Class Differences in Cohabitation Processes

In the United States, there have been unprecedented changes in family building processes over the past few decades. Many young adults are deferring marriage, the majority of young adults have cohabited with a romantic partner by their late twenties (Chandra, Martinez, Mosher, Abma, and Jones 2005; Schoen, Landale, and Daniels 2007), and cohabitation prior to marriage is now normative (Bumpass and Lu 2000; Casper and Bianchi 2002). Yet the function that cohabitation serves is still poorly understood, in part because it has changed over time, and also may hold meanings that differ by cohort, social class, race, and ethnicity (Manning, 1993; King and Scott, 2005; Musick, 2002; Raley, 2001). Whereas cohabitation was once considered to be simply a stage in the progression to marriage among young adults (Brown, 2000; Bumpass, Sweet, and Cherlin, 1991; Manning and Smock, 2002), increases in the proportion of births to cohabiting couples suggests that its meaning may be shifting (Heuveline and Timberlake, 2004; Raley, 2001; Sassler and Cunningham, 2008).

While cohabitation has become a normative step in the transition to adulthood, little attention has focused on class variation in young adults' likelihood of forming cohabiting unions, their reasons for doing so, when in their relationships such a transition occurs, and the consequences such decisions have on subsequent union behavior. Even though cohabitation has become widespread across all social classes, its increase has been greatest among those with a high school degree or some college – the middle-third of the education distribution. Between 1987 and 2002, the shares of women with a high school degree who had ever cohabited increased 115 percent, while for women with some college schooling the proportions grew 93 percent. The increase for women with a

college degree, while substantial, was far smaller in comparison – only 45 percent (Bumpass and Lu, 2000; Chandra, Martinez, Mosher, Abma, and Jones, 2005).[1] Class differences in transitions from cohabitation to marriage also appear to be growing, with living together more likely to serve as a springboard to marriage for non-poor women than for those who are disadvantaged (Lichter, Qian, and Mellott 2006).

A growing body of research has begun to explore what meanings cohabitors assign to their living arrangements (Reed 2006; Sassler 2004; Manning and Smock 2005), but to date these qualitative studies have not examined whether cohabitation serves the same function for the working-class as it does for the middle-class. This paper addresses this gap. We examine class variation in the tempo of entrance into cohabiting unions, explore the reasons cohabitors give for entering into shared living arrangements, and assess the extent to which future plans were discussed upon moving in together. Relying on qualitative methods traditionally used to expose social processes (Altheide and Johnson 1998; Ambert, Adler, Adler, and Detzner 1995), the goals of this study are to: (a) document how long respondents report being romantically involved before moving in together; (b) uncover the circumstances shaping their decision to cohabit; and (c) determine whether cohabiting individuals have discussed plans regarding their future together, particularly for marriage. Data come from in-depth interviews with 30 working-class and 31 middle-class cohabiting couples living in Columbus (Ohio). Our preliminary results reveal that the tempo of relationship progression is far more rapid for the working-class than the middle-class couples. Many of the same reasons for moving in are mentioned by the working- and middle-class, with convenience and housing frequently proffered. Nonetheless, financial necessity and a desire to live apart from family members features more prominently among

the working class, whereas the middle class respondents mentioned the desire to test the relationship for deeper commitments far more often. The middle class are also more likely to have discussed marriage plans prior to or shortly after moving in together than the working class, which is perhaps a function of their longer durations to cohabitation – offering one hint as to how class distinctions in transitions to marriage operate. Implications of social-class variation on family building processes, particularly as they relate to public policy designed to encourage marriage, are discussed.

RELATIONSHIP PROGRESSION AND COHABITATION

Despite a burgeoning literature on cohabitation, relatively few studies examine the progression of romantic relationships into shared living. Much of this is due to limitations in survey data, which rarely obtain information about when romantic relationships begin or reasons for entering into cohabitation. This is surprising, as the existing research on relationship progression has found that relationship tempo is important for relationship stability and quality (Cate et al., 1993; Surra & Gray, 2000; Surra & Huges, 1997). Longer courtships allow partners time to test compatibility and gain important information about one another (Cate & Lloyd, 1988; Lloyd & Cate, 1985; Surra et al., 1988). Even as cohabitation has become a normative stage in young adults' union formation (Schoen et al. 2007), these studies have yet to assess the role played by cohabitation in differentiating relationship progression. While some research suggests that married men who cohabited with their spouse prior to the marriage are less committed to their relationship than those who married without cohabiting (Stanley, Rhoades, and Markman 2006), to date the research has failed to explore how the tempo of relationship progression contributes to relationship quality. Instead, studies of

cohabiting couples have focused largely on assessing relationship progression from shared living into marriage (or dissolution) (Sassler and McNally 2003; Smock and Manning, 1997). To date, then, we know little about the factors surrounding cohabitors' decisions to enter into cohabiting unions.

