Consensual Partnering in the More Developed Countries: An Overview

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ABSTRACT

Arguably the most spectacular demographic development in the More Developed Countries (MDCs) in recent decades has been the emergence of consensual partnering as an alternative, albeit often a temporary one, to formal marriage in the formation of male-female relationships. This paper summarizes evidence for this trend across a range of MDCs and reviews the rapidly growing literature it has spawned under the following headings: 'The International Nature of the Phenomenon', 'Reasons for the Rise in Consensual Partnering', 'Who Cohabits?', 'The Nature of Consensual Unions', 'Union Conversion to Marriage and Dissolution', 'The Rise in Consensual Partnering and the Retreat from Marriage', 'The Impact of Premarital Cohabitation on Marital Stability', 'Childbearing in Consensual Unions', and 'Consensual Partnering Following Marital Breakdown'.

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In the space of less than twenty years, marriage has lost all measure of necessity. It is now no more than an 'option' in the marital life course: a bridge to cross when one chooses and if one chooses. (Villeneuve-Goskalp, 1991:81)

Introduction

The modern rise of consensual partnering in the more developed countries (MDCs) dates from the turbulent 1960s. More commonly termed in the literature 'cohabitation', 'unmarried cohabitation' or 'nonmarital cohabitation', various other phrases also are used more or less interchangeably: 'living together' and 'living in a de facto relationship', for example. Definitions abound (Cole, 1977; Macklin, 1976b; Hoffmann-Nowotny, 1987; Tanfer, 1987). Most have at their core the notion of a heterosexual couple who are not formally married to one another living in a sexually intimate domestic relationship under the same roof. Sometimes there is a narrowing to embrace only 'marriage-like' relationships (e.g. Brown and Kieman, 1981) or, so as to eliminate encounters whose brevity suggests limited substance (terminated unions) or that substance has still to be demonstrated (current unions), through imposition of a minimum duration. But the definition may also be broadened. Dates of commencement of consensual unions can be indistinct as couples drift from living separately through increasingly frequently sleeping together before becoming fully consensual (e.g. Hoern, 1988; Rindfuss and VandenHeuvel, 1990). Definitions can include 'living' relationships which were, or may become, part of this process, or indeed in which co-residence is eschewed for personal, legal, or other reasons (so-called 'living apart together' (LAT) relationships (Hoffmann-Nowotny, 1987; Cliquet, 1991)). Then again, to establish legal rights and obligations it may be necessary to de-emphasize sexual intimacy as integral to consensual partnership (Foreman and O'Ryan, 1985). Hereafter little attention is paid to definitions, but the fuzziness that attaches to the concept of consensual partnering at its margins should be appreciated.

Consensual partnering is not without historical precedent in many of the countries under review. In Australia it was widespread among the European population during the convict era (1788-1840), reflecting both the non-exceptional nature of such behaviour among the British

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1 This situation should be distinguished from that in which virtually any informal cohabiting union is assumed to be 'marriage-like'.

2 Note that LAT (arguably better labelled LTA) relationships can be marital. If included, the term 'consensual union' is decidedly more appropriate than 'cohabiting union'.

working classes from which convict settlers were drawn (Sturma, 1978) and peculiarities of their Australian situation that discouraged marriage (Carmichael, in preparation). European, and especially British and Scandinavian, forerunners of the modern phenomenon have been extensively described. Despite the precedents, however, the rapid growth of consensual partnering, in tandem with trends to later and less universal marriage, in most Western countries over the past 25-30 years represents a distinctive new phase in their demographic histories; one in which living together unmarried has acquired unprecedented middle and upper class acceptances, which partly because of this has had significant legal ramifications, and which reflects 'deliberate and individualized choices' rather than the 'massive cultural and structural restraints to marriage', particularly among the lower classes, which underpinned the phenomenon in the past (Hoffmann-Nowotny, 1987:162-163). It is a phase integral to the notion of a 'second demographic transition' advanced for Europe and the West by Lesthaeghe and van de Kaa (1986).6

Changing Marriage Patterns and the Rise of Consensual Partnering
The first two decades post-World War 2 were very familial in the MDCs, a unique combination of dominant middle class values, the depressions of wartime and post-war economic prosperity giving rise to the 'Golden Age' of marriage and the bourgeois nuclear family (Festy, 1980b; Hoffmann-Nowotny, 1987; van de Kaa, 1987). Total first marriage rates (TFMRs) in the mid-1960s consequently were high (Figure 1), but led by Sweden, and with Denmark, West Germany, France, the Netherlands, Austria and Switzerland following, the intensity of first marriage activity then began to fall dramatically (Festy, 1980b; Blanc, 1984; Westoff, 1986). From the early 1970s virtually all other countries of Scandinavia, Western and Central Europe, North America and Australasia joined the trend. TFMRs fell from levels that implied universal or near-universal marriage were birth cohorts to experience the prevailing cross-sectional age-specific first marriage rates (TFMR = 1000) to levels by the early to mid-1980s that, sustained indefinitely, would see from 50 to 70 per cent ever marrying (i.e. between 30 and 50 per cent never marrying).

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3 Cohabitation during the convict era was not always 'consensual'. Some convict women were selected by free settlers ostensibly as servants but in reality as de facto wives; others cohabited primarily to secure shelter and/or to minimize their level of sexual exploitation.


6 This original paper is in Dutch. For discussions of the notion in English see van de Kaa (1987, 1994) and Lesthaeghe (1992). For a sceptical view see Clignet (1991).
Marriage was being both postponed and, in some quarters, dispensed with, but as this was happening it was also noted that more and more couples were living together unmarried. Nonmarital cohabitation began to arouse intellectual curiosity; a curiosity that rapidly has generated a substantial literature. Much of its English language component pertains to the US, which is interesting (Figure 1) for the comparative mildness of its retreat from marriage, and a commensurately moderate level of consensual partnering by European standards (Cherlin and Furstenburg, 1988). This reality should not be overlooked in reviewing the literature. Early US studies focused on small, university-based samples (Cole, 1977; Muckley, 1977, 1984), promoting the misconception that the trend to consensual partnering diffused from campuses. Later US research (Tanfer, 1987; Bumpass et al., 1991b) indicated that college students were imitators, not innovators, and certainly Swedish (Bernhardt and Hoem, 1985; Hoem, 1986) and French (Villeneuve-Gokalp, 1991) studies have shown that in those countries working class people and non-students led the way, although de Jong Gierveld and Liebrot (1991) argue otherwise for the Netherlands. In the past decade and a half respectable US research has used samples representative of a region or the nation, and similar studies have appeared increasingly for a range of other countries.

