

COHABITATION AND MARITAL EXPECTATIONS AMONG SINGLE MOTHERS

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ABSTRACT

Attention at the policy level has focused on the marital expectations and patterns of single mothers with millions of dollars invested to provide education programs to single parents. The emphasis on marriage seems somewhat misplaced as a growing share of single mothers are cohabiting rather than marrying. To date no research has considered single mothers expectations to cohabit along with their joint expectations to cohabit and marry. We capitalize on a new opportunity to study cohabitation expectations by drawing on recently collected, nationally representative data (National Survey of Family Growth 2008-2010) ($n=3,633$) to assess how parenthood is associated with expectations to cohabit and marry as well as examine how disadvantage influences single mothers' cohabitation and marital expectations. The findings provide new insight into single mother's views of future union formation behavior.

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Single motherhood remains high in the United States, however most single mothers do not remain single for long. The majority of single mothers eventually form cohabiting or marital unions (Bzostek, McLanahan and Carlson 2012). Prior studies have shown that marriage remains a desirable relationship option by focusing on single mother's marital expectations (Edin 2000; Lichter, Batson and Brown 2004). The interest in marriage expectations has stemmed largely from the underlying assumption within federally sponsored marriage and relationship programs, which suggest that marriage is not positively viewed by single parents. Although cohabitation is an increasingly common relationship choice among single mothers, no work to date has included cohabitation expectations in assessments of single mothers' relationship horizon.

Drawing on data from a nationally representative survey (National Survey of Family Growth 2008-2010), we extend knowledge about single mothers union formation by investigating both cohabitation and marital expectations. To date, no study based on national-level data has evaluated the cohabitation expectations of single mothers. Taking advantage of new questions added to the NSFG, this study builds on the literature of union formation among single mothers. Furthermore, our focus on recently collected data provides insights into the contemporary context of the American landscape.

BACKGROUND

An indicator of the desirability of marriage has been expectations to marry. The general desire to marry overall is high and research conducted by Lichter, Batson and Brown (2004) find that 70% of women in their sample desire marriage. In their analysis, levels of marital expectations were higher among women without children than those with children. In contrast, a study of

young adults finds that those with children report higher chances of marriage in a five year time frame than those without children (Gassanov, Nicholson and Koch-Turner 2008).

Several studies of just mothers show high levels of support for marriage. Waller and McLanahan (2005) find that in 61% of the couples studied (unmarried couples with children), both partners are quite optimistic that they will marry in the future. Lichter et al. (2004) find that 69% of single mothers indicate high marital expectations. Qualitative data of low-income single mothers shows that most aspire for marriage, but consider marriage to have the potential for risk (Edin 2000). These expectations are consequential, as Carlson, McLanahan and England (2004) report that positive attitudes toward marriage were positively related to marriage after a nonmarital birth.

There has been little attention paid to expectations to cohabit, in part because, until recently, national-level data were not available. One exception is that adolescents' reports of expecting to cohabit are lower among advantaged youth (Manning, Longmore and Giordano 2007). A few studies have focused on attitudes towards cohabitation, showing an increase in support for cohabitation over time. In 1976, 40% of high school seniors reported that cohabitation was a testing ground for marriage compared to nearly 70% in 2008 (Bogle and Wu 2010; see also Thornton and DeMarco Young 2001). Drawing on nationally representative data collected in 2001 and 2002 from unmarried young adults ages 20 to 24, the majority agreed (70% of cohabitators, 59% of daters, and 60% of singles) that cohabitation is "all right" even if there are no plans for marriage (Scott, Schelar, Manlove et al.. 2009).

Views among parents indicate that low-income single mothers consider cohabitation as either a trial to marriage or a substitution for marriage (Gibson-Davis, Edin and McLanahan 2005). In terms of behavioral patterns, parents have higher odds of cohabiting and lower odds of

marriage than childless young adults (Guzzo 2006; Schoen, Landale and Daniels 2007; Manning, Trella, Lyons et al. 2010). Thus, we expect high levels of cohabitation expectations among single mothers.

As described above, prior work has exclusively focused on marital expectations and ignored a growing family type, cohabiting unions. A rationale for studying expectations is that they can be interpreted as an early indication of broader changes in social norms. This is so, in part, because barriers to a behavior (e.g., a poor economy) may prevent achieving behavioral goals but not necessarily the desire to realize that goal (Gibson-Davis, Edin and McLanahan 2005; Halpern-Meehin 2012). That is to say, behavioral measures cannot completely tap the perceived desirability of a behavior as an intention indicator can. This rationale motivated past studies on racial differences in the desire to marry and the actual occurrence of marriage (e.g., Bulcroft and Bulcroft 1993; South 1993). A focus on expectations about cohabitation and marriage informs us about the potential future value of marriage and how marriage and cohabitation are interconnected.

