



## CURRENTLY COHABITING: Relationship Intentions and Attitudes

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The rise in cohabitation — pre-marital, non-marital and post-marital — is one of the most significant changes in union formation patterns in many developed economies and some transitional and developing economies. In 2006, there were 2.3 million cohabiting couple families in the UK. The importance of cohabitation, and the public debates it generates, are reflected in the media attention it receives. The rise in cohabitation is one characteristic of the second demographic transition.

Theorising about cohabitation encompasses a broad range of perspectives, from notions of selfish individualism and breakdown of the family to notions of the democratic, consensual and ‘pure’ relationship. Cohabitation has moved from being a ‘deviant’ or ‘alternative’ lifestyle choice to one that is normative. Globally, attitudes toward pre- and non-marital cohabitation have become more ambivalent and less unaccepting of non-traditional living arrangements in general, and cohabitation in particular. Acceptance of cohabitation is likely to increase in the future, and can reasonably be interpreted as evidence for weakening of the social norms surrounding marriage. This process is referred to variously as deinstitutionalisation of marriage (Cherlin, 2004), *démariage* (Thery, 1993) and disestablishment of marriage (Coontz, 2004, quoting Cott).

Attitudes of increased acceptance of cohabitation have changed more rapidly than attitudes towards other aspects of intimate relationships such as extra-marital sex and same-sex relationships. Cohabitation has emerged as an aspect of intimate relationships that has come to be regarded differently (perhaps separately?) from other indicators of sexual freedom.

Union formation in general, and cohabitation in particular, are characterised by increasing number and complexity. The study of cohabitation has been described as ‘fuzzy’ (Knab, 2005), ‘elusive’ (Teitler and Reichman, 2001) and ‘heterogeneous’ (Oppenheimer, 2003). Cohabitation may be narrowly defined as “an intimate sexual union between two unmarried partners who share the same

living quarter for a sustained period of time” (Bacharach *et al.*, 2000).

Theories seeking to explain the rise in cohabitation incorporate a wide range of explanatory perspectives, including: increased secularization; increased female labour force participation; shifts in the meaning of marriage; risk reduction; a decline in the cultural importance of kin; and the separation of sex and reproduction.

### Cohabitation: normative attitudes

Changes in normative attitudes towards cohabitation are poorly represented before the final quarter of the twentieth century. Recent debates about the legal position of cohabiting relationship in Britain have incorporated attitudinal information as part of their corpus of evidence for legal change. The British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) has asked a series of repeated self-completion questions about attitudes towards cohabitation (Figure 1).

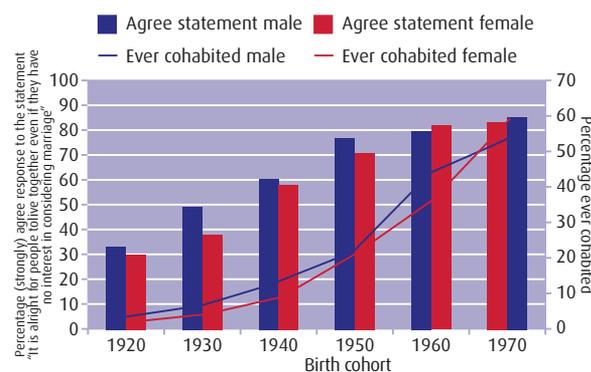
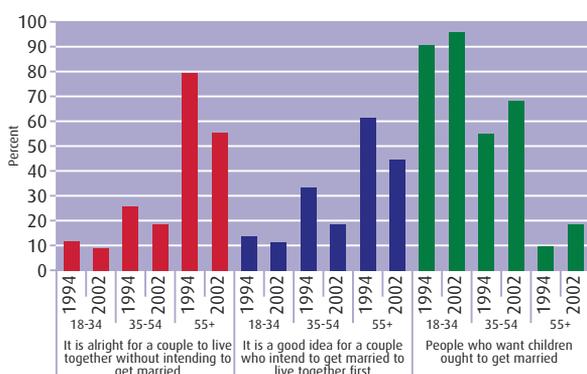


FIGURE 1. DISTRIBUTION OF ATTITUDES TOWARDS, AND EXPERIENCE OF, COHABITATION, BY BIRTH COHORT AND SEX, 1920-1970  
Source: BHPS, 2004



Older cohorts are much less likely to approve of non-marital cohabitation relative to younger cohorts, mirroring trends in reported ever-cohabitation by birth cohort. Individuals who have ever-cohabited are significantly ( $p < 0.000$ ) more likely to report approving attitudes towards cohabitation compared with individuals who have never-cohabited. Successive generations tend to have less traditional attitudes when compared with preceding generations.