Table 1 summarizes evidence of the increase in consensual partnering for several MDCs. Quite a variety of types of evidence is apparent. The best comes from surveys, mostly conducted through the 1980s, which gathered retrospective family formation histories. As cohabitation has spread some countries have also sought to monitor it via dedicated census questions, but these invariably have caught the trend mid-stream and in Australia, at least, seem to significantly underestimate the extent of the phenomenon. Other sources, resorted to in the absence of alternatives, have been census and survey household classifications, which identify cohabitators only imperfectly (Glick and Norton, 1977; Glick and Spanier, 1980; Spanier, 1983; Sweet and Bumpass, 1984; Thornton, 1986; Jacobsen and Pampel, 1989), and comparisons of addresses of brides and grooms in marriage registers (Carmichael, 1984; Gwartney-Gibbs, 1986; Haskey and Coleman, 1980; Haskey, 1990). Without discussing it country by country, Table 1 reveals spectacular trends in proportions of successive birth cohorts who cohabited during defined life cycle stages, in proportions of unions at ages 20-24

7 Villeneuve-Gokalp writes (p. 97) of a 'long-standing tradition of informal union', a lack of means (beyond social reprobation) of discouraging it, and lower religiosity as underpinning the working classes' leading role. She attributes the misconception of top-to-bottom diffusion of cohabitation to discrete practice of the lifestyle by the working classes; to over-interpretation of cross-sectional data gathered after the surge in cohabitation was well under way; and to over-aggregation of socio-occupational categories which, for example, masked distinct differences in the marital behaviour trends of skilled and unskilled manual workers.

8 Sanstow and Bracher (1993) report from a 1986 national survey that 12.0 and 9.6 per cent of women aged 20-24 and 25-29 were currently cohabiting, whereas 1986 census estimates were 8.4 and 6.6 per cent. For a review of the quality of 1986 Census data on de facto relationships see Australian Bureau of Statistics (1991).

West Germany: Between 1972 and 1982 the number of cohabiting couples increased nearly fourfold and the number of unmarried cohabitants ‘between the ages 18 and 25’ nearly tenfold (Hoffmann-Nowotny, 1987:130). Of a sample of 16-26 year-old females interviewed in 1978, 28% of those married before 1974 had cohabited before marriage compared to 35% of those married in 1977-78 (Hopflinger, 1985).

Great Britain: Data from the General Household Surveys of 1986 and 1987 show that, for persons in intact first marriages celebrated in 1966, 1971, 1976, 1981 and 1987, 2%, 6%, 19%, 30% and 53% (males) and 2%, 7%, 20%, 29% and 47% (females) cohabited with their spouse before marriage (Haskély and Kienman, 1989).

Australia: The 1986 and 1991 Censuses found 5.7% and 8.2% of all couples consensually partnered (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1994). While 25.4% and 7.7% of females, and 30.1% and 9.9% of males aged 15-24 and 25-34 who were in a union at the 1986 Census were cohabiting, equivalent figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics’s 1992 Family Survey were 40.1% and 12.6% (females) and 47.8% and 16.6% (males). A 1986 nationally representative survey showed (i) that among the female birth cohorts of 1932-42, 1942-51 and 1950-61, 8%, 17% and 32% had ever cohabited (Santow and Bracher, 1993); (ii) that female rates of entry into cohabiting unions at ages 20-24 for cohorts aged 50-59, 40-49, 30-39 and 25-29 at interview rose from 6 to 14 to 57 to 105 per 1,000 woman-years spent unmarried or separated (Bracher and Santow, 1990); and (iii) that for male cohorts aged 45-49, 40-44, 35-39, 30-34 and 25-29 at interview, exposure in marital or cohabiting unions spent cohabiting rose from 4% to 5% to 11% to 16% to 27% at ages 20-24, and from 1% to 3% to 7% to 11% to 18% at ages 25-29 (Carmichael, 1991).

New Zealand: While for 8% of marriages that were first marriages for at least one party in 1961 the bride and groom gave identical addresses, in 1976 26% did so (Carmichael, 1984). At the censuses of 1961, 1986 and 1991, 10%, 12% and 15% of females, and 8%, 9% and 12% of males aged 20-24 lived in consensual unions, as did 7%, 9% and 13% of females, and 8%, 10% and 14% of males aged 25-29. At the same dates percentages of those in unions who were in consensual unions were 20, 29 and 45 (females aged 20-24); 28, 40 and 59 (males 20-24); 8, 13 and 21 (females 25-29); and 12, 17 and 27 (males 25-29).

United States: US Bureau of the Census estimates show households comprising two unrelated adults of opposite sex (and any children) rose from 439,000 in 1960 to 523,000 in 1970, 1,389,000 in 1980 and 2,220,000 in 1996 (Glick and Norton, 1977; Thornton, 1986). The 1987-88 National Survey of Families and Households found (i) that in the first marriage cohorts of 1965-74, 1975-79 and 1980-84, 9%, 30% and 39% cohabited with their spouse before marriage while 11%, 32% and 44% cohabited with any partner, and (ii) that for the birth cohorts of 1940-44, 1945-49, 1950-54, 1955-59 and 1960-64, 8%, 11%, 24%, 29% and 33% of males, and 3%, 7%, 15%, 20% and 37% of females had ever cohabited before age 25 (Bumpass and Sweet, 1988).

Canada: The 1986 Canadian Family History Survey found probabilities of having entered a ‘common-law’ first union by age 25 for birth cohorts aged 50-59, 40-49, 30-39 and 18-29 at interview of 0%, 1%, 8% and 29% for females, and 0%, 1%, 9% and 25% for males (Burch and Macdon, 1988). The 1984 Canadian Fertility Survey indicated that, of the 1935-49, 1950-59 and 1960-69 female birth cohorts, 2%, 18% and 28% formed a first union by cohabitation after age 20, and 4%, 26% and 43% had done so by age 24 (Rao, 1990).

and 25-29 which were cohabiting unions, and in proportions of successive first marriage cohorts who cohabited prior to marriage.

Associated with the declines in first marriage activity and increases in consensual partnering have been increases in proportions of births occurring outside marriage (Figure 2; see also Moors and van Nimwegen, 1991; Rabin, 1992). Sweden and Denmark lead, with children now as likely to be born outside as within marriage (and first-born children a good deal more likely to be; two out of three in Sweden (Hoem, 1988; Trost, 1988)). In these countries cohabitation is a social institution alongside marriage: ‘...almost no-one marries without previous cohabitation. The wish for children, a pregnancy or a birth are no incentives for marriage’ (Trost, 1988:3; see also Festy, 1980a; Poppe/I, 1988). Elsewhere, upsurges in proportions of births occurring outside marriage have been decisive if, to varying degrees, less spectacular; Swedish and Danish indifference to marriage as a setting for childbearing may not yet prevail, but neither are consensual unions universally childless.

