

Marital Expectations among Cohabiting Men and Women

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The age of first marriage among young adults has steadily increased; by 2004 half of all women married by the age 25.8 years, and half of all men married by 27.4 years (U.S Bureau of the Census, 2004) At the same time, the rate of cohabitation in the United States has also greatly increased (Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin, 1991; Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Casper & Bianchi, 2002) with over half of Americans in their 20s and 30s cohabiting (Bumpass & Sweet, 1995). As a result, the majority of marriages and remarriages start as cohabiting unions (Smock, Manning, & Porter, 2005). However, not all cohabiting couples actually marry or even expect to marry (Manning & Smock, 2002; Brown, 2000). Indeed, there is evidence of a decline in marriage among cohabitators, indicating that the majority of cohabiting unions end in dissolution (Bumpass & Lu 2000; Lichter, Qian, & Mellott, 2006).

A great deal of research has concentrated on whether and under what conditions cohabiting couples marry (Brown, 2000; Clarkberg, 1997; Manning, 2001; Manning & Smock, 1997). Some of these studies focus on economic characteristics (Clarkberg, 1999; Manning & Smock, 1995), race and ethnicity (Manning & Smock, 1995), and gender roles and the division of household labor (Sanchez, Manning, & Smock; 1998). However, relatively less attention has been paid to cohabitators' expectations of marriage in the first place (exceptions include Brown, 2000; Brown & Booth, 1996; Bumpass et al., 1991; Manning & Smock, 2002). Such studies suggest that about three-quarters of cohabitators expect to marry their cohabiting partner (Brown, 2000; Brown & Booth, 1996; Bumpass et al., 1991; Manning & Smock, 2002) and this evidence indicates that cohabitation is part of the marriage process. This current paper will contribute to prior work on marital expectations by using recent data (2002), by including men in the sample, and by including the prior relationship and fertility histories of both cohabiting men and women.

This paper focuses on marital expectations themselves rather than marital behavior. Indeed, one of the basic tenets of the social psychological approach toward individual action states that it is one's intention to perform a particular behavior that will be the main *individual level factor* determining whether that behavior actually occurs

(Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). While expectations may not be exact substitutes for intentions, they can serve as a proxy for them and allow researchers to better understand the thoughts (marital expectations) behind behaviors (marital transitions) of cohabiting couples. Empirical evidence concerning marital expectations supports this concept by demonstrating that individuals who report plans to marry their partner (Brown, 2000) or someone else (Lichter, McLaughlin, Kephart, & Laundry, 1992) are more likely to marry than those who do not hold these expectations. This research emphasis on expectations rather than behavior allows us to tap into the intervening factors that may prevent actual achievement of marital expectations.

Prior studies of marital expectations are based on data from 1987-1988 (National Survey of Families and Households) or 1995 (National Survey of Family Growth). Given the growth and change in cohabitation over recent decades, it is important to focus on the most recently available data. This study will build on prior work by using cycle 6 (2002) of the National Survey of Family Growth, a newly available data source on marital expectation for both male and female respondents.

Although numerous complications are associated with the inclusion of men in demographic research (Green & Biddlecom, 2000), men and women do not necessarily report the same costs and benefits from marriage (Bulcroft & Bulcroft, 1993; South, 1993; Waite, 1995) supporting the possibility that the factors associated with intending to marry differ for men and women. Therefore, men are an important group to examine within the cohabitation literature. Past research indicates that while women's economic characteristics are not significant predictors of marriage, men's economic characteristics are associated with marriage outcomes (Smock & Manning, 1997). In addition, Sanchez, Manning & Smock (1998) determined that both women's housework and men's earnings were positively associated with union transition to marriage; however it was men's perceptions of fairness of the division of labor to their female partners that influenced union transition. Furthermore, Brown (2000) concluded that women's dissatisfaction with their cohabiting relationship prompted separation, whereas men's similar feelings of dissatisfaction decreased the likelihood of marriage; thus documenting the unique and important role men play in union formalization from cohabitation to marriage. By using cycle 6 of the NSFG in the investigation of union and fertility history on marital

expectations, we can explore the differences in marital expectations among men and women, a comparison that researchers were unable to make using previous cycles of the NSFG.