Adolescents' attitudes provide insight into the probable trajectory of normative attitudes and behaviours in the near future. The attitudes of adolescents are important for determining future union choices. Normative attitudinal data about cohabitation are also collected in the British Social Attitudes Survey (BSA) (Figure 2).



**FIGURE 2. PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION, BY AGE GROUP (AT TIME OF INTERVIEW), OF RESPONDENTS WHO DISAGREE, OR STRONGLY DISAGREE, WITH STATEMENTS ABOUT COHABITATION AND MARRIAGE, 1994 AND 2002** *Source: BSA*

The proportion of individuals expressing negative views about cohabitation, and its relation to marriage, has declined across all age groups. Acceptance of cohabitation is likely to increase in the future, a function of a range of social processes.

### Cohabitation: individual attitudes and intentions

Reports of plans or expectations to marry by cohabiters can be interpreted as indicative of cohabiting unions representing a transitional state leading to marriage. Relationship expectations cannot be used as proxy indicators of relationship 'quality'. For example, an expectation of relationship transition to marriage might be an expression of a perceived absence of alternatives to the current cohabiting relationship. Relationship expectation reports are cross-sectional, and it might be that an individual entered into a cohabiting relationship with no expectations of marriage, but that these expectations changed over time.

The absence of expectations to marry can represent one of three positions:

1. an ideological position that opposes marriage;
2. no ideological opposition to marriage but an assessment that their current partner is not marriage material; or
3. they have yet to transition to thinking about marriage.

Relationship expectations throw some light on whether cohabitation represents an alternative to marriage or an integral component of the transition to marriage. It is important to analyse gendered relationship expectations and attitudes. Considerable research into the gendered aspects of marriage has revealed 'his' and 'her' marriages, and it is reasonable to hypothesise that there are 'his' and 'her' cohabitations.

### Data

This research uses data from the BHPS to analyse individuals' relationship expectations and subsequent reported relationship behaviour. It deals with the relationship intentions of those individuals who report a non-marital cohabiting partner.

Begun in 1991, the BHPS surveys approximately 5,000 households annually. In the eighth wave, in 1998, and again in the thirteenth wave, in 2003, individuals aged 16 and above who were in cohabiting relationships were asked about their expectations of this cohabiting relationship. They were shown a card with a range of responses and asked to respond "Planning to marry", "Probably get married", "Just live together", "No thought to the future", "Don't know" or "Other".

A supplementary question was asked of those respondents who replied "Don't know" or "Just live together". It asked for a response to the statement "How likely it is that you will ever get married (or remarried) to anyone in the future?".

Cohabiting respondents were also asked a series of questions about their perceptions about cohabitation in general. This series of questions did not explicitly ask respondents to reflect upon their own current cohabiting relationship, but the questions did explicitly compare cohabiting relationships to marriage.

### Results

- For women and men born in the 1970s, 72% and 75%, respectively, of first unions were cohabiting. Of those individuals born in the 1980s and aged 16 and over who have entered live-in unions, 91% report cohabitation as the first type of union.
- In 1998 and 2003, the majority of cohabiting respondents reported neither an advantage nor a disadvantage (47% and 55%, respectively).
- In 2003, less than one third of individuals in cohabiting relationships reported that there was an advantage to living in a cohabiting relationship when compared to marriage.