Research Themes in the Literature on Consensual Unions

In the remainder of the paper the major intellectual issues raised by the rise in consensual partnering are identified and the research they have generated is reviewed.

The International Nature of the Phenomenon

The international nature of the rise in consensual partnering has aroused much interest. It is one of several demographic manifestations of a marked shift to more individualistic and post-materialist values which is claimed to have produced a ‘second demographic transition’ in the MDCs (Lesthaeghe, 1992; Lesthaeghe and Moors, 1993; van de Kaa, 1994). Allegedly, in the MDCs:

The higher living standard and greatly increased economic independence and security of individuals, the shift in values towards greater individualism and post-materialism, and the ‘second contraceptive revolution’ have had a profound impact on the aspirations, life courses, and life style of the populations concerned. They have reduced the role and influence of secondary groups, have changed the institutional context and mental model of the family and couple, and make individuals seek self-fulfillment and pursue higher order needs. (van de Kaa, 1994:114)

Clignet (1991) has criticized the attributing of recent demographic trends in Europe to individualistic tendencies. Responding to this criticism, Lesthaeghe (1992:4) focuses on ‘individual autonomy’ (i.e., ‘individual freedom of choice and the non-acceptance of external...') Post-materialist values (Inglehart, 1977) develop when "... the emphasis shifts from survival to satisfaction, from being to having; and an ideology stressing personal fulfillment becomes dominant" (Cheilton, 1990:152).
authority or morality) as the key concept. This, he argues, did increase during the first demographic transition, but only "very quietly" because the "act of dissent (adoption of contraception) occurred in private. By contrast the second transition has seen a much more public and, in confronting all forms of institutional authority, pervasive assertion of individual autonomy, and openly living together unmarried has been a prominent feature of this. The transition process has seen expressing sexuality become more acceptable; a rapid weakening of social control by institutions; greatly enhanced female control over reproduction (based on highly efficient contraception); a rise in the importance placed on the quality of the adult dyad; development of more symmetrical intra-union patterns of exchange; the 'discovery' by women of opportunity costs arising from improved economic autonomy; and household transactions increasingly needing to recognise domestic and career orientations of both partners. All of these developments have promoted consensual partnering as a flexible alternative to, or temporary substitute for, marriage. Its link with 'individualisation' has been demonstrated by Wiersma (1983) and Lesthaeghe and Moors (1993). The latter show cohabitants compared to married persons in four European countries to have distinctly more individualistic, secular, post-material value orientations. Wiersma (1983:104-105; 110) concludes that cohabitants:

go consistently and significantly more their separate ways. They appear to keep a greater sense of individuality in the management of financial affairs ... they are less committed, they are more unsure whether the relationship will last ... they think more often about leaving, they are less happy ... there is more admitted tension within their partnerships ... [they] idealize the partner less as the one and only ... They occupy a more autonomous position in relation to other societal institutions.

While increases in consensual partnering have occurred in all MDCs, considerable cross-national diversity has also been noted. Sweden and Denmark are the benchmarks (e.g., Festy, 1985; Hopfinger, 1985; Moors and van Nimwegen, 1991; Haskey, 1992a); for Sweden, as early as the 1930-40 birth cohort 40 per cent of women entered cohabiting first unions, marriage typically following so quickly as to attract little public attention (Hoem, 1988). Even Norway is not in the same league as its neighbours (Ostby, 1988). Sweden's more recent experience is central to Poponos' (1988) concept of the 'post-nuclear family', being to him a model of developments to be anticipated elsewhere as populations adjust fully to (p. 74) 'a serious social flaw' in the modern nuclear family - the problematic role of women once values of individualism, self-fulfilment and equality become preeminent. Not all, however, accept the inevitability of the Nordic model emerging in other countries. Boh (1988:296) writes of a 'convergence to diversity' being the common underlying feature in the evolution of family life patterns in Europe; Festy (1980:6) asserts that the extent to which marriage remains the preferred setting for childbearing will dictate progress towards the Swedish model elsewhere; and Sarnow (1980) sees disparity in the role informal unions will play as a likely ongoing feature of otherwise converging demographic regimes in the MDCs. Studies of non-

Figure 2
Nonmarital Births as a Percentage of Total Births 1965-1990

Northern Europe
- Norway
- Finland
- Sweden
- Denmark

Western Europe
- France
- England/Wales
- Netherlands
- Belgium
- West Germany

Central and Southern Europe
- Austria
- Switzerland
- Spain
- Italy
- Greece

North America and Australasia
- Australia
- United States
- Canada
- New Zealand

Source: Van de Kaa (1994:90-91); annual vital statistics volumes (Australia, United States, Canada and New Zealand).
Scandinavian populations often stress the typical brevity of periods of cohabitation, a disinclination to have children while cohabiting, and the lifestyle's status as mainly a precursor to marriage. 'Clearly, there are large differences in the meaning of cohabitation in different societies' (Leschziner, 1992:7).

**Reasons for the Rise in Consensual Partnering**

Noting that the proportion of first marriages preceded by cohabitation in the US had risen from 8 to 49 per cent between the late 1960s and the mid-1980s, Bumpass (1990) asked: 'How has it happened that what was once morally reprehensible has become the majority experience in just two decades?' He nominated two major factors - a revolution in the sexual experience of the unmarried which (p. 486) 'seriously weakened the basis for disapproving of cohabitation, and an erosion of confidence in the stability of marriage which had promoted testing compatibility as a rationale for cohabitation. Others, too, have identified these developments as conducive to consensual partnering, listing alongside them interrelated explanations like the prolonging of formal education, the Women's Movement's championing of new female life cycle priorities, women's growing capacity for economic independence, the 1960s youth idealization which saw living together as a form of generational protest, the eccentricity of joint residence during a low-income life cycle phase, increasing sexualization, and the spread of individualistic values and concern for personal autonomy. Schoen and Owens (1992:117), for example, see a reduced economic dependence of women coupled with a developing male taste for the capacity of consensual unions to minimize long-term obligations as having contributed to an 'era of individualism' that underpins the upsurge in cohabitation. Manning et al. (1992) also note a growth in the popularity of life course options that defer long-term commitment, while Santow and Bracher (1993:25) view both greater emphasis on the 'physical appurtenances of marriage and increasing economic uncertainty among the young as having encouraged cohabitation.

Neo-classical economic theory (Becker, 1981) attributes the rise in consensual partnering and deferment of marriage and parenthood to a reduction in the gains to marriage for women and a masked increase in the opportunity costs of motherhood consequent upon extended female education and increased female earning capacities. Easterlin et al. (1990) see them as products of the interaction of sustained consumption aspirations with deteriorating economic prospects for young males. Both economic theories have, however, drawn criticism.

