

Selection Effects among Recent Cohorts of Cohabiting Women

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Abstract

One response to the increase in cohabitation has been to examine whether cohabitators are selective on certain characteristics. In the United States, research suggests that cohabitation is selective of less religious, more liberal individuals as well as those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Selection into cohabitation has also been shown to be a factor in later marital stability. The majority of research on attitudinal selection into cohabitation is based on data that are now over twenty years old. During this time cohabitation has increased in prevalence and research suggests that as the prevalence of a behavior increases selection decreases. Using data from the 1995 and 2002 cycles of the National Survey of Family Growth, this research examines attitude based selection of cohabitators compared to single and married individuals. Cohabitators are not found to be selective of all unmarried women on attitudes about women's roles and career orientation, but show more liberal reports on attitudes about less traditional family forms.

Introduction

The second demographic transition framework offers ideas on how value changes influence contemporary family patterns. Lesthaeghe (1995) argues that increased individualism, the rising economic independence of women, increased market orientations, higher expectations for personal relationships, and secularization influence contemporary family patterns including the increase in non-marital cohabitation. His research, along with that of others, has linked these values with contemporary changes in family life in Europe and offers support for second demographic transition theory for this context (Surkyn and Lesthaeghe 2004). One path to establishing this link has been to show selection into less traditional family forms, such as cohabitation, on the basis of less traditional values. For the U.S. context researchers have found selection into cohabitation of those who are less religious and more liberal on attitudes such as sex roles (Clarkberg, Stolzenberg, and Waite 1995; Axinn and Thornton 1992; Thornton, Axinn, and Hill 1992; Lye and Waldron 1997) as well as those of lower socioeconomic status (Bumpass and Lu 2000; Thornton et al 1995). This suggests that cohabitation may be an attractive alternative to marriage for some individuals whose socioeconomic conditions hinder entry into legal marriage that works independently or along with the influence of values on family formation choices.

However, most research examining values or attitude based selection into cohabitation is based on data that are now over twenty years old. Given the substantial increase in cohabitation in that time frame it is important to examine current selection patterns. Schoen (1992) suggests that as a behavior becomes more prevalent it becomes less selective of individuals. This would suggest that since cohabitation now precedes a majority of first marriages it has become less selective than in the past and a new investigation with more recent data is warranted (Schoen,

Landale, and Daniels 2007). Using the 1995 and 2002 cycles of the National Survey of Family Growth this research examines whether cohabitators in recent cohorts are selective on attitudes about women's roles and career orientation as well as attitudes about family life.

Background

As noted above, research evidences that cohabitators are selective on certain factors including socioeconomic characteristics and more liberal attitudes such as gender roles. Research endeavors typically examine selectivity into cohabitation by either looking at how certain characteristics influence entry into cohabitation or through the link between cohabitation prior to marriage and later marital stability. A brief review of both of these approaches is presented next.

Selection into a union

One avenue research has taken to look at selection effects among cohabitators is to examine how certain characteristics influence entry into cohabiting unions. Cohabitation is selective on individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, those who are less religious, those who experienced higher numbers of family transitions during childhood and greater time in a household not headed by married biological parents, and those who endorse less traditional views on gender roles and commitment to marriage (Axinn and Thornton 1992; Thornton, Axinn, and Hill 1992; Thornton, Axinn, and Teachman 1995; Clarkberg, Stolzenberg, and Waite 1995; Lye and Waldron 1997; Bumpass and Lu 2000; Teachman 2003). For example, Clarkberg et al. (1995) use information on cohabitations and marriages between 1972 and 1986 to examine how views on attitudes such as sex roles and the importance placed on career success, among other factors, influence entry into a cohabiting union of those entering a union. They conclude

that a higher importance placed on career success and more liberal gender role attitudes increase the likelihood that a first union is a cohabitation for women.

