

## **Intentions to Marry at the Start of Cohabitation and Subsequent Transitions**

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Cohabitation has been variously characterized as an alternative to being single (Rindfuss & VandenHeuval 1990; Schoen & Weinick 1993), an alternative to marriage (Landale & Forste 1991; Loomis & Landale 1994), or a stage in the marriage process (Gwartney-Gibbs 1986; Tanfer 1987; Oppenheimer 1988), depending on the population and outcomes studied. Yet about 75% of cohabitators expect to marry their partners, though this declines with duration (Bumpass, Sweet, and Cherlin 1991; Waller 2000; Lichter, Batson, & Brown 2004), and about 60% of first cohabitations end in marriage (Bumpass & Sweet 1989). This suggests that while comparisons across single, cohabiting, and married persons may lead us to characterize cohabitation differently by indicators such as the presence of children, sexual behaviors and fidelity, shared financial resources, etc., those involved in cohabiting unions often view them as a precursor to marriage, even if that marriage is envisioned far down the line.

In fact, many cohabiting couples may begin their union with the expressed intention to marry in the future. Oppenheimer (2003) suggests that although data has been unable to definitely prove it, the quick transition of many cohabitations (Sweet & Bumpass 1992; Bumpass & Lu 2000; Manning & Smock 1995) would imply that many cohabitations signify an engagement and that perhaps a large proportion of the rise in cohabitation may reflect an increasing tendency for couples to cohabit once they have become engaged.

Qualitative work, on the other hand, has produced an image of cohabitation that is much more fluid and much less precise. Many cohabitators, it appears, do not actively discuss the future of their relationship before they begin cohabiting. Among young adults, cohabitation is often entered into quickly, with marriage sometimes not even discussed (Sassler 2004). And despite the quantitative modeling approach where cohabitation is framed as an explicit choice *not* to marry, qualitative work suggests that for many, marriage simply is not even considered as an option at the same time (Manning and Smock 2003). In fact, the decision to cohabit is often not even a deliberate decision after all (Manning and Smock 2003). Interestingly, cohabitators sometimes refer to their partners as fiancés or spouses, a point which underscores the lack of institutionalization of cohabitation in our family system (Manning & Smock 2003).

There is evidence that expectations of marriage among current cohabitators are predictive of subsequent marriage (Brown 2000; Waller & McLanahan 2005), but we know virtually nothing about whether people intended to marry at the start of the union. Intentions and expectations are strong predictors of subsequent behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen 1975), and expectations are generally weaker predictors than intentions. As such, we might expect those who began their cohabitation with the intention to marry are particularly likely to fulfill those intentions. Intentions to marry, distinct from expectations, have yet to be analyzed due to data constraints; however, one conceptualization of intention would be whether an individual is engaged or has definite plans to marry, and this information is finally available in a nationally representative survey and is examined here.

This paper makes use of the 2002 wave of the National Survey of Family Growth (Cycle 6) to examine the characteristics that influence whether cohabitators began their union with the expressed intention to marry (“marital intenders”) and how these intentions are related to subsequent union transitions. In doing so, this paper provides some insight into where cohabitation fits into the relationship spectrum as perceived by those currently cohabiting.

### **Data and Methodology**

In the past, the NSFG interviewed only females aged 15-44, but in this most recent cycle, males aged 15-44 were also interviewed, allowing researchers to use the NSFG to explore gender differences in union and family behaviors for the first time. Cycle 6 includes 7,643 women and 4,928 men. For each cohabitation, respondents were asked “At the time you began living together, were you and [partner] engaged to be married or did you have definite plans to get married?” This cycle of the NSFG is really the first nationally representative data source to inquire about engagement in current and prior cohabitations, marking a real opportunity to understand the mindset of couples when they start cohabitation and help researchers understand where cohabitation fits into the relationship spectrum. It is important to keep in mind that some cohabitators who were not engaged at the start of the union may have become engaged sometime during their cohabitations, while others may have called off their engagement. For simplicity’s sake, though, those who were engaged at the start of their union are referred to as “marital intenders.” Focusing only on the first premarital cohabitation, there are 5,325 first cohabitations, and there is only missing information on engagement for 5 cases. There are 3,379 females and 1,941 males.

Preliminary bivariate results show that about 45% of men and 42% of women report being engaged or having definite plans to marry at the start of their first cohabitation; these numbers are slightly higher when excluding current cohabitators (n=1086). Among those not currently cohabiting, there are significant differences by marital intentions in the proportion of cohabitators who transitioned to marriage or broke up. As expected, far more ‘marital intenders’ married their partners than those who did not have plans to marry at the start of their union (75% vs. 40%). About 78% of male and 75% of ‘marital intenders’ actually married, while 39% of males and 45% of females who did not have definite plans married. These results suggest that intentions to marry at the start of their union are strongly predictive transitioning to marriage. Moreover, among those who married, a lower proportion of ‘marital intenders’ had experienced the demise of their marriage (26% vs. 36% of non-‘marital intenders’). Planned analyses include event history models controlling for age, race, presence of children, duration of union, and socioeconomic characteristics to determine whether these results hold up in a multivariate setting.

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