10 See, for example, Clayton and Voss (1977), Yil (1976), Glick and Spanier (1980), Burch and Madian (1986), Thornton (1988), Willis and Michael (1988), Bumpass and Sweet (1989), Kiernan (1989), Lennox (1990a), Cherlin (1990), Bumpass et al. (1991), Schoen and Owens (1992) and Wu and Saha (1994). But note that several studies have also documented a tendency for the mean duration of union to increase as cohabitation has become more widespread (e.g., Etter, 1988; Lennox, 1990a; Manling, 1991; Moors and van Nierwegen, 1991; Lindgren et al., 1993).

Oppenheimer (1989) considers marriage market conditions to be crucial: higher education and greater financial independence have raised the standard of a minimally acceptable match for women, resulting in a more careful partner search and postponement, not (as the neo-classical view implies) rejection, of marriage. More recently Manting (1991), Bracher and Santow (1993) and Blom (1994) have produced evidence contradicting the neo-classical view, while Leschziner and Moser (1993) have criticized the failure of economic theories to acknowledge 'ideational factors'. As well as consumption aspirations, they argue, value orientations capable of greatly influencing the life course are generated during a person's formative years. Thus (p. 3), 'monocausal theories do not do justice to the complexities involved in the emergence of new life cycle states.'

As the likes of Holstien (1979), Carlson (1985), van de Kaa (1987, 1994), and Kiernan (1989) have argued, however, innovations in contraceptive technology in the early 1960s were crucial, in tandem with the spread of television facilitating and reinforcing relevant structural and cultural change (van de Kaa, 1994). They led to an increasing disassociation of fertility from nuptiality (Hopfinkel, 1985), from which it was but a short step to consensual partnering. Carlson (1985:124-125) sees as the defining feature of consensual unions their being normally childless or 'conjugal', relying for purpose and stability on 'the affections of the conjugal pair for each other ... Only the ability to avoid parenthood by contraceptive practices made "conjugal" relationships a viable alternative'. Reliable contraception was the key to lifestyles in which acquiring education, establishing careers, indulging consumption tastes and pursuing leisure interests and travel aspirations would receive priority in early adulthood. Initially, given prevailing morality in most MDCs, the natural response was to seize the potential for earlier marriage. But as the early years of marriage become typically childless, the need to marry to sanction such a phase soon was questioned; the more so as rising divorce rates and individualistic, secularist and feminist values took hold (van de Kaa, 1987, 1994; Carmichael, 1988). Rates of cohabitation may have begun rising before first marriage rates started to fall (Santow and Bracher, 1993), but this does not undermine the story. Some couples immediately recognized the potential for childless consensual partnering, while the alternative response of marrying younger delayed marriage downturns. The former, one-step response to new contraceptive circumstances was easier where normative sanctions against cohabitation were weaker, and this may largely explain the enthusiasm with which Swedes and Danes embraced the lifestyle (Holstien, 1979; Berndt and Hoern, 1985; Trost, 1986).

Who Cohabits?

Naturally this question has been asked often. Numerous studies (e.g., Dumas and Péron, 1992; Santow and Bracher, 1993; Manting, 1994) concur that the likelihood of having cohabited rises with recency of birth cohort, while US (Bumpass and Sweet, 1989; Jacobsen
and Pampel, 1989) and French (Audras, 1986) research shows an associated increased concentration at younger ages and among the never married and separated/divorced. Being formerly married predictably is associated with higher likelihoods of current cohabitation and cohabitation prior to marriage than being never married (Carmichael, 1981; Gwartney-Gibbs, 1986; Willis and Michael, 1988; Bumpass and Sweet, 1989; Haskey and Kiernan, 1989; Jacobsen and Pampel, 1989), and those with two or more previous marriages are even more 'risk averse' (Jacobsen and Pampel, 1989:24). American research also has yielded higher rates of cohabitation, net of other variables, among females (Thorton, 1988; Bumpass and Sweet, 1989), a finding attributed to greater exposure to risk before marrying and to their greater chance of acquiring a previously married partner while themselves never married.

Analyses of cohabitation almost invariably report strong negative associations with religiosity. In Santow and Bracher's (1993:10) study of Australian women the crucial variable is not, however, personal religious observance, but having a father who belonged to a 'minor fundamentalist Protestant sect'; paternal incultation of values unaccepting of cohabitation is, it is suggested, all-important. Liefbroer and de Jong Gierveld (1992) report independent effects of personal and parental religiosity. Blom (1994:162) asserts that part of the link from religious indifference to cohabitation is 'channelled through [early] sexual initiation'; and Thornton et al. (1992) establish a reciprocal impact of cohabitation on religious participation, the latter having fallen over a five-year period for cohabiters who at age 18 were regular churchgoers. In France, as many as 50 per cent of 'regular or irregular' church attenders entering first unions in the early 1980s cohabited, compared to 70 per cent of non-attenders (Villeneuve-Gokulp, 1991). But cohabitation gave way much more rapidly to marriage among the former. De Feijter (1991) (cited by Manting, 1994) claims that the impact of religion diminished as cohabitation has become more mainstream behaviour, but Leethaeghe and Moors (1993) assert the association's continued strength.

The relationship of education to cohabitation has been more contentious. Clayton and Voss (1977) first queried the US assumption that cohabitation was mainly a 'college phenomenon', finding for their male sample that it was most common among those with less than a high school education. Negative cohabitation/education gradients have since been reported in several North American studies. Elsewhere, however, researchers variously have found no difference in levels of cohabitation by education level, a positive gradient, or a U-shaped relationship. Manting (1994), studying Dutch females, provides insight into possible bases for this confused situation, establishing variations by both birth cohort and age in the relationship between education level and proclivity to cohabit. But the real focus in much of the literature has been not educational attainment, but student status per se.

In the US Tanfer (1987) for females in their twenties and Jacobsen and Pampel (1989) found that student status sharply reduced the propensity to cohabit, as did Manting (1994) for Dutch females, especially those born more recently. Blom (1994) for Norway maintained that being a student impeded cohabitation only for women, whereas for Sweden and the Netherlands Hoern (1986) and Liefbroer (1991) (see also Liefbroer and de Jong Gierveld, 1992) observed that student status greatly reduced the likelihood of entering any union, but substantially increased the likelihood that a union entered would be consensual. Villeneuve-Gokulp (1991), examining French first union cohorts formed between 1968 and 1982, also found students more likely than the employed to have partnered informally. Santow and Bracher (1993) concluded for Australian females that what discouraged, and then deferred, both cohabitation and marriage was actual participation in education. In the most recent US study, Thornton et al. (1994) duplicate the finding of Hoern and Liefbroer: lower rates of both cohabitation and marriage among students than among non-students, but a higher relative frequency of cohabitation among the former. Both conjugal states, they conclude, make demands that hinder study, but cohabitation is less demanding. Moreover, the inhibiting effect of student status on cohabitation diminishes across the life course (especially for women), and part-time student status impedes cohabitation and marriage less than full-time status does. Female students are more especially well to values conducive to cohabitation (Leethaeghe and Moors, 1993).