Studies on Selection and Marital Stability

Cohabitation before marriage is related to a higher risk of marital dissolution (Booth and Johnson 1988; Thomson and Colella 1992; Kamp Dush, Cohan, and Amato 2003). In response, researchers have worked to understand the link between premarital cohabitation and later marital stability. Two arguments have been developed to explain this link. The first argues that the relationship is a result of selection into cohabitation of individuals who are already at a higher risk of marital dissolution and the second is that the experience of cohabiting changes individuals in ways that increase their later risk of divorce (Smock 2000). This selection has been tested to include attitudes that increase the risk of divorce, such as a lower commitment to marriage, as well as other factors such as difficulties managing personal finances (Booth and Johnson 1988; Axinn and Thornton 1992). Support has been found for both explanations (selection and experience) of the influence of cohabitation on marital stability.

Studies evidence a decrease in the influence of cohabitation on later marital stability when accounting for potential selection factors (Booth and Johnson 1988; Lillard, Brien, and Waite 1995; Kamp Dush et al, 2003) Providing support for the second perspective, the experience of cohabitation, Axinn and Thornton (1992) find that cohabiting increases individuals' acceptance of divorce when controlling for attitudes before entry into cohabitation. Kamp Dush et al. (2003) note that much research in this area is based on data from marriages occurring in the 1970s and 80s when cohabitation was less common, and possibly more selective, which also highlights the need for more recent research in this area not only on the link

between cohabitation and later marital stability, but more generally on selection into cohabitation.

Hypothesis

Based on the idea that as a behavior becomes more common it becomes less selective and that cohabitation is now a majority experience it is expected the cohabitators will not be selective of more liberal attitudes about women's roles and career orientation and family life.

Limitations

The evidence garnered by the above studies illustrates selection issues into cohabitation and warrant further investigation of this topic. The current study aims to add to this line of research by examining attitudinal differences among single, cohabiting, and married women. Comparing attitudes across marital status groups provides some insight into how cohabitators may stand out as selective from single and married women. The comparison is potentially most useful between cohabiting and single women to see if cohabitators are selective of unmarried women overall. The approach of this research suffers limitations including establishing causal order since the attitude measures are assessed of women who are currently cohabiting. This leaves the possibility open that any differences seen between cohabitators and those in other marital states are a result of the experience of cohabitation and not selection into cohabitation. An approach that uses baseline attitude measures to predict entry into cohabitation would solve the causal order issue, however it is not possible with the data used. However, this issue would be potentially more problematic if the hypothesis of the research was to identify that cohabitators are selective as opposed to not selective.

Data

The data are from the 1995 and 2002 cycles of the National Survey of Family Growth. The selection criteria include single, cohabiting, and married women. Additionally, since some control variables in the models refer to maternal characteristics those women who report no mother figure during adolescence are excluded (123 women). The analysis focuses on White, Black, and Mexican American women. Since the same set of attitudinal measures is not assessed at each cycle, the women from each cycle are analyzed separately. The sample size for the 1995 cycle is 9,794 and for the 2002 cycle is 6,555 for a total sample of 16,349 (7,588 single, 1,307 cohabiting, and 7,454 married women). Appropriate weights are used to account for the complex survey design and multiple imputation is used to repair the small amount of missing data. Data are analyzed using SUDAAN.

Measures

The dependent variables are a series of attitudinal measures. The focus of the attitude items in the 1995 cycle was women's roles and career orientation. Appropriate item recoding was conducted so that higher scores represent less traditional attitudes about women's roles and career orientation. The index for this wave is comprised of 12 items with a range of 12-48 and a reliability coefficient of .83. The items that make up this index are "Young girls are entitled to as much independence as young boys (girlindp)," "A working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work (warm)," "It is much better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside of the home and the woman takes care of the home and family (achieve)," "A woman should have exactly the same job opportunities as a man (jobopp)," "Men should share the work around the house with women such as doing dishes, cleaning, and so forth (menshr)," "A woman should not let bearing and rearing children stand in the way of a career if she wants it (career)," "On the job, men should

not refuse to work under women (boss),” “Women are much happier if they stay at home and take care of their children (stayhome),” “Men and women should be paid the same money if they do the same work (samemon),” “Women should be considered as seriously as men for jobs as executives or politicians or even President (womnpres),” “A woman’s job should be kept for her when she is having a baby (keepjob),” and “A pre-school child is likely to suffer if his mother works (suffer).” Respondents were asked to rate how much they strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with each statement.

