wave 3.

Table 2. Individual Attitudes Towards Cohabitation and Non-Marital Childbearing

Attitudes	WAVE I ATTITUDES								
	Sig. Dif?	Not Currently Cohabiting		Currently Cohabiting		Currently Married W/O Cohab		Currently Married, Cohabited First	
		Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
PERSONAL ATTITUDES									
Towards Cohabitation									
It would be all right for ME to live with someone without being married, even if we had no interest in considering marriage ^a		3.330	1.306	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
It would be all right for ME to live with someone without being married, to find out whether we were compatible for marriage ^a		2.795	1.297	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
It would be all right for ME to live with someone without being married, if we were planning to get married ^a		2.614	1.278	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Towards Non-Marital Childbearing									
It would be all right for ME to have children without being married, even if I had no plans to marry the father/mother (1=SA, 5=SD). ^a		3.919	1.253	3.323	1.149	NA	NA	NA	NA
It would be all right for ME to have children without being married, if I had definite plans to marry the father/mother (1=SA, 5=SD). ^a		3.447	1.342	2.772	1.041	NA	NA	NA	NA
It would be all right for ME to have children without being married (1=SA, 5=SD).		NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
It is all right to have a child without being married (1=SA, 5=SD).		NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
N		1,993	400						

Note: a denotes significant difference between single non-cohabitators and cohabitators ($p \leq .05$) at Wave1.

b denotes significant differences between marrieds who did not and did cohabit first ($p \leq .05$) at Wave 1.

c denotes significant differences between current cohabitators and those cohabiting prior to marriage ($p \leq .05$) at Wave 1.

Table 2. Individual Attitudes Towards Cohabitation and Non-Marital Childbearing

Attitudes	WAVE 3 ATTITUDES								
	Sig. Dif?	Not Currently Cohabiting		Currently Cohabiting		Currently Married W/O Cohab		Currently Married, Cohabited First	
		Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
PERSONAL ATTITUDES									
Towards Cohabitation									
It would be all right for ME to live with someone without being married, even if we had no interest in considering marriage ^a	d,e,f	2.981	1.288	2.513	1.086	4.030	1.098	2.772	1.108
It would be all right for ME to live with someone without being married, to find out whether we were compatible for marriage ^a	d,e,f	2.533	1.242	1.996	0.816	3.748	1.194	2.201	0.927
It would be all right for ME to live with someone without being married, if we were planning to get married ^a	d,e,f	2.352	1.106	1.900	0.666	3.547	1.257	2.042	0.737
Towards Non-Marital Childbearing									
It would be all right for ME to have children without being married, even if I had no plans to marry the father/mother (1=SA, 5=SD). ^a		NA		NA		NA		NA	
It would be all right for ME to have children without being married, if I had definite plans to marry the father/mother (1=SA, 5=SD). ^a		NA		NA		NA		NA	
It would be all right for ME to have children without being married (1=SA, 5=SD).		3.191	1.253	2.599	1.136	3.910	1.042	2.981	1.149
It is all right to have a child without being married (1=SA, 5=SD).		2.908	1.150	2.443	0.975	3.740	1.088	2.791	1.059
N		987		279		234		359	

Note: d denotes significant difference between single non-cohabitators and cohabitators (p ≤ .05) at Wave 3.

e denotes significant differences between marrieds who did not and did cohabit first (p ≤ .05) at Wave 3.

f denotes significant differences between current cohabitators and those cohabiting prior to marriage (p ≤ .05) at Wave 3.

Note: Higher scores indicate more disagreement.

Note: Weighted means, unweighted Ns for data from Wave 1. No weighting applied to Wave 3.