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12 See, for example, for Canada, Rao (1989); and for the US, Glick and Spanier (1989), Spanier (1982, 1993) (never married women are reported to be an exception), Tanfer (1987), Bumpass and Sweet (1989), Jacobsen and Pampel (1989), Bumpass et al. (1991a) and Thornton et al. (1994).

13 See, for example, for Sweden, Hoern (1986); for Britain, Kiernan (1989) and Haskey and Kiernan (1989) (the latter for males only); for France, Lefort and Villeneuve-Gokulp (1989) (who nevertheless report higher levels of promotorial cohabitation at extreme ends of the educational spectrum); and for Norwegian males born in 1960, Blom (1994).


15 For example, for British females, Haskey and Kiernan (1989); and for Norwegian females born in 1945 and 1960, Blom (1994).

16 In the case of cohabitation only full-time participation in education had this effect; for marriage both part-time and full-time participation had a similar effect.
Class differences in consensual partnering receive special attention in Villeneuve-Gokalp's (1991) analysis of French survey data. As previously noted, these data point to the working classes having pioneered the lifestyle, but they also point to a sharp rise through the 1970s and early 1980s in the frequency with which upper class ('cadre') unions began informally. Cadre women, seeking to maximize their return on educational capital, eschew independence and (p. 95) 'on another persona than that of wife and mother', began rejecting direct marriage earlier than cadre men. Change was slower, from a higher base, among working class women. Middle class women persisted longest with direct marriage, but the cohorts affected by a rise in school leaving age and a difficult labour market entered the marriage market they (p. 95) 'adopted the new forms of marriage behaviour more massively'. Among maids, skilled manual workers were laggards compared to unskilled manual workers and cadres. Initially anxious to maintain respectability relative to their unskilled peers, they retained once changing cadre behaviour had lent cohabitation legitimacy. For Norway, Ostby (1988) finds the intensity of transition from never married to cohabiting for women aged 18-44 in 1977 to be 22 and 37 per cent higher for daughters of 'blue-collar workers and lower employees' than for those of 'higher employees' and 'farmers and fishermen'.

Prominent among other variables examined as potential correlates of cohabitation have been race/ethnicity, place of residence, parental marital disruption and employment status. In New Zealand and Australia the indigenous Maori and Aboriginal populations are culturally more attuned to consensual partnering than the European majorities (Carmichael, 1984; Gray, 1984). American research often has found higher cohabitation levels for Blacks (Clayton and Voss, 1977; Glick and Spaanier, 1980; Spanier, 1983; Willis and Michael, 1988; Schoen and Owens, 1992), but Tanfer (1987) concludes that, but for attitudes conducive to cohabitation being more prevalent, Blacks would not cohabit as often as Whites. Bumpass and Sweet (1989) agree, reporting a higher prevalence of cohabitation, but a lower underlying rate thereof among never married Blacks, while Carter (1993) finds no evidence of greater Black cultural acceptance of the lifestyle. Indeed Whites are the more approving of it, and typically exit it by marrying, whereas Black cohabitators most often separate (Schoen and Owens, 1992; Manning and Smock, 1994). In Australia and Canada, large immigrant populations have focused attention on the propensities to cohabitation of the native- and non-native-born. Rao (1986) for Canada reports a significantly lower propensity among the letter. For Australia, Khoo (1986, 1987) found those born in non-English-speaking countries disinclined to cohabit, while Sassert and Bracher (1993) describe a more complex pattern. Women born in Southern Europe and of Southern European parentage strongly disapprove of cohabitation. But non-British, English-speaking immigrants (born chiefly in New Zealand) and immigrants from Northern, Western and Eastern Europe exhibit higher rates of first union formation through cohabitation than the native-born, perhaps reflecting selective migration and remoteness from extended kin.

Metropolitan residence, variously white growing up or at the time of exposure to risk, typically has been found to elevate the probability of cohabitation. Reputedly large cities provide more opportunities to meet suitable partners, attract the more liberal-minded, offer greater anonymity and tolerance, and enhance the incentive to seek to share living costs. Blom (1994) for Norway, however, finds a significant effect only for an older (1945) cohort of females, arguing that it disappeared as cohabitation became less deviant, and Ostby (1988), also for Norwegian females, finds an effect only for first unions began at ages older than 22. Rao (1986) detects no effect for Canadian females, while Liebroer and de Jong Gierveld (1993) associate urban residence with cohabitation replacing, rather than preceding, marriage. Regional differences in the propensity to cohabit also have been established, studies associating the lifestyle with the West of the U.S (Tanfer, 1987), the Paris region of France (Audirac, 1982, 1986; Carlson, 1985; Leiden and Villeneuve-Gokalp, 1988); Quebec in Canada (Turjote, 1990 cited by Wu and Balakrishan, 1994a); the Stockholm region and northern Sweden (Bernhardt and Hoem, 1985); middle and northern Norway (Ostby, 1988; Blom, 1994); and the south east of Great Britain (Haskey and Kiemen, 1989).

Parental marital disruption has in several studies raised the likelihood of cohabitation, sometimes appreciably (e.g. Winters, 1983; Willis and Michael, 1988; Klitzman, 1992), and has been posited by Thornton (1991) to do so largely through its effect on attitudes to marriage and cohabitation (see also Yto, 1978; Bumpass and Sweet, 1989; Netherlands Central Bureau of Statistics, 1991; Menting, 1994). Reporting a similar result for France, Villeneuve-Gokalp (1991:104) asserts that it attests more than a determinacy to subject unions to trial scrutiny; it is also a refusal of marriage!, and may in addition reflect the impact being raised by a lone parent has on views as to the necessity of marriage. An Australian study (Giezer, 1993) finds disruption per se important only for males in a multivariate setting; for females a strong bivariate effect is suppressed by a variable linking cohabitation with having been unhappy in the parental home (see also Khoo, 1986). In a possibly related finding, Rao (1986) reports a higher risk of premartial cohabitation for women from larger families. The likelihood that cohabitation is viewed as a replacement for marriage rather than a precursor to it has also been found to rise against a background of parental divorce (Liebroer and de Jong Gierveld, 1993).