Qualitative researchers are now beginning to fill this research lacuna. Recent studies of cohabitors find that many move in with partners quite rapidly, often for event-driven reasons such as changes in employment, the completion of schooling, or housing exigencies (Sassler, 2004), which has been verified by quantitative research (Guzzo 2006). Some have suggested that cohabitors "slide" into their arrangements, often without much thought (Manning and Smock 2005; Stanley, Rhoades, and Markman 2006). In a study of a sample of 25 cohabitors in New York City, Sassler (2004) found that over half had moved in with their partners within six months of beginning their relationship. When asked why they moved in with a sexual partner, these respondents mentioned factors such as convenience, finances, and housing needs; notably absent in their responses was testing their compatibility for marriage (Sassler 2004). In fact, many couples justify moving in together because they are already spending so much time with their partner (Manning and Smock 2005; Sassler 2004). Others report that cohabiting couples move in together in response to a pregnancy (Reed 2006; Edin and Kefalas 2005).

None of these exploratory studies, however, examined whether social class differentiated the pace of moving in with a partner, largely due to their small sample size. In fact, recently available large-scale surveys, such as the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) and the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) have begun to include questions that would better enable researchers to explore relationship

progression. Add Health includes a module that enquires about beginning dates for serious relationships, and also enquires when respondents became sexually intimate with partners (defined as vaginal, oral, or anal sexual activity). The NSFG includes a question on the date of first sexual involvement with recent partners. Studies utilizing these data sources largely confirm the results of the published qualitative studies. For example, Sassler and Dush (2007) found that the majority of young adults' most recent romantic relationships progressed quite rapidly in an analysis utilizing data from Add Health; the pace of entrance into sexual relationships significantly shaped subsequent transitions into cohabitation. Relying on data from the 2002 NSFG, Sassler (2007) also found that among men under age 45 who entered into cohabiting relationships, the transition to shared living once relationships became sexual was rapid.

However, none of these large-scale surveys enable a good look at social class differentiation in relationship progression. That is because the information they currently have on young adults' own educational attainment is limited. Add Health has not (yet) collected data on young adults' own school progression, while the educational information in the NSFG is not extensive, and is only obtained at the date of interview (precluding the construction of time-varying variables to capture the relationship between school progression and relationship formation). Despite these data shortcomings, there is some evidence that social class is associated with slower relationship progression, both into sexual intimacy as well as shared living. Greater childhood economic well-being deters entry into both marriage and cohabitation (Sassler, Cunningham, and Lichter forthcoming). Sexually involved young adults whose mother's have a college degree progress more slowly into cohabitation than do their counterparts whose mother only

attained a high school diploma (Sassler and Dush 2007). But maternal education, while a good proxy for social class (particularly for young adults in their early 20s), may be confounded by family instability, class mobility, and numerous other factors.

An additional drawback of the existing studies based on large-scale data collections is their failure to determine *why* individuals enter into cohabitating relationships. In fact, assumptions about reasons for cohabitation are often inferred from subsequent individual-level behavior – notwithstanding the dyadic nature of the decision both to cohabit and to marry (e.g., Sassler and McNally 2003). Because the majority of cohabitors who formed their unions in the 1980s subsequently married (Bumpass and Lu 2000; Manning and Smock 1995), the assumption that cohabitation was a "trial" or precursor for marriage was widely accepted. Scholars are reassessing this belief, as the proportions of cohabitors who subsequently go on to marry their partners has declined (Lichter, Qian, and Mellott 2006), particularly among young adults under the age of 25 (Schoen, Landale, and Daniels 2007). Yet such studies continue to find important disparities in the outcomes of cohabiting unions. For example, economically advantaged women are significantly more likely to experience transitions from cohabitation to marriage than less advantaged women, such as single mothers (Lichter et al. 2006). Less advantaged women are more likely to move from cohabitation to cohabitation, and often accumulate children along the way, making subsequent marriage even less likely (Lichter and Qian, forthcoming).

Such results suggest that cohabitation processes may be diverging, with living together serving different functions for members of the middle class relative to others. Such a possibility has important implications, for child well-being, marital (and

relationship) stability, and income inequality. For example, Stanley, Kline Rhoades, and Markman (2006) have recently proposed that the tempo of entrance into cohabitation and marriage predicts later marital quality and stability. They argue that couples who slide into cohabitation, rather than make decisions to live together based on commitment and love, are more likely to end up in unhappy and unstable marriages. Furthermore, the substantial share of non-marital births to cohabiting couples, and the greater instability of cohabiting parental unions relative to marital ones, suggests additional divergence in children's likelihood of coresidence and involvement with both biological parents (Carlson, 2006). While more recent research is needed, studies of cohabiting women in the 1980s found that among those who conceived, marriages were far more likely among those with college-education than for those with only a high school degree (Musick 2002). Clearly, a better understanding of the processes involved in entering into cohabiting unions, and whether they diverge for working- and middle-class young adults, is important to address policy makers concerns with family change and instability.