The focus of the items in the 2002 cycle was attitudes about family life. Appropriate item recoding was conducted so that higher scores indicate more liberal attitudes about less traditional family life. The index for this wave is comprised of 6 items with a range of 6-30 and a reliability coefficient of .75. The items that make up this index are “It is better for a person to get married than to go through life being single (better),” “Sexual relations between two adults of the same sex are all right (samesex),” “Any sexual act between two consenting adults is all right (anyact),” “It is all right for unmarried 18 year olds to have sexual intercourse if they have strong affection for each other (sxok18),” “It is okay for an unmarried female to have a child (chsuppor),” and “Gay or lesbian adults should have the right to adopt (gayadopt).” In 2002, the same four response categories were available including strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree, however, respondents who insisted that they did not agree or disagree with a statement were coded separately. Responses were recoded as strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree.

Independent Variable

The independent variable is the current marital status of the respondents. Respondents are classified as single, cohabiting, or married.

Control Variables

A series of control variables are added to the models that correspond with past research on attitudinal selection into cohabitation. These include race/ethnicity, maternal education, childhood family structure, household income, education, work status, parity, age, school enrollment, and the importance placed on religion.

Analytic Technique

Since the outcome variable is a continuous index and the predictor variables are categorical, linear regression models are employed. An additive modeling technique is used. This allows for an examination of any possible mediation or suppression effects due to demographic differences across the three marital status groups. The models are run in five steps. The first model includes marital status identifiers. The second model adds race. Family background and socioeconomic characteristics are added in models three and four. In model five personal characteristics are added.

Results

Descriptives

Table 1 illustrates the descriptive statistics for the sample broken down by marital status. Tests are run to identify whether single or married respondents are statistically significantly different from cohabitators. Cohabitators are more likely than single or married women to report having a mother with less than a high school education (single 22%, cohabiting 32%, and married women 27%). They are less likely than singles to report a mother with greater than a high school education. Additionally, cohabiting women are less likely to report growing up in a household with two biological or adoptive parents (singles 60%, cohabitators 51%, and married women 70%). Cohabiting women report lower household income levels than married women

(\$40,170 for cohabitators and \$55,550 for married women). As far as the respondent's own education, cohabiting women report higher levels of a less than high school education compared to married women, but lower levels compared to singles (singles 31%, cohabitators 22%, and married women 10%). However, it is possible that the difference between single and cohabiting women is due to some single women who are still in high school. Cohabiting women are more likely than single and married women to report full-time labor force participation (singles 38%, cohabitators 51%, and married women 46%). Cohabiting women have higher reports of a parity of one or greater compared to single women and lower reports compared to married women (single 34%, cohabiting 55%, and married women 81%). Cohabitators' mean age is intermediate of single and married women as is their school enrollment. Compared to single and married women, cohabitators have the lowest mean for importance placed on religion (2.27 for singles, 2.10 for cohabitators, and 2.44 for married women on a scale of 1-3). This is in line with prior research that evidences the selection of less religious individuals into cohabitation although this assessment of religious importance is after entry into cohabitation.

Multivariate Results

Table 2 presents the linear regression results for the index of attitudes concerning women's roles and career orientation using the 1995 sample. Higher scores on the index represent less traditional attitudes about women's roles and career orientation. In the first model, the predictors of marital status suggest that compared to cohabitators, single women endorse significantly higher, less traditional, attitudes about women's roles. Married women report significantly lower scores. The addition of identifiers of race/ethnicity in model two does little to change the coefficients for marital status. Both Black and Mexican American women report lower, more traditional, attitudes about women's roles and career orientation. The coefficient for

Mexican American women indicates that, controlling for marital status, the average score on this index is slightly over three points lower than that of White women. This is the largest effect in the analysis and is reduced by about one-half with the addition of control variables in later models.