On employment status, both Glick and Spanier (1980) and Spanier (1982, 1983) found US men less, and women more likely to be employed if cohabiting than if married. Khoo (1986, 1987) reports a similar result for Australia, Klitzing (1988) and Henkens et al. (1993) agreeing for the Netherlands that cohabiting women are economically more independent than married women. Approaching the issue differently, Tanfer (1987) for women in their twenties showed that those who were neither working nor studying had the highest rate of cohabitation: Santow and Bracher (1993) found for Australian women that being employed reduced the risk of first cohabitation while increasing the risk of first marriage, leading them to argue (p. 17) that "Cohabitation has become an option for couples who feel they cannot afford to marry but do not wish to live apart." Consistent with this, Khoo (1986, 1987) established higher levels of unemployment among cohabiters than married persons of both sexes, and of job insecurity and instability among cohabiting never married males, and Willis and Michael (1988) and Vilaineveu-Gokaip (1991) similarly linked unemployment with entry to consensual first unions. The theme that lack of financial resources and poor economic prospects dispose toward cohabitation also underlies several other empirical findings. Cohabitation has been associated with receipt of welfare while growing up (Bumpass and Sweet, 1989), low personal income (Jacobsen and Pampel, 1989), and low current and expected future male earnings and high male job turnover (Willis and Michael, 1988). In addition, Bumpass et al. (1991b) establish a positive relationship among cohabiters between family income and the expectation of marrying. Klitzing (1988), however, suggests that cohabiting couples often represent two extremes, being more likely than married couples both to be both working and both not working. Khoo (1986) concurs - dual income status and at least one partner being unemployed both are more common among cohabiting couples - as does Blom (1994:143) in claiming that in Norway cohabitation developed from two socially opposite origins, the educated elite and the working class'. Liebrot and de Jong Gierveird (1992), in a rather different finding, associate consensual first unions with maternal employment during a person's adolescence, this allegedly enhancing emancipation and individual autonomy.

Finally, a range of studies predictably have linked cohabitation to residential independence from parents (Carlson, 1985; Khoo, 1986; Liebrot, 1991; Gilzer, 1993; Liebrot and de Jong Gierveird, 1992, 1993; Manting, 1994), to early initiation of sexual activity (Khoo, 1986), and to attitudes that downplay traditional family values and standards of morality, and accord importance to libertarian and individualistic goals, qualities and philosophies (Khoo, 1986; Bumpass and Sweet, 1969; Clarkberg et al., 1993; Gilzer, 1993; Lesthaeghe and Moors, 1993). The finding of Blom (1994) that the risk of entering a cohabiting first union rose with time since first intercourse could be related; those whose first coitus occurred in a relationship which neither was nor became coresident were probably apt to have liberal attitudes that rendered them more likely to cohabit when eventually they did form unions.

The Nature of Consensual Unions
Where do consensual unions fit with reference to the model in which courtship is followed by marriage, which marks the commencement of intimate co-residence? A related but narrower question commonly is posed: 'To what extent is consensual partnering a precursor to or a substitute for marriage?' The answer to the latter question is temporally, geographically and socially variable. But are there only two possibilities? If 'precursor to marriage' essentially means 'engagement', are not some consensual unions, at a point in time, characterized by levels of commitment that render them analogous to merely 'going steady' or even 'experimental dating'? Evidence such as London's (1960b:460) for France certainly suggests so; he finds that when first moving in together the majority of cohabiting couples had not thought about marriage. Similarly, Hoem (1986:11) for Sweden, noting a quadrupling from 6 to 25 per cent of women forming first unions with men they had known less than six months between the birth cohorts of 1936-40 and 1956-60, writes that 'the first period within a consensual union has surely to some degree replaced the previous practice of going steady'.

Temporal, geographic and social variability in the nature of consensual partnering is readily illustrated. Having argued in 1975 that Swedish cohabitation was trial marriage, by 1987 Trott (p. 15) had retreated: 'Very few...who form a non-marital cohabiting relationship do so...to test each other and the relationship. They move in together because they love each other.' Geographically, of course, Sweden and Denmark are in a league apart in the extent to which cohabitation has replaced marriage, while Wiensma (1983) demonstrates a range of differences in the ways samples of Dutch and US cohabiters perceived and practised the lifestyle. Within Sweden, Bernhardt and Hoem (1985) differentiate between working class women and the daughters of salaried employees, for whom, respectively, cohabitation is a setting for childbearing and a relatively long-lasting childless phase. And similarly, based on whether and how long after union formation marriage, separation or a nonmarital birth occurred, Vilaineveu-Gokaip (1991) distinguishes for France five types of cohabiting union ('prelude to marriage', 'trial marriage', 'free union', 'temporary union' and 'stable union without commitment'). She then demonstrates appreciable variability over time and between 'socio-occupational categories' in their relative importance, painting a much more complex picture of change than other studies have done.

US studies frequently assert that cohabitation is 'a contemporary extension of the courtship process' (Spanier, 1980:280), 'only an advanced stage of courtship' (Tanfer, 1987:490), 'a step in the courtship and marriage process' (Thornton, 1985:503) and 'a stage of courtship' (Thomson and Coilella, 1992:259). Lately, however, some US research has sought to alter this focus by comparing cohabiters with groups other than the married. Willis and Michael (1988) highlighted the limited commitment and range of uncertainties cohabiters frequently
profess, and Jacobson and Pampel (1989) contrasted cohabitation with two nonfamily living arrangements - living alone and with unrelated adult housemates - which they argued were often more realistic alternatives to cohabitation than marriage. Choice of living arrangement, they suggested, might hinge on weighing up the privacy/independence, companionship, social disapproval, consumption economies of scale, and assistance with domestic tasks perceived to be associated with each, an exercise likely influenced over time by changes in norms regarding sexual intimacy and in the use and effectiveness of contraception. Similarly Rindfuss and Vandeven-Heuvel (1990:704), noting the tendency to compare cohabiters with married persons, opined that ‘understanding of this new form of relationship would be better served by also considering the similarities between cohabitation and singlehood’. While cohabitation had marriage-like qualities, components of the dating experience of modern singles also were present: spending substantial time together, frequent sharing of meals, and an active sex life. The often gradual nature of the moving-in process, the lack of commitment early in many relationships, and evidence that many cohabiters (i) did not envisage marriage and (ii) disagreed with their partners as to its likelihood (see Bumpass et al., 1991b) also linked cohabitation to the single state.

Examining, for a cohort that finished high school in 1972 and was followed to 1986, several variables covering childbearing and marriage plans, employment, educational and financial activities, and independence from parents, Rindfuss and Vandeven-Heuvel found cohabiters to consistently rank between their single and married peers, but to be in almost all cases much more like the former. Shaton and John (1993), controlling for presence of children, similarly found cohabiting women to be much more like never married single women than married women in time devoted to housework. Rindfuss and Vandeven-Heuvel concluded (p. 723):

'We while acknowledge the substantial heterogeneity among American cohabiters, we maintain that, taken as a whole and in this time frame, cohabitation in the American context is primarily an alternative to being single.'