DATA AND METHOD

This research is informed by grounded theory approaches and methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Our study allows participants to present their own perspectives of their relationships, particularly when and why they decided to move in with their romantic partners. Data are from in-depth interviews with 30 working-class and 31 middle-class heterosexual couples who were living in a large metropolitan area (Columbus, Ohio). Interviews were conducted with both members of the couple, who were interviewed simultaneously in different locations; this enables us to assess partner similarities (and differences) in reasons for moving in, future expectations, and aspects of relationships

that involve couple negotiation. Interviews (n = 122) were conducted by the first and second author and an additional graduate students. Interviews took between one and two-and-a half hours, and were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Names of all respondents have been altered to protect confidentiality.

All respondents were between the ages of 18 and 36, the prime family formation years when young adults make key decisions about work, marriage, and fertility. Couples were eligible if they reported sharing a residence for at least three months. For this paper we focus on questions asked about how their relationship began and progressed, when couples moved in together and how and why that decision was made, and the kinds of plans couples discussed upon moving in together and subsequently.

Educational attainment, occupational status, mobility opportunities, and earnings were used to distinguish our two class groups. We initially pursued our working-class sample by identifying a community college that offered a variety of two-year degree programs as well as preparing students to pursue a four-year degree at a senior college. Community college students come from families with fewer economic resources, are less likely to have been on an academic track in high school, and have lower rates of attaining a four year degree than students who attend a four-year institution (Lee & Frank 1990).[2] Signs were posted on public message boards at the campus. Several non-students who saw the postings or were told of the study by an acquaintance also contacted us; we limited referrals to one per couple. The data collection period for the working class sample extended from July 2004 to April 2005.

The second stage of data collection targeted middle-class cohabitors, who were defined predominantly by educational attainment – having a college degree.[3] The 31 middle class couples were recruited primarily through fliers posted in grocery stores, coffee

shops, and restaurants, as well as a posting on an online community bulletin board[4]. In five instances, couples were referred to the project by colleagues, friends or family members of the researchers. Participants in the middle-class sample were interviewed between April 2005 and June 2006.

Of course, defining social class is a thorny methodological issue. It is rarely captured by a single measure, and it is likely that our working-class respondents might not so identify themselves. Furthermore, some of the working-class respondents attending school may also obtain their degrees and obtain middle-class status as they age; nonetheless, a considerable number of the students in the working-class sample had been attending school sporadically and for years. While obtaining a bachelor's degree in one's late twenties or thirties may improve job prospects, obtaining a college degree "on time" (in one's early twenties) affects job trajectory, the kinds of people one meets, and readiness to support a family.

Additionally, because many of the respondents are fairly young, income – another criterion – is also not the optimal measure. Among the working class sample, couples had to be earning a combined income of greater than $15,000 from a source other than public or familial assistance (though some did receive some form of assistance, most commonly through student loans or "loans" from family); middle class couples were required to earn a minimum combined income of $25,000 in order to be included in the sample. In four of the working-class couples, and four of the middle-class couples, one partner had a college degree while the other had some college. For these couples, class position was determined by the occupation of both partners; in the middle-class sample, couples where one partner had not attained a college degree were assigned to that group

because their occupational prestige, income, and family background; in the working-class, despite one partner having a college degree they were designated as working-class because the partner with the degree was not employed in a job requiring a Bachelor's, whereas the partner without the bachelor's degrees were employed in jobs with few mobility prospects or were only working part-time.

Sample Information

Descriptive results of the sample are presented in Table 1. The mean age for the middle-class sample is somewhat greater than for our working-class one – 28.3 for men versus 26.4, respectively, and 25.2 for women compared with 24.4. The majority of the middle-class couples (n = 24) are white, but the working-class sample contains a larger number of couples from different racial backgrounds. Couples have lived together for an average of 20.4 months for the middle class and 25.3 months for the working class. Parenting is far more prevalent in the working-class sample (n = 14); only two of the middle-class couples report sharing a child, and two of the men have children from a previous marriage. Finally, income levels are quite a bit higher among the middle class sample, with an average couple-level income of $67,672, compared to $38,971 for the working-class couples.[5] Occupations for those in the working class sample included such jobs as telemarketer, wait staff, and computer repairperson. Middle class occupations included architect, computer network/systems analyst, teacher, and respiratory therapist.

