

Cohabitation

Exploring Contemporary Courtship Trajectories

In the spring of 2013, various newspapers and magazines breathlessly declared that cohabitation was the “new normal.”¹ Drawing from the 2006–2010 National Survey of Family Growth, these reports revealed that nearly half of women’s first live-in unions with opposite sex partners—48%—were cohabitations rather than marriages. The NBC news story featured a blogger for *Glamour* magazine, who wrote about her experience moving in with her boyfriend and the couple’s subsequent engagement. Commenting on the news story, family scholars discussed the growing acceptability of being in long-term committed relationships without being married. “The question becomes not who cohabits, but who doesn’t,” one prominent demographer of family change concluded.

The number of unmarried couples who live together in intimate unions has increased dramatically over the past few decades. As of 2010, 7.5 million heterosexual couples were living together without marriage. This was a big jump from the 5.5 million unmarried couples who lived together in 2000, and more than double the 3.2 million that were cohabiting in 1990.² These households are disproportionately young. As a result, the percentage of young adults who have lived with a romantic partner (or more than one) rose across the last quarter of the 20th century and continues to climb.³ Furthermore, two-thirds of couples married since the beginning of the new century lived together before the wedding—suggesting that we have truly become a cohabitation nation.⁴

Glossed over in coverage of the new normal, however, are important social class differences in how romances progress. Less advantaged young adults are more likely to cohabit than their counterparts with college degrees and middle-class family upbringings. The outcomes of their relationships also differ. For college-educated cohabitators like the *Glamour* blogger, cohabitation frequently leads to marriage within a few years. For the less privileged, the sequence is more varied and often bumpier. These cohabitators face a much greater likelihood of having children, often unintentionally, breaking up before a wedding, or divorcing if they do tie the knot.

Describing the relationship patterns of the highly educated as the new normal ignores the challenges to forming stable and fulfilling intimate relationships that the less advantaged face. Compared to their college-educated counterparts, young adults with less schooling and from less advantaged families are taking longer to complete their educations, attain financial independence, find decent full-time jobs, and move out of the parental home.⁵ While the highly educated have not been immune to the social and economic changes that have transformed American society over the past few decades, the growing divide in our country between the more and the less advantaged suggests a need to move beyond a narrow focus on the relationship pathways of the highly educated.

What our research discovered is that the very trajectories couples follow—the steps leading up to shared living, the reasons for moving in with a partner, and what happens once couples are sharing a home—are quite dissimilar. For example, young adults from less privileged family backgrounds move in together far more rapidly, often within a few months of meeting, than do those from middle-class backgrounds. Compared to their college-educated counterparts, their reasons for cohabiting more often hinge on economic need or lack of the financial wherewithal to rent an apartment, rather than simple convenience or to test the waters for marriage. Less advantaged young adults more often face barriers to accessing resources—such as family support, health care coverage for contraception, and economic opportunities—that can strengthen relationships. Social class also influences the ways that couples negotiate their relationships, from how housework gets done, to whether and when to become more serious, to what kind of contraception they use—if any.⁶ Finally, gender roles—in particular, the ability of the female partner to have a say in how relationships progress or change—are enacted quite differently among more and less privileged

couples. In other words, common presumptions about the new normal mask considerable social class variation in relationship progression.

The challenges faced by young adults as they form romantic relationships have intensified by the decade. Fewer Americans are getting married, and for many young adults the specter of divorce looms. Policy makers often tout marriage as a solution for all that ails us. Yet describing the relationship patterns of the highly educated as the new normal ignores the challenges to forming stable and fulfilling intimate relationships that the less advantaged face. A real understanding of the factors reshaping the American family requires a fuller awareness of not just how the highly educated meet, form intimate relationships, and ultimately marry, but also how young adults who are located at different spots on the advantage curve fare. Illuminating those differences is the mission of this book.

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT RELATIONSHIP PROGRESSION

While our study set out to examine social class differences in how cohabiting relationships progressed, a great deal of existing research provided empirical and qualitative grounding for our agenda. The basic facts about contemporary union formation—what proportions of adults cohabit, how that varies by educational attainment or race, and shifts in the factors conditioning transitions from cohabitation into marriage—are well known.⁷ Less well understood are whether attitudes about cohabitation as an alternative rather than a precursor to marriage differ by social class background, or if gender norms work in ways that differentiate behaviors and experiences. We summarize that background here, from time to time pointing out holes that invited our attention.