In another recent study, Schoen and Wainick (1993) compared patterns of partner choice for cohabiting and married couples to test whether cohabiting unions were 'informal marriages' or a 'looser bond'. They found the latter conceptualization more appropriate. Glezer (1993) for Australia, investigating reasons for cohabiting, obtained answers which often pointed to a 'going steady' lifestyle - respondents perceived themselves as too young or immature for marriage, unsure of levels of compatibility and commitment (their partner's and their own), in the process of developing intimate relationships, wanting to spend maximum time together, and achieving financial and domestic economies. The crucial, all too often overlooked, point to grasp from these studies is the complexity of consensual partnering. It is not 'this' as opposed to 'that'. It straddles courtship and the early stages of marriage, deferring marriage but also displacing to varying degrees engagement, 'going steady' and even, if convenience dominates and commitment is minimal, experimental dating. For some it is also a long-term marriage substitute. At any given time it has different meanings to different participants: alternative to being single; precursor to marriage; substitute for marriage. And these perceptions can change and differ between parties to the one relationship (Manting, 1994). Researchers have still to adequately grapple with this complexity.

One who attempted to do so was Sarantakos (1984). Using intensive interviews with 330 cohabiting couples in Australia, he identified three types of cohabitation: 'trial', 'liberal', and 'de facto'. Consensual unions were further differentiated using three models of partner selection: 'marital' (rational, serious, and with marriage as an explicit objective); 'cohabitant' (oriented toward finding (p. 63) 'an adequate cohabitant'; and 'just friends' (directed at (p. 66) 'securing a relatively permanent dating partner', with convenience often to the fore and commitment lacking). Sarantakos's work is far from beyond criticism, but more research in that mould is needed if these 'do-it-yourself relationships' - individually designed by [couples] to suit their own particular needs' (Glezer, 1993:32) are to be properly understood. Time spent (ever) in a union is not to be equated with time spent (ever) married in a previous era; it is not that simple. Cohabitation has encroached backwards into the courtship process as well as forward into marriage, but how far? There is a need to recognize subcategories of consensual unions.

Union Conversion to Marriage and Dissolution

Examining the fate of consensual unions - the extent to which and speed with which they lead to marriage or dissolve, and the extent to which they endure - is central to assessing their nature. Studies mostly have found that significant but declining proportions are quite rapidly converted to marriages, that rates of dissolution are substantially higher than those for formal marriages (see, for example, Trussell et al., 1992; Manting, 1994) and have tended to

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18 Bumpass and Sweet's (1986:615) comment that 'There is no single answer to whether cohabitation is a late stage of courtship or an early stage of marriage' misses the reality that it may also be a relatively early stage of courtship. Their further claim that contemporary marriage timing 'may be a matter of convenience rather than a marker of a changed commitment' is not in dispute, but convenience may also overwhelm commitment in the formation of consensual unions. Hence the suggestion that cohabitation might 'represent a clearer transition in intimate relationships than marriage' is both difficult to evaluate and, even if true, of dubious assistance. Either or neither event might reasonably approximate the date at which a mutually committed conjugal union came into being, and many consensuel unions undoubtedly dissolve without ever reaching this point.

19 Ironically there was perhaps more research interest in how consensual unions were formed; how committed they were and how they functioned in the early 1970s, when studies invariably used samples not conducive to generalization and when techniques of event history analysis had yet to spawn the misconception that entering first union was analogous to entering first marriage in a previous era. See, for example, summaries by Cole (1977), Macklin (1978) and Blanc (1984).
increase as consensual partnering has encroached further back into the cohabitation process, and that these patterns vary by age at entry to union as well as by cohort.

In Sweden, conversion to marriage no longer is a priority. Hoem and Rennesmalm (1986) report that, of consensual first unions entered childless by members of the 1936-40, 1945-50 and 1955-60 female birth cohorts, 66, 34 and 9 per cent led to marriage childless within two years; 15, 38 and 49 per cent remained intact and childless; 3, 9 and 22 per cent divorced childless; and 16, 19 and 19 per cent yielded nonmarital births. Only 1 in 5 of the youngest cohort ever married childless. In Finland, Lindgren et al. (1993) claim for women entering first consensual unions in 1970-74 and 1980-84 that percentages marrying, and separating without marrying, within five years fell from 70 to 61 and rose from 7 to 19, while Manting (1991, 1994) notes a declining urgency to marry among younger cohorts of Dutch cohabitators, and an 80 per cent higher risk of separation without marrying in unions entered during 1980-88 than in those entered before 1980. Leiden's (1989a) French data reveal rates of conversion to marriage within three years for consensual first unions formed during triennia 1968-70 to 1980-82 ranging between 48 and 67 per cent, and separation rates of from 5 to 20 per cent, trends suggesting that the initial upsurge in cohabitation tied it more closely to marriage, but that from the mid-1970s haste to marry declined. For the US, Schoen and Owens (1992) show for the 1943-47 and 1963-67 birth cohorts a decline from 58 to 44 and a rise from 13 to 40 in percentages of females marrying and separating from first cohabiting partners by age 25 (although to age 30 the former trend is more subdued), and Bumpass and Sweet (1986) find that of cohabiting first unions entered during 1975-84, 56 and 35 per cent became marriages and dissolved without marriage by exact duration 5 years. Noting the 'ephemeral nature' of cohabitation in Canada, Wu and Balakrishnan (1994b:16), for a 1980 sample reporting on unions entered prior to first marriage, establish female and male rates of conversion to marriage and of separation without marrying of 44 and 41 per cent (marriage) and 28 and 34 per cent (separation) within 5 years. For Australia, Brachter and Santow (1993) associate cohabitation with an increased risk of marriage among non-pregnant women, but only after six months (one year if entering the union aged 25 or older), and with the effect falling away beyond duration 3 years to indicate growing aversion to marriage.20

Lately, the determinants of marriage and separation while cohabiting have received attention. Studies to have addressed them include those of Manting (1991, 1994) for the Netherlands, Wu and Balakrishnan (1994b) for Canada, and Manning and Smock (1994) for the US. Cohort effects on marriage rates aside (which Wu and Balakrishnan find more 'eradic' than


Maternal pregnancy strongly elevates the likelihood of marriage, although it marriage does not occur the child is a limited stimulus to it once born (but see Blossfeld et al., 1993 for Germany). To what extent pregnancy (i) induces or (ii) anticipates marriage remains an open question. Being religious also raises the probability of marriage. Other variables to do so in Wu and Balakrishnan's analysis were older age at entry to union (which runs counter to Thornton's (1991) conclusion), age heterogamy (women and men seeking to 'secure' younger, and much younger, partners), higher female education and residence outside Quebec. Having a separated/divorced partner and especially (for men) one with marital status 'not stated' reduced the likelihood of marriage; the latter group perhaps were committed to cohabitation as a marriage substitute and baulked at labelling their partners other than 'wife'. Manting's results add to the sat student status, which impedes marriage (see also Blossfeld et al., 1993), and a positive effect of having lived together for less than 3 years. He does not find employment status important, but Manning and Smock contend, for US Whites, that full-time employment of the male is crucial to decisions to marry. They also show growing up in a non-traditional family to lower (Thornton, 1991 finds no effect), and the presence of children to raise, the odds of marriage, and observe that for Blacks higher levels of female education, signifying greater capacity to achieve an acceptable standard of living, are conducive to marriage while receipt of public assistance during childhood is not. For Sweden Bernhardt and Hoem (1985) found daughters of farmers compared to those of unskilled workers more inclined to convert consensual unions to marriages.