Variables controlling for family background are added in Model 3. Maternal education and family structure while growing up are predictive of attitudes. Compared to women whose mothers have a high school education, those with less than a high school education report lower and those with greater than a high school education report higher, less traditional, attitudes about women's roles and career orientation. In Model 4, the addition of socioeconomic characteristics reveals that higher income, education, and employment in the labor force are associated with less traditional attitudes about women's roles. Finally, the personal characteristics added in the last model show that older age and greater importance placed on religion are associated with more traditional attitudes while current school enrollment is predictive of more liberal attitudes. With the addition of all of the control variables the coefficients for marital status are slightly reduced in size, but the substantive conclusion from the baseline model remains that single women report less traditional and married women more traditional attitudes about women's roles and career orientation. This does not suggest that cohabiting women are selective of all unmarried women on more liberal attitudes about women's roles and career orientation.

In order to provide a test of attitudinal differences more comparable with past research, one item from the index was tested individually (results table available in the appendix). Prior research shows that women who place a higher importance on success at work are more likely to enter a cohabitation as their first union (Clarkberg et al 1995). In an effort to provide a test for a similar measure the analysis presented in Table 2 was run for the outcome "career" measuring

agreement with the statement that “A woman should not let bearing and rearing children stand in the way of a career if she wants it.” Although this is not an equivalent measure to past research it does gauge importance placed on career in comparison to family life. The results of that model indicate no statistically significant differences across marital status for that outcome once all controls are added to the model. Without controls, married women report slightly more traditional attitudes on this measure. This provides additional support for a lack of selectivity among cohabitators on values concerning women’s roles and career orientation among unmarried women.

Table 3 shows the results for the linear regression predicting the index of attitudes concerning family life. Higher scores indicate more liberal attitudes about less traditional family life. In the first model the identifiers of marital status show that both single and married women report lower scores on this index of attitudes related to less traditional family forms. This suggests that cohabitators stand out on this measure as endorsing more liberal ideas about less traditional family forms. The addition of the control variables in models two through five reduces the size of the coefficients for marital status, but the differences are still statistically significant. As a general summary of the impact of the control variables in the models, Whites report more liberal attitudes about less traditional family life as do respondents with higher levels of maternal education, and those employed full time. Respondents who grew up in two parent households, those with a less than high school education, those who are parents, and who place greater importance on religion report more traditional attitudes. Overall, the results suggest that cohabitators are selective on endorsing more liberal attitudes about less traditional family forms.

On a related note, other models were run testing the inclusion of additional control variables. One variable that was tested was an identifier of whether the respondent reported

being in a current sexual relationship (results not shown). When this variable is added to the model, the difference between cohabiting and single women on this index is reduced to non-significance. This suggests that while cohabitators may differ from all single women on this index, they do not differ from single women in a current sexual relationship.

As with the index in 1995, one individual item from the 2002 index similar to that used in prior research in this area was tested separately. This was the item asking respondents whether they felt that it was better for a person to marry rather than go through life being single. This is similar to the measure used by Clarkberg et al (1995) asking about the importance respondents place on finding the right person to marry and have a happy family life. Overall, the results suggest that cohabitators do not endorse less traditional attitudes on this item compared to singles, suggesting cohabitators are not a selective group from all unmarried women on this outcome (results table in the appendix).

Discussion and Conclusion

Past research has identified that cohabitators are a select group based on factors such as socioeconomic status, religion, and attitudes toward marriage and gender roles. Most research in this area is based on data that are over twenty years old. In the interim cohabitation has become a majority experience with around 60% of women in recent cohorts entering a cohabiting union by age 24 (Schoen, Landale, and Daniels 2007). Schoen (1992) suggests that as a behavior becomes more common it becomes less selective. This merits research examining the selectivity of cohabitation with more recent data. This study used data from the 1995 and 2002 cycles of the National Survey of Family Growth to examine cohabiting women's attitudes about women's roles and career orientation and family life in comparison to those of single and married women.

While the research design is limited by assessing attitudes after entry into cohabitation calling into question causal order, the hypothesis driving this work was that cohabitators would not be selective on the outcome measures since cohabitation is now a majority experience. The results indicate that cohabiting women do not stand out among all unmarried women as selective on attitudes about women's roles and career orientation, but do endorse more liberal attitudes about less traditional family forms compared to single women. This provides some support to a decreasing selectivity of cohabitators given past findings of selection based on more liberal attitudes about gender roles.