Is Everyone Doing It? A Snapshot of How Cohabitation Varies by Educational Attainment

As is the case with other new family behaviors—including bearing children outside of marriage, serial cohabitation, and multipartner fertility—highly educated young adults and those from families where parents also have educational credentials are considerably less likely to have cohabited as their first coresidential union than women and men with lower levels of educational attainment. Data from the National Survey of Family Growth provide a snapshot of these differences. One in five women (20.2%) aged 22 to 44 who had not completed high

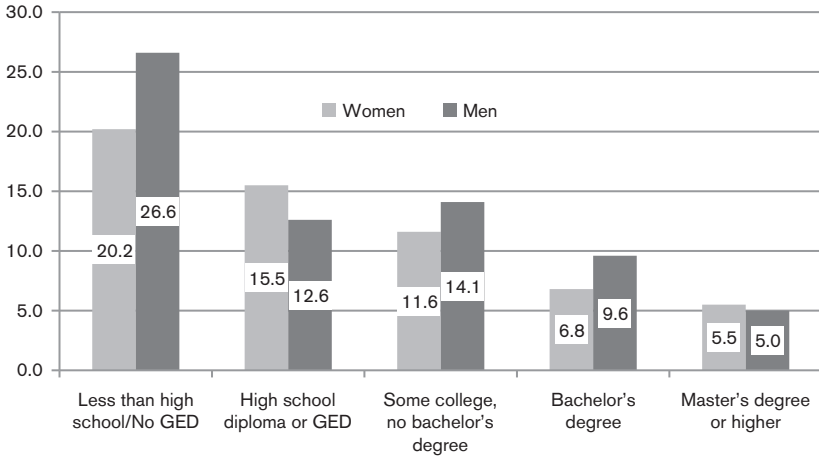


FIGURE 1. Percentage of Women and Men Age 22–44 Who Are Currently Cohabiting: United States, 2006–2010

school were cohabiting in 2010. So were 15.5% of women with a high school diploma or GED. But only 6.8% of women who had a bachelor's degree were cohabiting. Similar trends emerged for men, though college-educated men were more likely to be cohabiting than their female counterparts (see Figure 1).⁸

Focusing on who is cohabiting at one point in time understates the proportion that have *ever* lived with a partner, as many of these unions either break up or transition into marriage.⁹ To get a better approximation of the prevalence of cohabitation and how it varies by educational attainment, demographers also look at those whose first union was cohabitation (rather than marriage). Even though the proportion of those who have cohabited has increased across all education levels over time (see Figure 2), women with a bachelor's degree are far less likely to have cohabited as their first union than women with more limited education. Between 1995 and 2006–2010, the proportion of women who first lived with their male partners grew by 38% among the college educated, compared with 59% among those with a high school diploma.¹⁰ In the words of demographers Larry Bumpass, James Sweet, and Andrew Cherlin, “College graduates have been not the innovators in the spread of cohabitation, but rather the imitators.”¹¹

Also of note is the age at which people move in with a sexual partner. Women who do not pursue or complete a bachelor's education enter into cohabiting relationships at younger ages than those who obtain a

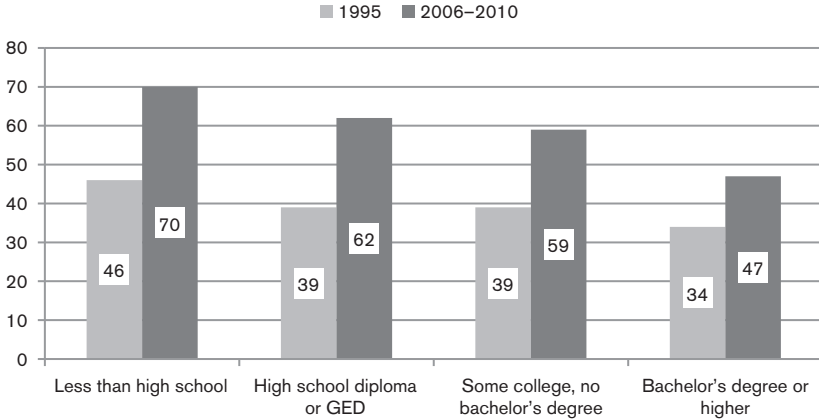


FIGURE 2. Percentage of Women Age 22–44 Whose First Union Was a Cohabitation, by Education: United States, 1995 and 2006–2010

college diploma. By age 25, almost two-thirds of women who received a high school diploma (or GED) but no more schooling (64%) had cohabited, compared with only 36% of women who had completed college.¹² What this means is that even when the most highly educated adults engage in the same behavior as their less educated counterparts, they do so differently. They are often older and have completed their schooling, or at least hold a degree that sets them on the road to the middle class. They may also be better established in the job market.