[Table 1 about Here]

Analytic Approach

Data were coded thematically, and common patterns of behavior, reasons, and expectations were identified through repeated readings of the transcripts. Open coding

was initially used to generate topical themes (relationship progression, reasons for moving in together, plans at move-in) and allowed sections of narratives to be classified into distinct categories for each code (Strauss and Corbin 1998). For the working-class sample a team of three researchers coded the data and reviewed the results for consistency across coders. For the middle-class sample, two researchers who had also worked on the working-class sample coded the transcripts. The working-class transcripts have been entered into AtlasTi to facilitate coding; we are currently entering the middle-class transcripts. The second stage of analysis involves axial coding, or looking at variability and linkages within topics (i.e., various reasons reported by respondents for moving in together, if one was assigned greater priority). The third level of analysis involved selective coding, integrating and refining categories, and relating them to other concepts, for example, looking at class variation among those giving a particular reasons (e.g., finances) for moving in, how long they had dated prior to joining households, or future plans.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

The preliminary discussion of findings will proceed in three stages. First, the amount of time respondents were romantically involved prior to cohabiting is described, first for the sample overall and then by class. Second, reasons for moving in together are detailed and linked with the prior section, as well as explored by class. Third, cohabitors discussions of their future plans - upon moving in and subsequently - is reviewed.

Duration to Moving in Together

We estimated the length of time from when couples began their romantic relationship to when they moved in together, based on responses to questions regarding

how the relationship progressed. Based on prior research by Sassler (2004), we divide move-in time into those who moved in within six months, those who moved in within the year but after the six month period, those who entered shared living after a year but before the two year period, and those who dated for over two years before forming a shared residence.[6] Over a third of our couples (36.1%) moved in together within six months of beginning their romantic relationship, a somewhat smaller share than in previous studies of cohabitors in New York City (Sassler 2004). A fourth of the couples in the sample moved in together within seven to 12 months, while slightly more than a quarter waited for over a year but less than two years. Only 13.1% were romantically involved for over two years before entering their coresidential union.

[Figure 1 about Here]

These overall trends, however, mask considerable class disparity in union tempo. The entrance into cohabiting unions is far more accelerated among the working-class, half of whom report moving in with their partner within the first six months of the relationships' beginning, compared with less than a quarter of the middle-class couples. About one-quarter of both samples moved in together after being involved for between seven and twelve months. Overall, then, nearly three-quarters of the working-class sample had moved in within a year of becoming romantically involved, as did not quite half of our middle-class sample. The middle-class couples demonstrate a much more tempered entrance into their shared living arrangements – over one-third were romantically involved for over a year, but less than two, prior to moving in together, while 16.1% were dating for over two years.

Reasons for Cohabiting: The Working Class

Whereas nationally representative surveys present respondents with a list of hypothetical reasons that people might give for wanting to cohabit, we asked our participants an open-ended question about why they had moved in with their partner. Answers to this question provide a relationship-specific means of exploring both individual's and couples' reasons for making a change in their living arrangements. We discuss the reasons our respondents give for moving in together, if couples share the same reasons, and if there is variation by social class.

Respondents often mentioned several reasons for moving in with their partner, though generally one or two causes predominated. Among both the working- and middle-class, respondents' reasons fell into six broad categories: convenience, finances, housing situations, as a sign of commitment or the next step in the relationship, in response to family issues, and in response to a pregnancy. A handful of respondents also cited a few reasons that did not quite fit into these groups - because it would be fun or they were lonely, for example - but never as a first reason. Of note is that working-class couples are far less likely than their middle-class counterparts to mention the same reasons for moving in. Only a third of the working-class couples (n = 10) agreed on their first reasons for entering share living, while another four couples concurred regarding the second most important reason; among the middle-class sample, in contrast, 18 reported the same first reason for determining to move in together, while another 13 concurred on their second reason.

Working-Class Respondents' Reasons

The reason given most often by working-class respondents as their first or second reason for moving in with their partners was convenience, though finances was

mentioned almost as frequently. Eighteen of the 60 respondents initially referred to the challenges that shuttling between two different homes posed as a reason to move in with their partner, while another six mentioned it as their second cause. For example, Chad said of his move in with Jackie after four months, "It really was the most convenient thing, option for both of us at the time," a sentiment that Jackie seconded. Most of the respondents in this group reported reasons similar to Alex, who said, "we're spending all our time together anyways, and basically, all we were doing was living together with a commute. So why not just live together and then not have to worry about taking stuff back and forth, having clean clothes at the other person's place, deciding whose place to stay at."