A second rationale for attitudinal research is that expectations are typically a proximate determinant of behavior (Brown 2000; Guzzo 2009; Lichter, Batson and Brown 2004; Liefbroer 2011; Miller and Pasta 1995; Schoen, Astone, Kim et al.. 1999; Waller and McLanahan 2005). A central tenet of social psychology is that the primary individual-level factor determining whether a behavior will occur is the intention to perform that particular activity (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975, 2010). There have been critiques of this approach but it remains an important framework for family and demographic research (Ajzen and Koblas 2013; Barber 2011; Morgan and Bachrach 2011; Philipov 2011).

Current Investigation

This study has two aims. The first is to identify the levels of expectations to cohabit and to marry among single mothers and childless women and to assess how these expectations are interrelated. Given the majority of young adults cohabit and then eventually marry (Manning 2013), we examine factors associated with expectations to both cohabit and marry versus a more traditional pathway that involves only marriage. It is important to avoid the tendency to examine cohabitation and marriage formation expectations in isolation of one another. The second is to examine the key correlates of single mothers' expectations to cohabit and to marry. Because of the recent addition of new questions about cohabitation expectations to a large, nationally representative survey (the NSFG), we have a unique opportunity to address these aims. The new NSFG questions ask the chance respondents have at cohabitation and marriage. We consider key factors found to influence cohabitation including relationship history, sociodemographic characteristics, activity status, and religious attitudes. The indicators of welfare receipt are especially salient as they are the targets of public policy surrounding marriage.

DATA and METHODS

Data for this study were obtained from the 2008 to 2010 (quarters 9 to 16) years of the 2006 to 2010 cycle of the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG). The NSFG is a nationally representative cross-sectional survey conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) and includes information regarding marriage, cohabitation, fertility histories, family background, demographic indicators, family attitudes, and measures of socioeconomic status (Lepkowski, Mosher, Davis et al. 2010). The analyses are weighted to account for the complex survey design of the NSFG.

These data are unique because within the 9th and 16th quarters of this cycle, two questions regarding expectations of marriage and/or cohabitation were introduced. To date no other cross-sectional, nationally representative survey has included items about cohabitation expectations. In the NSFG they were 3,647 single (not currently married or cohabited) female respondents of which 3,633 had valid responses on cohabitation and marital expectation questions. Our analytic sample is limited to these 3,633 women with 1,209 single mothers and 2,424 single childless women. Single women (e.g. never married, divorced, separated or widowed) were asked the following questions regarding their expectations for marriage and cohabitation: “What is the chance that you will ever or ever again live together with a man to whom you are not married?” and “What is the chance that you will get married or get married again someday?” Response categories ranged on a five-point scale and included the following: “No chance,” “A little chance,” “50-50 chance,” “A pretty good chance,” and “An almost certain chance.” This study also included a number of control variables used in prior studies on marital expectations and union formation behavior including whether the respondent has been in a prior cohabitation or has been in a prior marriage, grew up with two biological parents until the age of eighteen, was living in an urban environment, age, race and ethnicity, educational attainment, employment, and participation in Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

Table 1 indicates that nearly 90% of women without children and 63% with children report at least even odds of marrying someone in the future. There is a statistically significant difference in the odds of expecting to marry according to maternal status that exists at the bivariate level and persists with the inclusion of the covariates (results not shown). Single mothers with lower

levels of education are less likely to expect to marry, but there appears to be no difference with regard to employment status or reliance on TANF.

Table 2 shows that overall, about half of single women without children report at least 50/50 chances of cohabitation and 44% of single mothers do so. Logistic regression analyses indicates that there is not a statistically significant difference in the reports of expectations to cohabit for single mothers and single women without children. The inclusion of the covariates does not change the association between maternal status and cohabitation expectations. The indicators of socioeconomic disadvantage (employment, education and TANF) are not related to cohabitation expectations. These findings are consistent with the notion that the economic bar for marriage is higher than cohabitation.

Table 3 presents the joint expectations to cohabit and to marry according to maternal status. Among single women without children, the vast majority expect to form a union (93%) with almost all expecting to marry in the future. Among single women without children who expect to marry, about half anticipate directly marrying (without cohabitation) and the other half plan to follow the contemporary pathway (cohabitation and marriage). Very few anticipate cohabiting without marriage.