Finally, there are also sizable differences in what ensues once couples begin living together. Take the case of our happy cohabiting *Glamour* blogger, whose story begins this chapter. After dating for two years, she and her boyfriend moved in together. Before taking that step, she had plenty of time to determine how they got along, whether they were able to manage disagreements and finances, if she could tolerate how neat or messy he was, his willingness to compromise, if he wanted children or not, as well as whether he left the toilet seat up or put the cap back on the toothpaste. But in this day and age, relatively few sexually involved adults date for long before moving in together—in part because it's expensive to maintain two separate places.¹³ Dating couples who are romantically and sexually involved for longer periods before cohabiting are better able to have serious conversations about the future than are couples who move in together early on.

All this leads—sometimes—to the grand finale for many relationships. Our *Glamour* blogger provides a neat and tidy ending to the

story. A little over a year after moving in together, her partner proposed, and when she was interviewed for the NBC news story, they were planning their destination wedding in Aruba.¹⁴ That is consistent with what we know from the national data: Cohabitators who have at least bachelor's degrees often transition into marriage within a few years of moving in with their first and only live-in partner.¹⁵ But while living with a partner is now a normative step in the transition to adulthood, there are important social class differences in the timing, progression, and quality of cohabiting unions. What is it about social class that results in these differences?

The Importance of Social Class

Transformations in family formation processes have taken front stage in contemporary public policy debates in the United States. But much of that attention has focused on the child-bearing and union formation patterns of the most disadvantaged populations—those who have very limited educational attainment and have often grown up in poverty. Overlooked in this emphasis on low-income families is growing evidence of divergence in the life opportunities available for the moderately educated—a group that accounts for the majority of American adults. As of 2006, when we completed our interviews, 58% of Americans aged 25 and older had obtained a high school degree or pursued some postsecondary schooling but lacked a bachelor's degree. Only 28% of those in their mid-twenties or older had a college degree or more.¹⁶

This group was not always neglected by researchers. In the 1960s and 1970s scholars such as Mirra Komarovsky (1964, *Blue Collar Marriage*), Arthur B. Shostak (1969, *Blue-Collar Life*), Lillian Rubin (1976, *Worlds of Pain*), and Chaya Piotrkowki (1979, *Work and the Family System*) focused their attention on the family lives of the group that accounted for the bulk of American families. Many of these studies utilized qualitative approaches to better understand the ways that families who were described as “working class” made sense of the challenges of modernization, consumerism, and changing gender roles. Between the 1960s and the latter half of the 20th century, however, the working class went missing from scholarly analysis.

In his 2014 book, *Labor's Love Lost*, the distinguished family sociologist Andrew Cherlin chronicled the fall of the working-class family, which had been classified largely on the basis of the types of jobs that men held—in industrial factories manufacturing goods, driving trucks,

or working in construction. Such jobs, while perhaps not particularly satisfying or stimulating, were relatively stable, paid decently, and often were unionized. Furthermore, they were readily available for men with only a high school degree or even less. But in today's society, according to Cherlin, the challenges facing young adults who lack a bachelor's degree is that "they cannot *become* working class."¹⁷ Good working-class jobs are hard to find. Workers are no longer needed in large numbers to man (literally) large plants that pump out steel or manufacture cars; technological advances have made these jobs obsolete or companies have transported them overseas. The labor market has hollowed out for those with only moderate levels of schooling, and the jobs of the past have been replaced by low-skilled service positions. The lack of skills required for many service jobs means that employers are not interested in training and retaining workers, often preferring to just replace them. As a result, the economic floor has become far less stable among the less educated, particularly less educated men.

The need to focus on this group has again burst into the foreground. In several books, Cherlin and others have highlighted the need to turn the spotlight on the sizable proportion of the American population that is neither the most disadvantaged (the very poor) nor the most advantaged, but rather the large group that lacks the educational credentials needed to place them firmly in the middle class.¹⁸ The message of these books was somewhat overshadowed by the attention paid to Charles Murray's (2012) *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960–2010*. Murray attributed the divergence between what he termed the "college-educated elite" and those with less education to a shift away from traditional values such as marriage, religion, industriousness, and morality. Murray's work extends the libertarian and conservative perspectives attributing behavioral manifestations of inequality to individual values rather than to the structural factors contributing to wage declines, marital delay, and rising levels of personal debt. In Murray's view, economic insecurity does not result in changes in family-building behavior.¹⁹ Rather, desires for short-term gratification, weak wills, and inadequate parental guidance have caused the economic crises rocking today's less educated adults.