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Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Female Respondents (n=16,349)

	Single	Cohabiting	Married
<u>Race/Ethnicity^a</u>			
White	.69	.71	.83 ^b
Black	.23 ^b	.16	.08 ^b
Mexican American	.08 ^b	.13	.09 ^b
<u>Family Background</u>			
Mother's Education %			
Less than High School	.22 ^b	.32	.27 ^b
High School	.38	.38	.43 ^b
Some College	.20 ^b	.17	.17
College Degree	.20 ^b	.13	.13
Family Structure			
Two biological or adoptive parents	.60 ^b	.51	.70 ^b
<u>Socioeconomic Characteristics</u>			
Income (2001 Dollars) ^b	38,330	40,170	55,550 ^b
Education %			
Less than High School	.31 ^b	.22	.10 ^b
High School	.26 ^b	.38	.36
Some College	.27	.26	.27
4-year college and above	.16	.14	.27 ^b
Work Status %			
Not working for pay	.35 ^b	.29	.30
Working less than full-time	.27 ^b	.20	.24 ^b
Employed Full time	.38 ^b	.51	.46 ^b
<u>Personal Characteristics</u>			
At least one child	.34 ^b	.55	.81 ^b
Age	25.97 ^b	28.76	34.17 ^b
Current School Enrollment	.42 ^b	.15	.08 ^b
Importance of Religion (1-3)	2.27 ^b	2.10	2.44 ^b
<u>Attitude Indices</u>			
1995 Index of Liberal attitudes about Women's Roles and Career (n=9,794)	39.35 ^b	38.67	38.21 ^b
2002 Index of Liberal attitudes about Non-traditional Family Forms (n=6,555)	19.59 ^b	20.80	17.59 ^b
N	7588	1307	7454

^a Cell entries represent means

^b Significantly different from cohabitators at $p < .05$

Table 2. Linear Regression of Index of Liberal Attitudes about Women's Roles and Career Orientation, Range 12-48 (1995 Respondents n=9,794)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
<u>Marital status</u>					
Single	.68***	.68***	.39*	.70***	.41*
Cohabiting (reference)	.---	.---	.---	.---	.---
Married	-.46*	-.54**	-.52**	-.83***	-.23
<u>Race/ethnicity</u>					
White	.---	.---	.---	.---	.---
Black		-.62***	-.22	.01	.59***
Mexican American		-3.15***	-2.18***	-1.66***	-1.49***
<u>Family background</u>					
Mother's education					
Less than high school			-1.48***	-1.00***	-.71***
High school			.---	.---	.---
Some College			.88***	.48**	.36*
College degree			1.57***	.98***	.71***
Family structure					
Two biological or adoptive parents			-.20	-.58***	-.44***
<u>Socioeconomic characteristics</u>					
Income (2001 Dollars, in thousands)					
				.02***	.01***
Education					
Less than high school				-.31	-1.00***
High school (reference)				.---	.---
Some college				1.03***	.83***
4-year college and above				1.86***	2.01***
Work status					
Not working for pay (reference)				.---	.---
Working less than full time				.56***	.55***
Employed Full time				1.03***	1.29***
<u>Personal characteristics</u>					
At least one child					-.12
Age					-.03**
Current school enrollment					1.57***
Importance of Religion					-1.13***
Intercept	38.67***	39.03***	39.20***	37.43***	40.51***