Monetary reasons were reported as the initial explanation for moving in by 12 respondents, while another 11 mentioned it subsequently. Whereas convenience was referenced in similar ways by all of those who mentioned it, fiscal reasons were discussed in more varied ways. Some respondents, such as Stephanie, who asked her partner to move in with her after they had been romantically involved for six months, told him, "It's stupid to pay for another place, you might as well come live with me." For others, fiscal reasons and convenience are conflated. Stacy, who moved in with her partner Andre after about a year and a half of maintaining separate apartments, viewed sharing the costs of housing as a rational choice, explaining, "OK, we've been together for over a year now and we've spent every night together and we're paying all these bills. It doesn't make sense."

Yet quite a few respondents also reported that moving in with their partner was a financial necessity (JL09, EJ11, SR11, JP20, SB25, JM27, SM36). For a few, this was

because they could not afford their own apartment or even one with others, if they didn't receive some assistance. Josh explained, "At the time, I was a little bit stressed about money and I didn't know that, if I didn't have a roommate if I could've been okay." Having a partner, who was able to pick up the brunt of the expenses, even if temporarily, was for many of these respondents a necessity. Several of the men reported being out of work when they initially moved in with their partner. Simon recalled that when he and Laura moved in together, "Finances were very, very hard, very hard. I was laid off; I was actually in-between jobs." Eugene also reported how employment conditioned his rapid move in with Susan. "I needed help with the money and she was willing to help me," he explained, "'cause there was a time, after I quite Gamestop, that I didn't have a job, for about a month. And what she did is help me pay my bills and pay rent and everything." His partner Susan presented the fiscal need as mutual, saying, "I actually didn't have the money to pay the rent where I was currently living so I was in a financial bind," even though she had a job at the time.

That resources feature so prominently in cohabitors' discussions of why they move in together is not unexpected (e.g., Sassler 2004). In fact, the old adage that formerly encouraged marriage, that two can live as cheaply as one, is also applicable to cohabitation. But several of our respondents reveal that were it not for their financial need, they would not be cohabiting. Susan, for example, viewed moving in with Eugene as less than optimal, explaining, "We understand that this was not our first option, to move in with each other, but we knew it was financially what we needed to do." Asked what they would have done if each had more money, Susan replied, "We wouldn't have moved in with each other," specifying that they would have waited until they got married.

Immediate financial need was not the only reason some of these couples moved in together. Sherry was also in need of a new place to live, as her lease was ending and her roommate had left. Although she made enough at her job to cover rent, she described the difficulty of putting away enough for the deposit many landlords require. "I look around for one-bedrooms, I could not afford it," she explained. "Like I said, I didn't have any savings, I didn't save up a dime. And those down-payments and things like that, they cost, while paying $400 dollars for my place." Asked about the factors influencing her decision to move in, Sherry stated, abashedly, "And my main motivation, this is so bad, was money." Her partner, Tyrone, indicates that they have talked about her moving out, with him explaining, "I mean we ain't living right." Cohabitors who report financial need as a reason for moving in with partners tended to form their unions rapidly (within six months) and be in their early to mid-twenties. None reported receiving monetary assistance from parents. Our findings suggest that the difficulty of finding affordable housing on low-wage jobs features prominently in working-class youths' expedited entrance into coresidential relationships.

Housing needs also featured prominently among first and second reasons cohabitors reported for moving in with their partner, mentioned by 21 respondents. The need for housing encompassed a variety of situations, including changes in living arrangements resulting from poor living situations, bad roommates, or roommates leaving, as well as the intensification of internet long-distance relationships. Several respondents talked about their lease or sublet concluding, and how that precipitated moving in with their partner. Chad and Jackie, who were both students when they decided to move in together, were on school-year leases that were ending. Chad explained their reasons by

saying, “We both needed to find another place and our relationship was like progressing anyway.” Other respondents reveal that their partners turned to them when they needed a place to stay. Eugene recalled his partner, Susan, telling him that she was about to get kicked out of the house she was living in, and saying to him “I really need a place to stay,” while Tyrone reported that his partner Sherry suggested they be roommates when her lease was running out. Forming cohabiting unions, then, was often a strategy utilized by these working-class respondents in response to their highly fluid housing, as none of them owned their own homes.