Unfortunately, Murray fails to test his own assertion that "culture" causes a growing proportion of whites to make morally bad decisions regarding their lives, such as cohabiting (and bearing children within cohabiting unions) rather than marrying. Despite the dramatic historical shifts that have seriously diminished the economic prospects of

today's moderately educated men and women, the closest Murray comes to testing his theory is to cite unemployment over time and to assert that plenty of jobs are available. His book does not acknowledge that though Americans without college degrees still aspire to be a part of the middle class, attaining this goal has become increasingly difficult. In fact, the prospects for these men and women, whom we term "the service class" as many worked in service jobs in retail, telemarketing, and food production, are often considerably worse than they were for the working class of previous generations.

In the past few decades, demand for low-skilled labor has steadily decreased, while demand for (and supply of) higher-educated labor has risen.²⁰ In 2006, when we concluded our interviews, high school graduates 25 years and older were more than twice as likely to be unemployed compared with college graduates, who also had shorter spells of unemployment and tended to earn substantially more for their labor.²¹ This was the case for both men and women.

Youth with college degrees and those with only a high school diploma or some postsecondary schooling hold similar views regarding the desirability of marriage, the acceptability of premarital cohabitation, and the challenges facing marriage.²² But cohabitation has increased the most among those with less than a bachelor's degree. Other factors have also aligned to distinguish the family formation behaviors of the more and less educated. College-educated cohabitators are far less likely to bear children within their informal unions than are less educated cohabitators, though they presumably have a similar risk of conception.²³ Furthermore, the divorce rates of the highly educated have declined, whereas the marriages of couples with lower levels of education continue to dissolve at high rates.²⁴ The conditions encouraging getting and staying married appear stronger among the college educated than they are for the less educated.

But just what *are* the conditions that encourage marriage among those already living together? Most Americans assert that the bedrock of marriage is love and commitment. When asked about their *own* private relationships, most individuals do not believe that marriage will improve their level of financial attainment.²⁵ Rather, most strongly believe in the importance of being "financially established" *prior* to getting wed, which is also a long-standing trope in literature.²⁶ In fact, wealth is an important predictor of first marriage.²⁷ Many cohabitators say they will not wed until they have a good job and some money in the bank.²⁸ It should not be surprising, then, that abundant evidence finds men's odds of marrying increase among those who have completed their schooling and obtained

a good job. Earnings and educational attainment also predict transitions into marriage among recent cohorts of women.²⁹

Less well understood is why the decision-making processes of couples with resources differ in so many ways from those of couples who are more economically challenged. Many politicians and social commentators view marriage as a means of reducing poverty in the United States.³⁰ But evidence that exchanging rings somehow leads disadvantaged men or women to earn more is thin, at best. While married men, on average, have higher earnings than unmarried men, much of this differential is due to selection—their desirable characteristics make them both readier for marriage *and* more marriageable to prospective spouses.³¹ And increasingly, women are also positively selected into marriage, as those with college degrees and presumably more earning power are now more likely to be married than are less educated women. As a result, marriage has been transformed from a normative rite of passage for the majority into the equivalent of a luxury good attainable mostly by the privileged—leaving many of the less advantaged working toward a goal that seems increasingly out of their reach.³²

He Said, She Said: Why Gender Still Matters

It is not just social class that impacts couples' lives. In her classic book, *The Future of Marriage*, Jessie Bernard argued that marriage differed for men and women. In her words, there were “his” and “her” marriages. According to her thesis, men benefit more from their marriage than do women because they have more power, control, and freedom, all explicitly supported by the very institution of marriage and buttressed by existing gender roles.³³ While marriages in the latter quarter of the 20th century and the early years of the 21st have become more egalitarian, it is still the case that when it comes to power, money, and prestige, men continue to hold the dominant hand in American society.

Whether that remains the case, or to the same extent, among cohabiting couples is more debatable. Cohabitators differ from married couples in many ways, including the ways they enact gender roles. Whether this is because marriage is selective of the most educated, due to the relative resources partners bring to their relationships, or because cohabitators and marrieds already hold different views regarding normative gender roles is hard to ascertain. Scholars who examine couples often focus on how gender is enacted in either paid work arrangements or the division of domestic labor. We also explore a third dimension—relationship

progression—where both paid work and reproductive labor may feature in negotiating power.

