



The relationship context of premarital serial cohabitation

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ABSTRACT

Even though serial cohabitation is on the rise, it has not been integrated into recent family research. We analyze the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) cycle 6 to explore the relationship context of serial cohabitation for women throughout emerging adulthood ($N = 3397$). We provide a relationship context for serial cohabitation by examining the age at first cohabitation, duration of cohabiting unions, marital expectations and transitions, as well as premarital sexual histories. Furthermore, we examine the change in these relationship indicators across women's birth cohorts. We find that serial cohabitators' co-residential unions are about the same duration as single-instance cohabiting unions. Serial cohabitators start cohabiting younger, report lower marital expectations than single-instance cohabitators and a smaller proportion marry before age 30. Women who have more premarital sex partners have significantly greater odds of serial cohabiting. These findings indicate that women face increasingly complex relationship trajectories during emerging adulthood.

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1. Introduction

The median age of first marriage continues to increase. For women it is 26 years and for men, 28 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2009). Yet, this does not mean that young (“emerging”) adults are remaining single or living alone until marriage. Indeed, the courtship process now includes cohabitation as the modal pathway to marriage, a process that often begins with dating (or sexual relationships), transitions into cohabitation, and culminates with marriage (Cherlin, 2009). As the age at first marriage rises, the opportunities to experience greater numbers of premarital sexual partnerships throughout emerging adulthood have also grown.

Prior research on cohabitation often focuses on one key cohabiting union and overlooks the advent of serial cohabitation, defined in this study as two or more cohabiting relationships. The central goal of this study is to describe the relationship context of serial cohabitation. We accomplish this by examining the age at first cohabitation, duration of co-residential unions, cohabitators' marital expectations and transitions, as well as women's premarital sexual partnerships. Given the increase in serial cohabitation over the late 1990s and early 2000s (Lichter et al., 2010), we consider the change in the relationship context across three birth cohorts of emerging adult women. We also pay special attention to women's premarital sexual histories by including their number of premarital sex partners as a main predictor of serial cohabitation. In line with Nock (1995), this work recognizes the importance of premarital cohabitation and serial cohabitation's burgeoning role in the marriage process during emerging adulthood. Our findings have implications for understanding a group of cohabitators who are most at risk of marital dissolution once they transition into marriage (e.g., Teachman, 2003; Lichter and Qian, 2008).

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1.1. Emerging adulthood: a developmental perspective

Using a developmental perspective, we explore the meaning of serial cohabitation throughout emerging adulthood. Because the age at first marriage is at an historical highpoint in the United States, there is increased time during late adolescence and early adulthood for a wide variety of premarital sexual and relationship experiences. The contemporary courtship process is now likely to include multiple sexual, dating and cohabiting relationships before entering marriage (Cherlin, 2009). The term “emerging adulthood” has been coined to encapsulate the notion of this complex and less rigid pathway into adulthood, which results from shifts in the nature of educational opportunities, leaving the parental home, career development, early parenthood, and delayed marriage (Arnett, 2004). Emerging adulthood is a time of both adolescent and adult commitments and responsibilities, and is characterized by instability, self-focus and exploration (Arnett, 2004; Erikson, 1968).

One important aspect of emerging adulthood is social learning through romantic unions to understand what types of relationships work best. The relationship quest in emerging adulthood shifts from the more adolescent question of “Who would I enjoy being with now?” to “Who am I?” and “Who do I want to be with through life?” (Arnett, 2004). There are opportunities for exploring many relationships as there is little normative pressure to settle down or for these relationships to operate inside the purview of close parental attention. Although the age range defining emerging adulthood varies across prior studies, it typically ranges from late adolescence through the twenties (Arnett, 2004). Thus, in this paper, we examine women’s cohabitation experiences between the ages of 16 and 30. This investigation furthers the extant literature on cohabitation by examining the fluid nature of union formation throughout emerging adulthood. We do not simply limit our analysis to one premarital cohabiting or sexual relationship during a time when many women are starting and ending several relationships. Our goal is thus to contextualize women’s multiple cohabitation transitions within their premarital sexual histories.

1.2. Cohabitation

Nock (1995) documents the increasingly important role of cohabitation in the marriage process by examining the substantive differences between cohabiting and marital unions. His work reveals that cohabitation and marriage differ on a host of relationship quality criteria, with cohabitators reporting significantly lower relationship quality than married couples. The author is especially concerned about understanding cohabitation as a step toward marriage and the implications of premarital cohabitation on the quality and stability of marital unions. This same concern is echoed in Nock (2009) where he argues that marriage generates certain benefits that cohabitation cannot and further, that while marriage signals a number of desirable characteristics that a husband/wife may possess – maturity, independence, productivity, and trustworthiness – cohabitation does not signal to society that one possesses these desirable traits. Nock argues that as the rate of marriage continues to decline, the social power of such signals may increase. In keeping with Nock’s past research focus, this study addresses serial cohabitation’s role in the marriage formation process by concentrating on the serial cohabitation of emerging adult women prior to marrying for the first time and describing the meaning of serial cohabitation. To this end, this investigation focuses on women’s complex premarital relationship careers throughout emerging adulthood and discusses the implications of premarital serial cohabitation for subsequent marriage and divorce.

Most prior studies of cohabitation have focused on one cohabiting union and have typically overlooked serial cohabitation, cohabiting with two or more partners. Past work on serial cohabitation is sparse (exceptions Lichter et al., 2010; Lichter and Qian, 2008; Teachman, 2003; Teachman and Polonko, 1990). Furthermore, past work that does focus on serial cohabitation is often limited to the experiences of ever-married women, thus excluding those women who delay or forgo marriage (exception Lichter et al., 2010). This gap in the extant literature is problematic considering that serial cohabitation is increasing. Indeed, in 2002 about 25% of women report having serial cohabitation experience (Lichter et al., 2010). Lichter et al.’s (2010) research focuses on the increase of serial cohabitation and lays important groundwork by documenting the predictors of serial cohabitation. Our investigation complements their findings by presenting the relationship context of serial cohabitation, thereby giving scholars more insight into the nature of these unions and how they relate to women’s other sexual relationships. Lichter et al. (2010) investigate serial cohabitation with great breadth by studying both never- and ever-married women, considering serial cohabitation before and after first marriage, examining women of a wide age range (19 through 44), and analyzing two different survey cycles of the NSFG (1995 and 2002). Our work extends their findings with a more detailed analysis of recent birth cohorts of women (1958–1972), whose cohabitation experiences occurred within a narrower age range (16–30), and prior to first marriage. In doing so, we are able to consider serial cohabitation within emerging adulthood and focus on how it links to the marriage process.

1.3. Premarital sexual partnerships

Women’s sexual histories are considered in this study, not only as a descriptive measure designed to examine relationship context, but also as the focal predictor of serial cohabitation. Sexual experiences, especially earlier onset of sexuality in adolescence, are associated with greater odds of cohabitation in adulthood (Lichter et al., 2010; Raley et al., 2007). Therefore, we expect to find that premarital sexual partnerships in emerging adulthood serve as an important predictor of serial cohabitation. Prior research suggests that parallel to the rise in cohabitation since the 1980s is the de-linking of sex from marriage. In 2002, less than 10% of married women, under age 35, waited until marriage to have sex (Chandra et al., 2005). According

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