Five respondents indicated that they had met on the internet, and because they were long-distance viewed shared housing with their new love interest as essential for relocation. While these transitions might also be classified as related to aspects of relationships, they are included here with housing reasons because respondents viewed them as such. Participants that discuss moving in with partners as a means of intensifying their relationship are described below. These respondents indicated that when they decided to move to the same city as their there was no other option, as they generally did not know other people, and needed a place to stay. “The main reason in our specific situation, the main reason I lived with him is because I didn’t know anyone else in Wisconsin,” Julie explained, “and I was nervous about the move. It was just part of the deal.” Maria, who moved from California to be with Bill, stated, “He didn’t want the long distance relationship and I wasn’t gonna move down here just to go into another apartment.” In fact, two of the men, both of whom were residing in Columbus, indicated that they initially gave their partner the option to *not* live with them, Bill by offering Maria a separate room in his home, and Jorge by having Valencia live with his cousins.

Neither of these housing options were seen as acceptable to their female partners, though. These respondents viewed shared living as part and parcel of their move.

A fairly large number of respondents also indicated that their move into shared living was spurred by the natural progression of their relationship. Both Stan and Keisha indicated that they moved in because they were in love. Asked why they decided to live together, Stan replied, "Just, you know, 'cause we hit it off so well. Um, the feelings were there, the emotions, and we wanted to give it a try." Keisha responded in kind, stating "'Cause we really loved each other." Beth and Mitch replied in a similar fashion, though it was their second reason; Mitch asked, "Why would we get separate places, you know? We love each other." Five respondents also stated that moving in with their partner was the result of the natural progression of their relationship. Jerry replied to the question on why they moved in together by saying, "It felt like it was the next, next step to do, and I was excited to live with her." Sheryl reports a similar reason for why she and Adam moved in together, saying, "We wanted to be together. I know we wanted to move it a little further." However, none of these couples felt that they were ready for marriage. In fact, they saw living together as an opportunity to see if marriage was in the cards. Tracy, who met her partner Mark on the internet, expressed it this way: "So it was naturally the progression to take, was to live together. 'Cause I wasn't ready to get married." Maria also thought living together as a necessary prerequisite, explaining of her move, "I wanted to, in my mind I wanted to move in together, I needed to move in with somebody before I could marry them because I wanted to make sure I could live with them." Such reports are consistent with recent empirical research that suggests

young adults perceive shared living as a good way to assess compatibility prior to marriage (Thornton and Young-DeMarco, 2001).

Seven respondents also indicated that they moved in with their partner due to family issues, particularly the desire to get out of the parental home, while another four respondents (two couples) revealed that their realization that they were pregnant fomented their move in together. Shane, who started dating Sandra when they were in their teens, said, "We'd talk about not wanting to live with our parents and then we'd just talk about living together instead, 'cause it'd be easier for rent." Some respondents mentioned feeling that they were getting too old to live with parents, highlighting the stigma associated with extended family living in contemporary society. "I wanted to get away from my parents," Dawn explained. "I mean, I love my parents, I love to hang out with them, but you know, you just kind of want to have that separation, you know, feeling like you're kind of moving on with your life and doing what you want to do." Other respondents felt that living with parents cramped their ability to engage in romantic relationships. Artie stated bluntly, "I wanted to get the hell out of my parents' house." While these respondents viewed moving away from parents and family as a reason to cohabit, two other couples described their realization that they were themselves pregnant and about to become parents as the motivator for moving in together. Said Terrell, "I wasn't trying to move in, but after she found out, after we found out she was pregnant it wasn't no ands, ifs, or buts about it." His partner, Aliyah, concurred, reporting, "when I found out that I was pregnant and once we really decided [what to do about the baby] like there was no choice."

Middle-Class Respondents' Reasons

FIRST REASONS

Housing (leases expiring or roommates moving out)- 25
Convenience (together so much anyway, driving, long distance rel. can live more cheaply, etc.)- 21
Financial necessity (couldn't afford to live alone)- 5
Commitment/next step- 5
Want to be together (more often or to learn more about each other)- 4
Pregnancy- 1
Can't remember why-1

SECOND REASONS

Commitment/next step- 19
Convenience- 14
Financial necessity- 8
Housing- 9
No second reason given- 6
Security (physical safety)- 3
Family issues- 2
She didn't pressure him-1

Best quote ☺
Ok, why is it that you would say you guys decided to live together?
LW: Um well that would be because we were sick of making out in cars.

Plans at Move-In.

Preliminary Conclusion

Notwithstanding the dramatic rise of cohabitation for contemporary American young adults, and the growing prevalence of non-marital coresidential living across all education levels, research on social class differences in the formation of cohabiting unions is scant. This is surprising, given recent calls for further attention to growing levels of family inequality (McLanahan 2004; Palloni 2006). Furthermore, the growth of births to cohabiting women and those in the middle-education-tier (Jencks and Martin 2004) further raise the possibility of demographic momentum resulting in continued high levels of family instability. This exploratory study seeks to provide some purchase on

what cohabitation means for young adults from working- and middle-class backgrounds. Our results suggest considerable disparities in the tempo with which cohabiting couples form their shared living arrangements. Over the next few months, we will explore what reasons middle-class cohabitors report for moving in together, and contrast those with the working-class sample. We also intend to assess the types of plans (if any) discussed upon moving in together and whether those diverged across our samples.