Women account for about half of the paid labor force and have greatly narrowed the gap in earnings with men. But men continue to earn more than women, at all education levels. The proportion of women who out-earn their male partners has increased in recent decades. But the dominant pattern among couples is for the male to earn more than his female partner and for this gap to increase when couples bear children.³⁴

In 2006 the median earnings for female high school graduates employed full-time year round was \$27,240, a full \$10,000 lower than wages for similar men and also only about half what women with a college degree or more earned (their median yearly income was \$50,400).³⁵ Gender disparities in earnings, and changes in returns to education over time, have exacerbated the difficulties facing the less educated. While men still out-earn women, women have fared better than men with respect to earnings growth over time at all levels of education. Between 1979 and 2006, men with only a high school degree or some postsecondary school actually experienced a decline in inflation-adjusted earnings.³⁶ Over the same period, women's inflation-adjusted earnings grew, though the largest returns to education were experienced by female college graduates, whose inflation-adjusted earnings rose by 33.5% over that time period, compared with college-educated men, whose inflation-adjusted earnings grew by 18.4%.³⁷ These shifts have dramatically decreased the earnings gaps between men and women with only moderate levels of education, and at a far faster rate than attitudes toward gender roles have changed.³⁸

Cohabiting couples demonstrate greater similarity in earnings than do married couples. So it makes sense to ask whether partners who hold more of a desired attribute—such as earning more, or having more schooling, a better job, or even being more attractive—have greater decision-making power within the relationship, what sociologists often refer to as a “relative resources” perspective.³⁹ The evidence suggests that this does not hold true. Even if cohabiting women earn a larger proportion of the couples' combined earnings, they still remain disadvantaged when it comes to their negotiating power relative to men.

Much more evidence, in fact, points to cultural attitudes about gender and gender roles as the primary organizing principle within American households. Normative gender roles assigning to men the dominant role of family provider and to women the primary homemaker and nurturer role persist even if she is working for pay as well, notwithstanding several decades of progressive policies, consciousness raising, and changing rela-

tions between men and women.⁴⁰ Gender theory explains these findings by noting that gender is a primary stratifier in society, one that trumps other resources. Gender is performed by individuals on a routine basis and reinforced by interactions with others. It is not created anew in each interaction but is instead shaped and constrained by the larger social structure.⁴¹

Cultural ideas about men's and women's roles help determine which gendered paths individuals can walk and how comfortable they are in those paths. Men in the United States have the right to be stay-at-home fathers, for example, but face challenges in integrating their roles with their individual views of self and often lack peer and communal supports—as evidenced by the fact that as of 2011, only 3.4% of all stay-at-home parents were fathers. Women, too, face individual, interactional, and institutional challenges in breaking culturally gendered norms. Those who wish to propose to their partners, for example, must first see themselves as “that kind of woman.” They then must ensure that their partners will accept this reversal of tradition when the big moment comes. Finally, few cultural classics feature young women proposing to their Prince Charming. Traditional models, however, abound. Early socialization in normative gender practices include Disney classics like *Snow White* and *The Little Mermaid*, where women wait passively for men to pursue them or make deep sacrifices for their true loves. Although no hard and fast rules or regulations prohibit American adults from bucking gender traditions, hidden constraints often discourage them from doing so.

To be sure, how gender roles are enacted within romantic relationships are more varied than in the past. This is especially evident among cohabitators. Survey results reveal that cohabitators adhere less strongly to traditional gender views regarding women's place in the home or men's role as providers.⁴² But that does not mean that cohabiting couples are free from the expectations and norms of gender. It is much easier to express egalitarian views than it is to practice egalitarian behaviors.⁴³ Just as attitudes are not always congruent with behavior, behaviors often lie along a spectrum of more or less equal, rather than fitting neatly into categories of either “egalitarian” or “traditional.” Furthermore, discussions of “service class” versus “middle class” and “men” versus “women” often miss the fact that men don't always have more power than women. Those who have a college degree are not all more privileged than their less educated peers. There are intersecting layers of dominance and oppression.⁴⁴ Simply put, an individual's place in the power hierarchy cannot be explained by examining their social class or their gender in a vacuum. Rather, both must be examined simultaneously. At the same time that all women are

subjected to similar cultural norms based upon their gender, the experiences of less educated women are likely different from those of middle-class women because their social class status also shapes their expectations, power, and opportunities.

What Role Does Cohabitation Serve?