* p<.05. **p<.01. ***p<.001

Table 3. Linear Regression of Index of Liberal Attitudes about Non-traditional Family Forms, Range 6-30 (2002 Respondents n=6,555)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
<u>Marital status</u>					
Single	-1.21***	-1.19***	-1.24***	-1.07***	-.70**
Cohabiting (reference)	.---	.---	.---	.---	.---
Married	-3.21***	-3.47***	-3.37***	-3.62***	-2.27***
<u>Race/ethnicity</u>					
White	.---	.---	.---	.---	.---
Black		-2.20***	-2.17***	-2.06***	-.69***
Mexican American		-1.50***	-.95***	-.53*	-.03
<u>Family background</u>					
Mother's education					
Less than high school			-.56*	-.36+	-.18
High school			.---	.---	.---
Some College			.47*	.35	.21
College degree			.96***	.78***	.59**
Family structure					
Two biological or adoptive parents			-.64***	-.79***	-.36**
<u>Socioeconomic characteristics</u>					
Income (2001 Dollars, in thousands)				.01**	.01*
Education					
Less than high school				-.58**	-.76***
High school (reference)				.---	.---
Some college				.02	.16
4-year college and above				.50*	.48*
Work status					
Not working for pay (reference)				.---	.---
Working less than full time				.25	.22
Employed Full time				.63***	.47**
<u>Personal characteristics</u>					
At least one child					-.51**
Age					-.02
Current school enrollment					-.32
Importance of Religion					-2.78***
Intercept	20.80***	21.41***	21.59***	20.81***	27.17***

* p<.05. **p<.01. ***p<.001

Appendix

Table A1. Linear Regression of Liberal Attitudes about Not Letting Family Interfere with Career Plans for Women, Range 1-4 (1995 Respondents n=9,794)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
<u>Marital status</u>					
Single	.05+	.04	.02	.05+	.04
Cohabiting (reference)	---	---	---	---	---
Married	-.07*	-.07*	-.07*	-.08**	-.01
<u>Race/ethnicity</u>					
White		---	---	---	---
Black		.11***	.13***	.14***	.20***
Mexican American		-.16***	-.10***	-.07*	-.05
<u>Family background</u>					
Mother's education					
Less than high school			-.09***	-.06**	-.04
High school			---	---	---
Some College			.02	.01	.00
College degree			.07**	.06*	.03
Family structure					
Two biological or adoptive parents			-.01	-.03*	-.02
<u>Socioeconomic characteristics</u>					
Income (2001 Dollars, in thousands)				.00**	.00*
Education					
Less than high school				-.05*	-.10***
High school (reference)				---	---
Some college				.04*	.03
4-year college and above				.04	.05
Work status					
Not working for pay (reference)				---	---
Working less than full time				.03	.03
Employed Full time				.13***	.15***
<u>Personal characteristics</u>					
At least one child					-.04
Age					-.00
Current school enrollment					-.09***
Importance of Religion					-.12***
Intercept	3.15***	3.14***	3.16***	3.04***	3.38***

* p<.05. **p<.01. ***p<.001

Table A2. Linear Regression of Less Traditional Attitudes About Marrying Versus Remaining Single, Range 1-5 (2002 Respondents n=6,555)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
<u>Marital status</u>					
Single	-.08	-.10	-.09	-.05	-.00
Cohabiting (reference)	.---	.---	.---	.---	.---
Married	-.38***	-.43***	-.41***	-.44***	-.37***
<u>Race/ethnicity</u>					
White	.---	.---	.---	.---	.---
Black		-.28***	-.29***	-.29***	-.18**
Mexican American		-.53***	-.47***	-.39***	-.32***
<u>Family background</u>					
Mother's education					
Less than high school			-.14*	-.10	-.11
High school			.---	.---	.---
Some College			-.06	-.08	-.06
College degree			-.03	-.04	-.02
Family structure					
Two biological or adoptive parents			-.13*	-.15**	-.13*
<u>Socioeconomic characteristics</u>					
Income (2001 Dollars, in thousands)				.00	.00
Education					
Less than high school				-.21***	-.17**
High school (reference)				.---	.---
Some college				.05	.06
4-year college and above				.04	.00
Work status					
Not working for pay (reference)				.---	.---
Working less than full time				.02	.01
Employed Full time				.12*	.07
<u>Personal characteristics</u>					
At least one child					-.12*
Age					.01*
Current school enrollment					-.08
Importance of Religion					-.22***
Intercept	3.15***	3.28***	3.39***	3.32***	3.59***

* p<.05. **p<.01. ***p<.001