Our preliminary results indicate that they do. About a third of the middle-class cohabiting couples were engaged, with specified marriage dates. While some of the working-class couples also reported being engaged, none reported a definite marriage date, even though some had been engaged for quite a lengthy period of time. These results suggest that cohabitation may be serving a very different function for the working and middle classes. For the middle class, it still appears to be more prevalent as a stepping-stone to marriage. For the working-class, living with a partner arises more in response to economic exigencies or convenience; in other words, it is more likely to be a good arrangement for the moment.

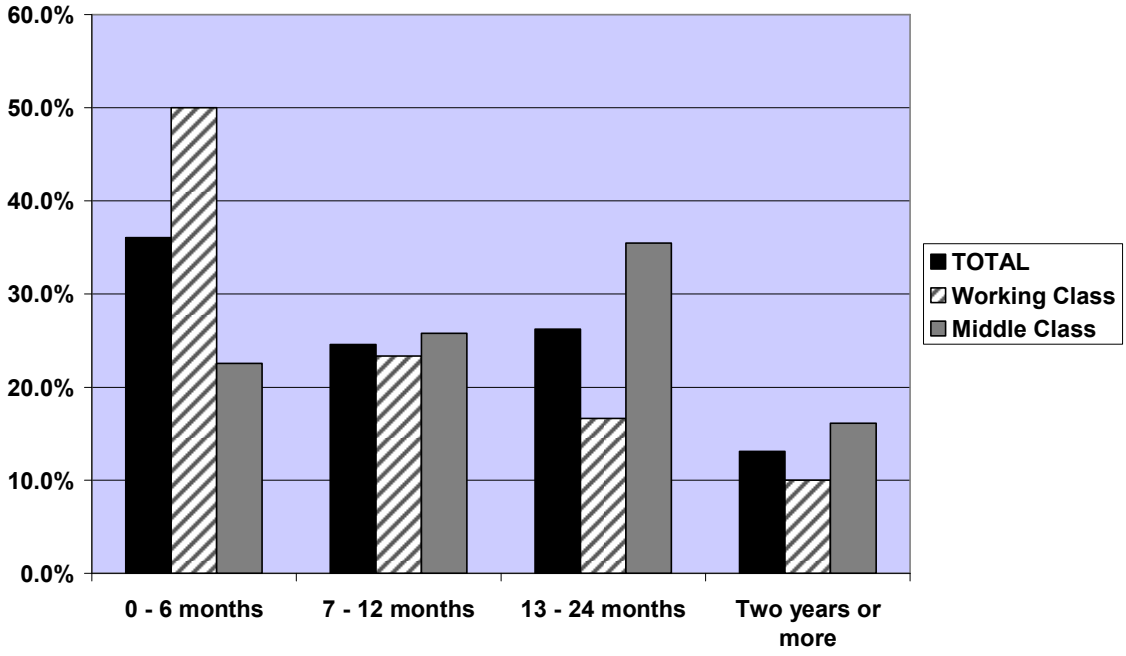
Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Cohabiting Couples

Variables	Measures	Working 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	Man > 4 years older	4	11
	Both within 4 years	24	19
Educational Attainment	Both high school or less	1	-
	1 ≤ HS, 1 some college	6	-
	Both some college/associate's	19	-
	1HS, 1 BA	1	-
	One Some college, one BA	3	4
	Both BA	-	14
	One BA, one MA	-	10
	Both MA+	-	3
Race	Both White, non Hispanic	13	24
	Both Hispanic	1	1
	Both Black, non-Hispanic	4	2
	Mixed-race couple	12	4
Couple-Level Income[a]	Mean couple income	$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	14
	Woman earns more	6	3
	Each partner earns 40-60% of the income	11	14
Marital Status	Both never married	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