To understand why the relationship trajectories of more and less advantaged young adults have diverged so dramatically also requires an understanding of the role that cohabitation has served, both in the past and today. As a living arrangement, cohabitation as we know it has not been with us very long.⁴⁵ Early research on cohabitation as a new living arrangement often presumed that it was mainly used as a precursor for marriage.⁴⁶ In fact, the majority of cohabitators surveyed in the 1980s expressed the belief that they would marry their partners, and more than half of them subsequently did so.⁴⁷ As a result, studies often concluded that living together had become simply one more stage in relationship progression, a precursor to marriage.⁴⁸

But others challenged that notion. Examining young cohabitators living together in the 1980s and earlier, several scholars argued that cohabitation instead served as an alternative to being single—better than living and paying rent alone. They pointed to the behaviors and expectations of cohabitators to support their case. Cohabitators were more like singles than marrieds in their near-term childbearing intentions, as well as in their likelihood of being enrolled in school, owning a home, and being financially dependent upon their parents. And while cohabitators interviewed in the 1970s and 1980s were more likely than singles to anticipate getting married, the majority of those living with a partner did not report plans to wed within the next year.⁴⁹ Cohabitators interviewed in later decades demonstrated similar behaviors; most indicated that when they moved in with their partners they had not yet discussed marriage. Such findings challenged the notion that cohabitation was a stepping-stone toward marriage, at least early in coresidence.⁵⁰

A growing body of evidence supports the idea of cohabitation as an alternative lifestyle. The proportion of couples who live together for extended periods of time has increased over the decades in the United States, though stable long-lasting cohabiting relationships still account for a relatively small share of all cohabiting unions.⁵¹ These couples may reject the institution of marriage as a patriarchal arrangement or irrelevant in modern society or eschew the involvement of the state in their

intimate affairs.⁵² Among the group to receive the most attention for not marrying is the growing proportion of couples who bear children within their cohabiting unions.

As of the early years of the 21st century, the majority of babies born to women under the age of 30 were to unmarried women, and over half of those new mothers were cohabiting.⁵³ Cohabitation increases the risk of childbearing, and various studies have reported that cohabiting women often report their pregnancies were unintended. But contemporary young adults frequently assert that becoming a parent is not a good enough reason to marry, though many believe that living together is optimal for the child.⁵⁴ As a result, once traditional patterns of family formation—embedded in the children’s chant, “First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes baby in the baby carriage!”—are being challenged.

In fact, cohabitation may serve as any or all of these things—a precursor for marriage, an alternative to being single, or an alternative to marriage—at different points in the relationship. Some couples may initially move in without thinking about or discussing marriage, viewing living together as a way to share costs while still experiencing companionship, a kind of “marriage lite” with all of the fun but fewer of the role expectations. But with increasing time together they may come to believe that their partner is a “keeper” and that their relationship is marriage worthy. Others may move in with intentions to marry their partners but come to realize that they are not compatible or that they want dramatically different things. Still others may move in with intentions of jumping the broom, but over time wonder what difference it will make in their relationships or worry that they should not “fix something that ain’t broke.” Existing studies, based largely on cross-sectional surveys, cannot unpack how shared living can shift between these roles over time or identify what factors may increase the likelihood that a relationship that once was a better alternative to being single will transition into a precursor to marriage or an alternative to it.

The alternatives to marriage that have arisen over the past few decades—including cohabitation, childbearing within cohabiting unions, or remaining single—are in many ways the result of the changing economic situations facing today’s young adults. Such changes may, in fact, alter young people’s views about the institution of marriage, as culture interacts with structure to reorient the value system of a particular segment of the population. Young adults have high expectations that they will marry someday. Among unmarried young adults in their

early twenties who were interviewed in the early years of the 21st century, 83% thought it was very important or important to be married someday.⁵⁵ Our study reveals how the issues and challenges that seem so personal—like the decision to move in with a new romantic partner within a few months, or a lapse in use of contraception, or continued deferral of formalizing a relationship—reflect larger social and economic forces that contribute to the growing gap in the well-being of young adults from more and less advantaged backgrounds.

WHAT WE SET OUT TO LEARN

To understand how the relationships of young adults from across the economic spectrum progressed in the early years of the 21st century, we spent over two years interviewing cohabiting couples living in Columbus, Ohio. Between the spring of 2004 and the summer of 2006 we interviewed over 130 cohabitators—white, black, Asian, Latino, and multiracial—to find out about their relationships. Our respondents were between the ages of 18 and 36, the prime family formation years when young adults make key decisions about work, marriage, and children. Given our interest in how social class mediated relationship behaviors, we worked to recruit a sample that was moderately educated—whom we subsequently refer to as the *service class*—as well as college educated, whom we term the *middle class*.

We asked our participants a wide array of nosy, personal questions—not only about the families they had grown up in and what they had anticipated in the way of families but also how they had met their partners and how their current relationships had unfolded. In particular, we focused on understanding why they had moved in with their partners, when this occurred, what they had expected the arrangement to be like, and whether it matched their expectations. To get a flavor of their day-to-day lives, we probed about who did what in the home, if they had discussed household chores and who would do them, how living together had affected their sex lives, and if they were ready to have children (or what they were doing to prevent that eventuality if they were not). These questions are listed in Appendix A.