Past research among cohabiting men and women in the NSFH and cohabiting women in the NSFG indicates that the effect of socioeconomic status on marital expectation may vary by race/ethnicity. Approximately 57 percent of Black women, 71 percent of White women, and 58 percent of Hispanic women report a “pretty good chance” or greater of marrying their cohabiting partner. Many of the socioeconomic factors that influence union transition, such as income and education, differ across racial and ethnic groups; however, racial and ethnic differences in union formation are shown, even after data are controlled for economic characteristics (Manning & Smock, 1995). These results indicate that although economic status accounts for some of the gap in marital transition between Blacks, Whites and Hispanics, it does not account for some or even most of this differential in marital transition (Manning & Smock, 1995; Manning & Smock, 2002). Therefore, this paper will examine whether a race/ethnicity differential exists in marital expectation and if so, whether union and fertility history as well as other covariates explain its existence.

This current study extends previous research on marital expectations by exploring gender and racial/ethnic differentials in marital expectations among cohabiting men and women using recent data. Unlike prior research, this paper will expressly examine the influence of prior relationship history (never-married, previously married, previously cohabited) and fertility history (respondent’s biological children, partner’s biological children or children born in current union) on expectations of marriage. These indicators of family complexity may reveal important differentials in the certainty of marriage within cohabiting unions. Furthermore, this paper includes controls for other factors that influence the transition from cohabitation, such as race/ethnicity, nativity status, age, duration of cohabitation, family background, socioeconomic status, religiosity, as well as partner’s race and ethnicity, age, education and prior marital history.

DATA AND METHODS

The NSFG Cycle 6 was conducted in 2002 and is based on a national probability sample. The sample represents the household population of the United States, ages 15-44. The NSFG collects information on topics for females, such as marriage, divorce, and cohabitation. For males, Cycle 6 covers topics related to reproductive health, family formation and fertility similar to those covered by the women's survey, including biological and adopted children, marriage, cohabitation and other sexual relationships. There are three main advantages to using these data. First, NSFG cycle 6 is the most recent data available on cohabitation and marital expectation. Indeed, when studying union transition, it is important to use timely data. Second, while previous cycles have ignored males, these data include both males and females in its sample design. Thus, allowing for comparison of male and female expectation of marriage. Third, these data include rich retrospective union and fertility histories, which will allow for the investigation of the influence of union and fertility history on marital expectation. The analysis will be limited to the 369 cohabiting men and 741 cohabiting women, who have valid responses on the marital expectations dependent variable, are 18 years or older and provided a valid response when asked about the start date of their current cohabiting union.

Marital expectations, the dependent variable in this current investigation, is measured by five response categories which include, “no chance of marriage”, “a little chance”, “50-50 chance”, “a pretty good chance”, and “an almost certain chance of marriage”. For analysis, the dependent variable was divided into two groups, those respondents who thought they had a “fifty percent chance” or less of marrying their current cohabiting partner and those who had a “pretty good chance” or greater of marrying their current cohabiting partner. Preliminary analysis of the data indicates that approximately 65 percent of cohabiting women and 67 percent of cohabiting men expect to marry their current partner (Table 1 and Table 2).

The independent variables of this study include measures of socio-demographic characteristics including respondent’s relationship and fertility history, as well as respondent’s race/ethnicity, nativity status, age, duration of current cohabiting union,

family background, socioeconomic status, church attendance, and partner's race and ethnicity, age, education and prior marital history. Table 1 and Table 2 present the unweighted distribution of covariates for women and men.

Respondents who had been married before his/her current cohabitating relationship are coded as "previously married". Another variable was created to measure whether the respondent had cohabited before his/her current union. Fertility is measured with a four-category variable designating those couples that have no children, whether the respondent had a child/children during his/her current cohabitation, whether the respondent had a child/children before the couple began their current cohabitation and whether the respondent's partner had a child/children before the couple began cohabiting. In addition, a separate variable measures whether the respondent was pregnant at the time of the interview.

This study controls for both the respondent and partner's demographic characteristics. The respondent and partner's race/ethnicity is coded into the following four groups: Hispanic, non-Hispanic White, non-Hispanic Black, and "other". Both the respondent and partner's education are measured at the time of the interview and are coded into three categories: "below a high school degree", "high school degree" and "college degree or higher". Religiosity is measured by respondent's church attendance at the time of the interview, ranging on a five point scale from "never attending church" to "attending church more than once a week". In addition this study controls for respondent's nativity status, age at interview (years), duration of cohabiting union (months), family background, socio-economic status, and partner's race and ethnicity, age, education and prior marital history. It is important to control for both respondent and partner's demographic characteristics in order to create a couple's perspective in examining what factors influence marital expectations among cohabiting adults.