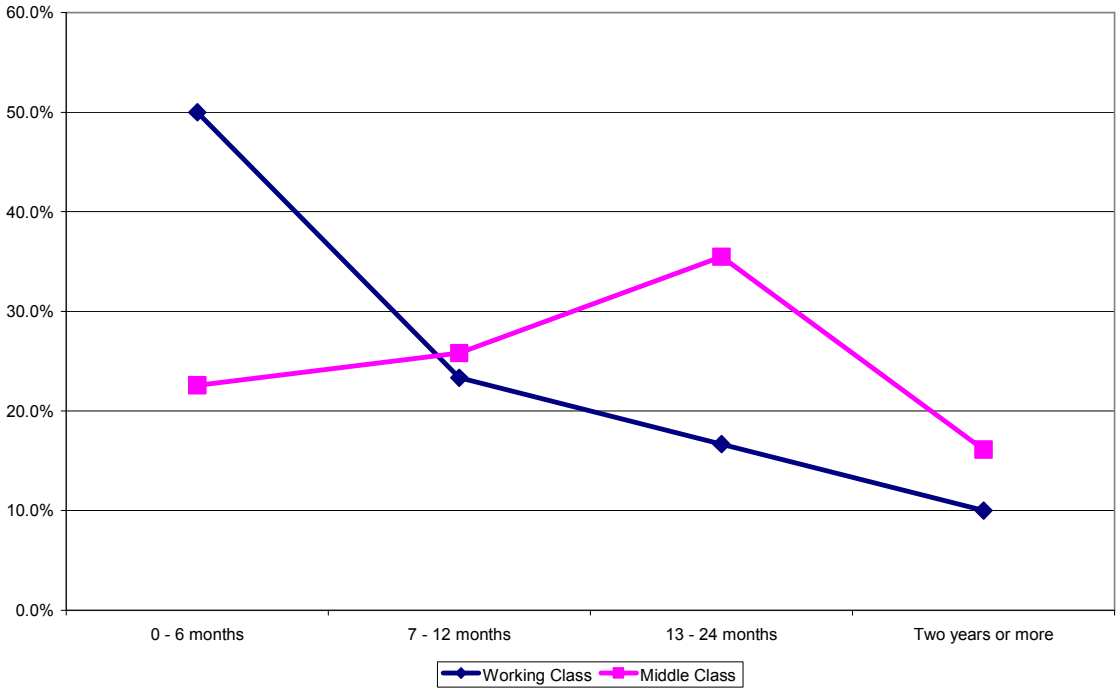
[a] Couple level income is determined by summing each partner's reported individual income. One man in the working class and one man and one woman in the middle class refused to report their income. Their partners' reports were used to determine their couple-level income. In another instance, neither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

[b] In two working class couples the partners share a child and the male partner also has a child from a previous relationship

Duration to Cohabitation, from Relationship Start



Cumulative Tempo of Entrance into Cohabitation from Start of Relationship



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Endnotes

[1] Data are from the National Survey of Family Growth. Information for the years 1987 and 1995 are from Bumpass, L.L, and Lu, H.H. 2000. "Trends in Cohabitation and Implications for Children's Family Contexts in the United States." *Population Studies* 54:29-41; the figures for 2002 are from Chandra A., Martinez, G.M., Mosher, W.D., Abma, J.C., & Jones, J. 2005. Fertility, Family Planning, and Reproductive Health of U.S. Women: Data from the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth. NCHS. Vital Health Statistics 23(25). The increase for women with less than a high school degree was 60 percent.

[2] In four of these couples, one partner had a Bachelor's degree while their partner had some college or less. We grouped these four couples with the working class because none of their jobs required a college degree, and their partners also did not hold positions that had mobility prospects.

[3] In four couples, one partner had a Bachelor's degree or higher while their partner did not have a college degree. In three of these couples, the female partner had the college degree and the man had some college. The men in all three couples were financially established at the time the couple began dating, and owned or managed businesses; we therefore classify them as middle class couples. In one couple, the man had a Bachelor's degree, while his partner had only some college; because she was from a middle class family (with a father who was a physician) and bore the trappings of the middle class (driving her parents' old Mercedes, living in a wealthy suburb prior to cohabiting) we also group this couple with the middle class.

[4] Internet recruitment was done on Craig's List, an online community-specific forum where everything from employment opportunities to furniture for sale is advertised. Although online recruitment in general may result in a higher income, more educated sample (Hamilton and Bowers 2006), in this instance (where middle class participants were the desired respondents) it was an effective way of reaching the target sample.

[5] Couple-level incomes for the working class range from $18,000 to $86,800 and $25,000 per year to $175,000 per year among the middle class. The couple with the lowest income in the middle-class is one where the female partner recently gave birth and is

currently at home with their two children; prior to the birth of their baby, the couple reported earning approximately $50,000 per year.

[6] Partners did not always concur regarding how long they were romantically involved prior to moving in together, but responses generally only differed by a few months. These differences were often encompassed within one category (such as one respondent reporting four months and the other six). When responses fell into two categories, we carefully reread transcripts to determine if there was consistency in dates, and reconciled discrepancies. When one partner only reported vague periods, we choose to privilege the report of the partner who could specify dates, such as when they had their first date or the month of moving in.