Who Did We Interview?

Defining social class is, of course, a thorny conceptual and methodological issue. It is rarely captured by a single measure, whether educational

attainment, occupation, or earnings. We focused on both education and occupation. For our moderately educated sample, we recruited at a local community college that offered a variety of two-year degree programs and also prepared students to pursue a four-year degree at a university.⁵⁶ Despite the recruiting locale, fewer than half of these respondents were students, and most attended school part time or intermittently while working at least part time. Because of the occupations held by these respondents, throughout our study we call them the *service class*.

The jobs held by the service-class women often involved taking care of others—as nannies or veterinarian’s assistants, waitresses, or baristas—or providing office support as administrative assistants or bookkeepers. Service-class men’s jobs tended to be oriented toward machines or data, with more of them working in some noncredentialed way with computers or as mortgage processors. Several of the men also held traditional working-class jobs that involved physical or “dirty” work, such as mechanics, dock loaders, carpenters, or postal workers. But these men were in the minority, and only two were working in these occupations full-time; the others either could get only part-time hours or had to combine their desired manual job with other service work, as waiters or kitchen staff, to accrue enough hours to make ends meet. Many of these moderately educated cohabitators described frequent job turnover and experienced the challenges of obtaining enough hours to pay the bills. Some were working toward getting the degree that would allow them to obtain jobs they found interesting. Others were still searching for what they described as their “dream job.”

Our second group, whom we call our *middle-class* cohabitators, was also defined predominantly by their level of education; the majority of these couples consisted of two partners with at least bachelor’s degrees. They were recruited via signs posted at high-end grocery stores, gourmet coffee shops, and restaurants, and, in two cases, through referrals. The cohabitators in our middle-class sample were generally in professional jobs that required academic credentials, as teachers, therapists, and social workers, as well as lawyers, professors, architects, and auditors. While their jobs were also somewhat gendered, in that the men were far more likely than the women to be employed as computer programmers or in information technology, women also held jobs that required intensive work with data, as auditors or scientists. A handful of respondents in this group did not work in professions that would place them firmly in the middle class, even though they held college degrees; such respondents tended to have recently obtained their degrees

in an arts-related discipline and combined their interest (e.g., photography or art) with food service (waitressing, pizza delivery) or worked providing specialized services to those who could afford them (as a pastry chef or tennis professional). A more detailed discussion of our recruitment methods, sample information, and analytic approach is available in Appendix B.

We interviewed a total of 30 couples (60 individual cohabitators) in the service-class group and another 31 couples (62 individuals) in the middle-class group. Because we were interested in how respondents perceived their own relationships, we interviewed both members of the couple separately but simultaneously. We hoped that this would better get at the “his” and “hers” story of cohabitation.

What are our couples like? Our sample of middle-class couples were slightly older than the service-class couples, but the latter were more likely to have children, either shared or from a prior relationship. The largest number of service-class couples had obtained some postsecondary schooling, typically at the community college level, whereas among the middle class not quite half had obtained a master’s degree. Reflecting these educational disparities, income levels are quite a bit higher among the middle-class sample, with an average couple-level income of \$67,672 versus \$38,971 for the service class. Women in the service-class group were somewhat more likely than their middle-class counterparts to be bringing home the majority (60% or more) of their household income, suggesting some potential avenues for discord. Additional descriptive results about the entire sample are presented in Table 1, and details about each couple’s specific characteristics are provided in Tables A1 and A2, in Appendix C.

One major distinction between the two groups was that service-class couples had been living together for considerably longer than had the middle-class couples. This is consistent with the national data.⁵⁷ The service class was also far more racially and ethnically diverse, while the middle-class couples were more likely to have grown up with parents who were married throughout their childhood. Of course, the two groups differed in other subtle ways. Style of dress, modes of speaking, and life goals, as well as when respondents expected to achieve them, varied by social class. While these may influence what they discussed or how we interacted with them, we worked hard to ensure that they were all able to express their views about their relationships, that we captured the meaning of what they were telling us, and that their stories are told here in their own words.