In contrast, one-quarter of single mothers do not expect to marry or cohabit. A sizeable minority of single mothers (one in eight) expect to cohabit and not marry. Three-fifths (63%) of single mothers anticipate marrying in the future, with an even split between those who plan on directly marrying and marrying with cohabitation. These findings support prior qualitative research that single mothers may be more inclined to cohabit than marry. We will estimate multinomial logistic regression models to examine how the indicators of disadvantage are related to joint union formation expectations.

The next steps are to present the logistic regression models for cohabitation expectations, marital expectations, and joint expectations. We will test for other specifications or cut off points for the expectations indicators. Our current strategy replicates the approach used by Lichter et al. (2004), but we will consider alternative specifications as well.

SUMMARY

The focus on marital expectations among single mothers is based on intensive federal investments in marriage education and training programs. An underlying assumption is that single parents are ‘rejecting’ marriage and prefer to live alone with their child. These programs did not consider the reality that many single parents view cohabitation as a viable option and perceive marriage as out of their reach (Manning et al. 2010). We find that in recent years, 63% of mothers expect to marry and 44% expect to cohabit. When we jointly consider expectations, most mothers expect to marry or cohabit and the modal category is to marry as well as to cohabit. Consistent with prior literature on the presence of a high economic bar for marriage, disadvantage appears to be related to marital expectations but not cohabitation expectations. Our findings underscore the importance of considering not just behavior, but also individuals’ expectations for understanding union formation, and more broadly, family change.

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Table 1:

Percent of Single Women Who Expect to Marry
(50/50 Chance, Pretty Good Chance or Almost Certain Chance)
By Maternal Status

	Total	Without Children	With Children
Previously Cohabited			
Yes	75.1	86.6	65.8
No	84.3	90.2	61.1
Previously Married			
Yes	59.5	64.7	57.3
No	87.7	92.0	69.0
Age			
Less than 25	93.2	94.9	76.5
25–34	74.5	86.2	63.2
35 or older	59.9	63.0	57.6
Race			
White	83.5	91.2	57.9
Black	83.0	86.3	78.9
Hispanic	74.2	85.6	50.3
Other	85.0	92.2	59.6
Biological Parent Family			
Yes	86.3	93.3	61.7
No	75.2	83.5	64.5
Urban or rural residence			
Urban	82.9	90.2	65.1
Rural	77.5	86.8	52.8
Education			
Less than high school degree			
School degree	82.6	89.2	52.2
High school degree	74.2	86.8	58.5
Beyond high school	86.8	91.1	74.2
Employment status			
Currently employed	80.4	88.8	63.9
Not employed	83.9	90.5	62.3
Received TANF			
Yes	71.9	--	66.4
No	82.9	89.7	62.6
Total	82.0	89.7	63.3
Sample Size	3633	2424	1209

Table 2:

Percent of Single Women Who Expect to Cohabit
(50/50 Chance, Pretty Good Chance or Almost Certain Chance)
By Maternal Status

	Total	Without Children	With Children
Previously Cohabited			
Yes	56.8	72.1	44.2
No	45.3	45.6	44.1
Previously Married			
Yes	45.1	45.7	44.8
No	48.9	50.1	43.6
Age			
Less than 25	50.1	50.4	47.9
25–34	50.4	54.1	46.8
35 or older	39.8	39.8	39.8
Race			
White	55.2	55.3	54.8
Black	34.7	36.0	33.1
Hispanic	42.7	44.2	39.4
Other	41.7	43.6	35.2
Biological Parent Family			
Yes	45.2	46.3	41.0
No	52.8	57.6	46.5
Urban or rural residence			
Urban	47.0	48.7	42.9
Rural	54.2	55.0	51.9
Education			
Less than high school degree	44.4	44.8	43.1
High school degree	49.2	51.4	46.3
Beyond high school	50.1	52.6	42.9
Employment status			
Currently employed	50.6	54.7	42.5
Not employed	45.3	44.9	46.8
Received TANF			
Yes	44.7	–	42.3
No	48.4	49.7	44.6
Total	48.1	49.7	44.2
Sample Size	3633	2424	1209

Note: the cell size for those who received TANF was too small, n = 17

Table 3:

Joint Cohabitation and Marital Expectations by Maternal Status

	Total	Without Children	With Children
No or Low Expectations	12.3	7.3	24.5
Only Marital Expectation	39.6	43.0	31.4
Only Cohabitation Expectation	5.7	3.0	12.2
Both Cohabitation and Marriage	42.4	46.7	31.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
<i>Sample Size</i>	3633	2424	1209