I plan to use logistic regression to analyze the effects of the independent variables on marital expectations. This is an approved method for a dichotomous dependent variable. I plan to test whether ordered logistic modeling is a better technique for analysis by retaining the ordinal nature of the dependent variable. Ordered logistic modeling is the approved analytic method when examining a polytomous dependent variable (DeMaris, 1992). Men and women will be analyzed using separate models. Initial zero-order

methods are presented (Table 3) and blocks of independent variables will be added to the model, with special attention being paid to race/ethnicity covariates. Finally, interactions with key independent variables, race/ethnicity and gender, will be included in the analysis. The analysis will account for the complex sampling design by weighing the sample with SLY commands in SAS.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

These preliminary findings focus on cohabiting women. The multivariate analysis of cohabiting men is currently in progress. Men and women report similar levels of expecting to marry. Approximately 65 percent of women and 67 percent of men report a “pretty good” to “almost certain chance” of marrying their cohabiting partner. This represents a decline from approximately 75 percent of women in the 1995 NSFG (Manning & Smock, 2002). Only two-fifths of women (42%) and men (41%) report they have an “almost certain chance” of expecting to marry. Indeed, while the majority of men and women expect to marry, 18% of women and 14% of men report “little” or “no chance” of expecting to marry their current cohabiting partner. Overall, there is a considerable share of cohabiting respondents, who report having a “fifty percent chance” or less of marrying their current partner; thus demonstrating the need to study the factors which influence marital expectations.

Table 3 presents zero-order and multivariate regression analysis for women. Zero-order regression analysis shows that Blacks and Hispanics have lower odds of high marital expectations when compared to their white counterparts. Both Blacks and Hispanics are approximately 35 percent less likely to expect to marry their cohabiting partner when compare to Whites. Model 2 shows that when the covariates are added to the analysis, Blacks are 54 percent less likely to expect to marry than their White counterparts. Further analysis will explore which sets of covariates mediate the effect of race and ethnicity. In addition, I will examine the interactions to determine whether the effects of the covariates differ by race/ethnicity.

Both the respondent and partner having a child before the start of their cohabitation significantly reduced the odds of the respondent’s high marital expectations

by 28% when compared to those respondent's with no children. Whether the respondent was married before her current cohabitation also reduces the odds of high marital expectations by 35 percent when compared to those respondents, who have never been married. In addition, the respondent's partner's previous marital history also significantly reduces the odds of high marital expectations by approximately 29 percent.

Several of the control variables have a significant relationship with the dependent variable. As a respondent's age increases, the odds of her marital expectation decrease. Those respondents without their high school degree have lower odds of high marital expectations when compared to those who have earned their high school degree and those students with college experience have greater odds of high marital expectations than those with only a high school degree. Duration of cohabitation has a negative relationship with marital expectations. Those respondents born outside the United States have lower odds of marital expectations than those born in United States. Alternatively, as a respondent's income increases the odds of high marital expectations increase. The respondents with Hispanic partners have lower odds of high marital expectations than those respondents with White partners. Partner's age has a negative relationship with marital expectations. Finally, a respondent with a partner who has less than a high school degree will have lower odds of marital expectation than those with partners who have earned their high school degree.

Multivariate regression analysis shows that as a respondent's income increases the odds of high marital expectations increase as well. Those students with college experience have greater odds of high marital expectations when compared to those with only a high school degree. In addition, as a respondent's church attendance increases, her odds of high marital expectations increase as well. Alternatively, as a respondent's age increases, the odds of high marital expectations decrease.

SUMMARY

The goal of this paper is to examine the influence of relationship and fertility history on marital expectations by exploring gender and race differentials in marital expectations among cohabiting men and women. This research will expressly examine the influence of prior relationship history and fertility history on expectations of

marriage; hence investigating whether a race/ethnicity differential does exist in marital expectations and whether introducing prior relationship or fertility history into the model explains the existence of such a differential. The findings from this study will contribute to our understanding of the decline in the transition from cohabitation to marriage by determining whether cohabitation is becoming increasingly less tied to marriage the process, hence representing an alternative to singlehood (Manning & Smock, 2005; Sassler, 2004) rather than an alternative to marriage. This current study will help determine whether there are two types of cohabitators: those who are on the path to marriage or are using cohabitation as a “stepping stone” toward marriage and those who are not on this “marriage path” or are using cohabitation as an alternative to dating.