- Respondents who are parents are significantly less likely to report advantages of cohabitation compared to non-parents.
- Non-parents are more likely to report trial marriage, and parents are more likely to report personal independence and the absence of legal ties as advantages of cohabitation compared with marriage.
- Approximately one quarter of respondents report disadvantages in living as a couple, with women significantly more likely to report disadvantages compared to men if they had a previous live-in relationship or were a parent.
- Substantial proportions of never-married, currently cohabiting respondents with no expectation of marriage for the current cohabiting relationship, report that they are unlikely or very unlikely to ever marry, with 67.8% and 65.8% of men and women, respectively, reporting this expectation.
- If cohabitation is part of the marriage process, then one might reasonably expect individuals to respond that they have plans to marry the longer they have cohabited. For cohabiting individuals interviewed in 2003, the relationship between the duration of the cohabiting relationship is significantly associated with relationship intentions.
- Individuals who had a prior live-in relationship (whether married or cohabiting) are significantly more likely to report an intention to continue cohabiting compared with individuals who have not had a prior live-in relationship.
- For never-married, childless respondents interviewed in 1998, the subsequent birth of a child within the relationship is significantly associated with the relationship outcome, with subsequent parents more likely to continue to cohabit and less likely to marry compared to non-parents.
- For those respondents that reported a 'definite' expectation, there is a significant relationship between expectation and outcome, for both men and women and for both parents and non-parents. More than two thirds (67.9%) of those individuals who reported that they planned to marry their cohabiting partner then went on to marry that partner.
- Levels of concordance within couples are high, with most concordance for "No" responses to questions about disadvantages and advantages of cohabitation when compared with marriage. Where both partners report an advantage, the most common concordant response is as a trial marriage. Levels of agreement within couples about specific disadvantages of cohabitation are much lower, although financial insecurity is the most commonly mentioned where both partners report a disadvantage.
- In terms of future expectations about their current cohabiting union, there are high levels of concordance within couples. Of course, concordance does not equal achievement of these desires, concordant couples may

still be disappointed in the future. Over four fifths (81.5%) of those couples who agreed in 1998 that they planned to marry did go on to marry, whereas only 39.5% of those couples who agreed they would probably get married went on to convert their relationship to a marriage. Sixty per cent of couples who agreed in 1998 that they would continue to cohabit were still cohabiting at their most recent interview wave in the BHPS.

## Discussion

The majority of cohabitators assert that they will marry their partner (including both "plan to marry" and "probably marry"). Such responses could imply that cohabitation is one element of the process of marriage, and that cohabitation represents a considered step on the pathway to marriage. However, what we cannot tell is whether these intentions to marry preceded becoming a co-residential couple, or whether they emerged as a result of having co-resided.

Current cohabiters who have a previous live-in relationship and are already parents are more likely to report an expectation of cohabitation rather than marriage. Data are rarely collected on engagements, which affect the entering into, and dissolution of, cohabiting unions. If couples are cohabiting as a result of engagement with an intention to marry, then engagement-driven cohabitation explains in part both the rise in cohabitation and delays in marriage.

One possible reason, rarely explored, for reported intentions not to convert a cohabiting union into a marital union, is that of the costs of a wedding. Whilst a marriage in England and Wales costs approximately £100, the cost of a wedding can run to tens of thousands of pounds, and for many people, the marriage and the wedding are indivisible as processes.

The wording of survey questions such as those included in the BHPS tends to pose statements about cohabitation relative to marriage. This standpoint reflects much of the broader academic endeavour surrounding cohabitation, which has debated whether cohabitation is a prelude to marriage, or whether it is an alternative to marriage. A more productive line of enquiry might be to view cohabitation as an alternative to being single and/or progression of an intimate non-co-residential relationship

Future research needs to widen the pool of potential couples available to enter into a co-residential union, whether cohabiting or married, and their relationship intentions. 'Living-apart-together' (LAT) relationships, in which two partners regard themselves as a couple but do not cohabit, are increasingly recognised in the social science literature.

As people's living arrangements and households become smaller and more complex, their commitments and networks outside of the traditional 'household' tend to become greater, mean that social science research needs to better understand and reflect non-household-based definitions and sources of information. There is a need for

more finely grained qualitative research into the processes underlying cohabiting unions, including their formation and dissolution. The vast majority of research on cohabitation is based in the US and is quantitative. Large-scale, representative, quantitative datasets give us some clues as to potential avenues for further investigation. However, they cannot fully account for the rapidly changing role of cohabitation in contemporary society.

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