TABLE I DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF COHABITING COUPLES

Variables	Measures	Service Class (means/N/\$)	Middle Class (means/N/\$)
Age	Mean age: Men	26.4 years	28.3 years
	Mean age: Women	24.4 years	25.2 years
Relative Age	Men > 4 years older	4	11
	Women > 4 years older	2	1
	Both within 4 years	24	19
Educational Attainment	Both high school (HS) or less	1	–
	1 ≤ HS, 1 some college	6	–
	Both some college/associate's degree	19	–
	1 HS, 1 BA (bachelor's degree)	1	–
	One some college, one BA	3	4
	Both BA	–	14
	One BA, one MA (master's degree)	–	10
	Both MA+	–	3
Race	Both non-Hispanic white	16	24
	Both Hispanic	1	1
	Both non-Hispanic black	4	2
	Mixed-race couple	9	4
Couple-Level Earnings ^a	Mean couple earnings	\$38,971	\$67,672
	\$18,000–\$24,999	8	–
	\$25,000–\$34,999	7	5
	\$35,000–\$49,999	8	6
	\$50,000–\$74,999	6	10
	\$75,000–\$99,999	1	5
	\$100,000 or more	–	5
	Relative Earnings	Man earns more	13
Woman earns more	6	3	
	Each partner earns 40–60% of the income	11	14
Marital Status	Both never married (NM)	24	26
	One NM, one previously married	6	5
Parental Status	Both no children	16	27
	Both share children ^b	5	2
	Man has children (not woman)	6	2
	Woman has children (not man)	2	0
	Each has a child from a previous relationship	1	0
Duration of Cohabitation	3–6 months	8	12
	7–11 months	2	1
	12–23 months	5	12
	24–35 months	7	4
	3 years or more	8	2
N		30	31

^a Couple-level income is determined by summing each partner's reported individual income. One man in the service class and one man and one woman in the middle class refused to report their income. Their partners' reports were used to determine their couple-level income. In another instance, neither partner reported a middle-class man's income; instead, it was set to the mean of men's income for his social class.

^b In two service-class couples the partners share a child and the male partner also has a child from a previous relationship.

A READER'S GUIDE TO OUR BOOK

In the following chapters we showcase the thoughts and feelings of our couples about what it means to live together in 21st century America. This book uses their stories to reveal how contemporary relationships progress and how social class and gender shape the ways that men and women negotiate change or maintain stability in relationships that lack clear rules or guidelines. We focus on the relationship processes that form the underlying layers of romantic relationships, expectations, and behaviors. Our book documents how individual men and women cope with creating families in the midst of transitioning into adulthood during a time of economic flux. We show the ways in which traditional aspects of relationships can change and how in some ways gender norms remain entrenched. More important, we examine how social class shapes virtually every aspect of relationship progression, from dating to moving in together to discussing the future. Our respondents' experiences shed light on the factors contributing to the diverging destinies of young adults from more and less advantaged backgrounds and how that is reflected in the families they form.

In the next two chapters we explore the stages leading up to and into shared living. Discussions of such experiences are largely absent in the academic literature on relationships, especially cohabitation. In Chapter 2 we explore how couples' relationships began, with a focus on the role that gender norms played in shaping who initiated the romance and determined when it would advance into shared living. Chapter 3 examines the speed of couples' entrance into cohabitation after the start of their relationships. We utilize our respondents' stories about what shaped their decision to move in together and highlight how these reasons differ by social class. These variations, we argue, reverberate through subsequent stages of couples' relationships.

Then we explore the nitty gritty of daily life among our cohabiting couples. Chapter 4 delves into how couples manage the division of housework, while Chapter 5 explores their desire to plan or defer child-bearing, detailing the contraceptive behaviors of couples, their idealized time frame for having children, and their responses to pregnancy scares or actual conceptions. We consider these the underlying scaffolding helping to support or undermine the relationship. Couples who are best able to achieve a balance of domestic work that is mutually satisfying to both partners have a greater likelihood of remaining together, while couples that are on the same page regarding whether or when to bear

children, as well as how to avoid conception until the timing is right, should also be better able to address the other challenges that life throws at them. These chapters provide some of the first and most in-depth studies of the factors shaping the daily lives of cohabiting young adults.

Finally we explore factors shaping relationship stability and progression. Chapter 6 examines couples' attitudes toward marriage relative to dating or cohabitation. Chapter 7 explores our couples' relationship futures—if and how they actually discuss marriage and negotiate whether or not to become engaged. In Chapter 8, we draw out the implications of these results for the future of the family and suggest some policies for narrowing the bifurcating outcomes of young adults from more and less advantaged backgrounds.

In what ways have the family formation processes of young American adults changed over the past few decades, and are there ways in which they have largely remained the same? Chapter 2 examines who made the key moves as these young adults met and became couples, along the way exploring if those who enter cohabiting unions engage in behaviors that could set them apart from married couples, perhaps flipping the normative gender script to enable women to be more assertive or minimizing the costs of the sexual double standard. What happens once couples begin dating, and how do relationships that in the past might have transitioned directly into marriage instead lead to cohabitation? Let's find out.