Appendix

Table 1: Distribution of Variables for Cohabiting Women (N=741)

	Percentage/Mean
Marital Expectation	
"Pretty good chance" or greater	65.18
"50-50 chance" or less	34.82
<i>Women's Characteristics</i>	
Race/Ethnicity	
Black	18.22
Hispanic	27.80
Other	3.91
White	50.07
Born Outside U.S	
Yes	20.24
No	79.76
Respondent's Age (mean years)	28.66
Age at Start of Cohabitation (mean years)	24.97
Duration of Cohabitation (mean months)	45.66
Family Background	
Two-Biological Parent Household	54.39
Not a Two-Biological Parent Household	45.61
Socioeconomic Status	
Income (mean)	8.14
Education	
<12	29.55
12 years	24.97
13 or more years	45.48
Welfare	
Yes	15.38
No	84.62
Church Attendance	
More than once a week	3.91
Once a week	14.04
1-3 times per month	14.04
Less than once a month	29.15
Never	38.87

Table 1: Distribution of Variables for Cohabiting Women (N=741) Cont.

Fertility History

Pregnant	
Yes	7.42
No	92.58
Only During Cohabitation	37.11
Respondent Child Before Cohabitation	37.11
Partner Child Before Cohabitation	35.22
(No Children)	25.78

Relationship History

Ever Married	
Yes	31.85
No	68.15
Prior Cohabitation	
Yes	26.72
No	73.28

Partner's Characteristics

Ever Married

Yes	31.85
No	68.15

Race/Ethnicity

Black	20.65
Hispanic	27.80
Other	4.18
White	47.91

Age (mean years) 32.21

Age at Start of Cohabitation (mean years) 28.88

Education

<12	21.59
12 years	63.29
13 or more years	15.11

Table 2: Distribution of Variables for Cohabiting Men
(N=369)

	Percentage/Mean
Marital Expectation	
"Pretty good chance" or greater	66.67
"50-50 chance" or less	33.33
<i>Men's Characteristics</i>	
Race/Ethnicity	
Black	20.87
Hispanic	33.88
Other	4.07
White	41.19
Born Outside U.S	
Yes	20.60
No	79.40
Respondent's Age (mean years)	
Age at Start of Cohabitation (mean years)	25.59
Duration of Cohabitation (mean months)	44.85
Family Background	
Two-Biological Parent Household	59.08
Not a Two-Biological Parent Household	40.92
Socioeconomic Status	
Income (mean)	8.14
Education	
<12	28.18
12 years	54.74
13 or more years	17.07
Welfare	
Yes	10.84
No	89.16
Church Attendance	
More than once a week	2.44
Once a week	9.21
1-3 times per month	17.89
Less than once a month	27.64
Never	42.82
Table 2: Distribution of Variables for Cohabiting Men (N=369) Cont.	
Fertility History	
Pregnant	
Yes	n/a

No	
Only During Cohabitation	38.75
Respondent Child Before Cohabitation	4.61
Partner Child Before Cohabitation	33.88
(No Children)	41.46

Relationship History

Ever Married	
Yes	15.18
No	84.82
Prior Cohabitation	
Yes	43.63
No	56.37

Partner's Characteristics

Race/Ethnicity

Black	14.36
Hispanic	30.08
Other	6.50
White	49.05

Education

<12	20.05
12 years	63.41
13 or more years	16.53

Table 3: Odds Ratios of Expectations for Marriage Among Cohabiting Women (N=741)

	Model 1	Model 2
<i>Women's Characteristics</i>		
Race/Ethnicity		
Black	.654*	.456*
Hispanic	0.643**	0.721
Other (White)	1.710	1.178
Born Outside U.S		
Yes (No)	.612**	0.846
Respondent's Age (Years)		
	.749****	0.898
Duration of Cohabitation		
	.765****	0.884
Family Background		
Two-Biological Parent Household (Not a Two-Biological Parent Household)	0.872	0.879
Socioeconomic Status		
Income	1.235*	1.820*
Education		
<12 (= 12 years)	.517****	0.877
13 or more years	2.220****	1.763****
Church Attendance		
	0.986	1.164*
Fertility History		
Pregnant		
Yes (No)	1.329	1.310
Only During Cohabitation	0.772	0.931
Respondent Child Before Cohabitation	.716*	0.781
Partner Child Before Cohabitation (No Children)	.713*	1.273
Relationship History		
Ever Married		
Yes (No)	.647*	0.908
Prior Cohabitation		
Yes (No)	0.885	1.000
<i>Partner's Characteristics</i>		
Partner Ever Married		
Yes	0.707*	1.031

(No)

Race/Ethnicity

Black	0.760	1.162
Hispanic	0.689*	1.009
Other (White)	0.970	0.672

Age (years)

.745**** 0.804***

Education

<12 (= 12 years)	0.680*	0.952
13 or more years	1.475	1.024

*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001 ****p<.0001

Note: Reference category in parentheses

Non-weighted sample

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