As to determinants of consensual union dissolution, Wu and Balakrishnan (1994b) report increased risk the more recently the union was formed and, to a degree, with higher levels of male education, the latter finding reflecting greater competition for more 'attractive' men. Reduced risk is associated with both the presence of children and their number, with partner's marital status being 'widowed' (men only) and especially 'not stated' (again perhaps indicating reluctance to assign a legal marital status deemed not reflective of a prevailing marriage-like commitment), with the male partner being ten or more years older, and with residence in Quebec. Neither age at entry to union nor religiosity is important, but Manting (1994) does find higher dissolution risks for women who began cohabiting aged 16-18 and those who had no religion. He incorporates dissolution of cohabiting unions into a more general study of union dissolution, providing only univariate results for the former. Additional to those just noted, these indicate rising risks across birth cohorts (especially the youngest, or 1960-64 and 1965-69, cohorts); higher risks for women whose parents had divorced, who were unemployed (as against studying or employed), and who already had a child or were pregnant when entering their unions; and a U-shaped relationship between risk of dissolution and whether the union was formed pre-1975, 1975-79 or 1980-86.
The Rise in Consensual Partnering and the Retreat from Marriage

An obvious research question has been the extent to which increased cohabitation has compensated for later and less universal marriage. Studies that have addressed it often have concluded that substantial compensation has occurred. For France, Leiridon and Villeneuve-Gokalp (1989) assert total compensation until the early 1980s, age-specific proportions of women in a union remaining stable as proportions currently married fell (although more recently as the latter trend had accelerated, compensation had become increasingly less than total). By contrast, Kiernan and Eldridge (1987) (see also Eldridge and Kiernan, 1986) concluded for England and Wales that, at best, increased cohabitation accounted for half the decline in the percentage of women aged 20-24 ever married during 1973-80. For the US, Schoen and Owens (1992:116) write that marriage has declined more than cohabitation has increased, whereas there is little reason to think that the rise in cohabitation has caused the decline in marriage. Similarly, van de Kaa (1994:95) describes increases in proportions cohabiting at ages 20-24 through 30-34 for the Netherlands as 'too limited to make up for the declines in the proportions married', although Swedish and Danish data he presents show proportions of women in a union rising at these ages between 1975 and 1981 (Swedish women aged 30-34 excepted). Hoem and Renneralm (1985), Etzioni (1988) and Hoem (1988) confirm that in Sweden cohabitation more than compensated for the decline in marriage rates.

Studying the US, Bumpass and Sweet (1989) and Bumpass et al. (1991b) adopted two methods, comparing for birth cohorts: (i) proportions ever married and ever in a union by exact ages 20 and 25; and (ii) time spent in a marriage and in a union up to exact age 25. The former approach yields higher estimates of the extent of compensation as between cohorts reaching age 25 around 1970 and 1985 (59 and 76 per cent for males and females compared to 47 and 43 per cent (Bumpass et al., 1991b)). A similar approach is taken by Liefbroer and de Jong Garreld (1992) and Mantling (1994) in claiming near full compensation among post-war Dutch birth cohorts until it diminished among those of the 1960s, and by Rao (1990) in showing similarly full compensation to about age 20 or 22 across the 1935-49, 1950-59 and 1960-69 Canadian female birth cohorts (see also Burch and Madan, 1986; Rajatlon and Balakrishnan, 1990). It is, however, an unsatisfactory way of addressing the compensation issue. In effect it equates entry to a first consensual union with marriage, when in reality some such unions are better likened to 'going steady' and even experimental dating relationships, lacking commitment and often quickly dissolved. The focus on time spent in marriage and in a union at least discounts these tenuous unions once ended, and produces more realistic results. A study of Australian males (Carmichael, 1991) using this approach, but disregarding altogether 'non-serious' consensual unions (those that never led to marriage nor lasted for a year), concluded that, to the mid-1980s, 'around half' of the retreat from marriage had been compensated for by 'serious' consensual partnering. Analysing data for females from the same survey Bracher and Santow (1990) reported that consensual partnering had compensated substantially, though not completely, for the retreat from marriage. A closer look at their numbers suggests something more akin to the French pattern, with the degree of compensation falling away through the first half of the 1980s. Bumpass et al.'s (1991b) US analysis points to cohabitation having compensated least for declining marriage rates among the college-educated.

The Impact of Premarital Cohabitation on Marital Stability

Many consensual unions 'end' when the parties marry. This reality and the frequency with which the opportunity to test compatibility is advanced as a positive attribute of such unions have made the impact of premarital cohabitation on marital stability another obvious research focus. While there are exceptions (a rogue Canadian study (White, 1987), later shown to be flawed (Trussell and Rao, 1989); a British study (Haskey, 1987); and Willis and Michael's (1988) US study), most empirical evidence shows marriages preceded by cohabitation to be less, not more, stable. Research which has sought to pursue this finding has:

1. Linked serial rather than (or more than) single-instance cohabitation Teachman and Polonko, 1990 (males only); Bumpass et al., 1991a; DeMaris and MacDonald, 1993, and cohabitation with someone other than the spouse more than cohabitation with the spouse alone (Swee and Bumpass, 1990a) with instability, suggesting elevated risk where there is premarital experience of union dissolution.

2. Assorted that there is still reason to believe (and evidence to suggest) that cohabitation fulfils a worthwhile premarital 'weeding' function (Bumpass and Sweet, 1989; Sweet and Bumpass, 1990a; Teachman et al., 1991; Kiljbom, 1992).

3. Reached conflicting conclusions on whether the elevated instability of marriages preceded by cohabitation is (Teachman and Polonko, 1990) or is not (Bennett et al., 1988; Teachman et al., 1991; Trussell et al., 1992; DeMaris and Rao, 1992) a function of the fact that at any given marriage duration their durations of union are longer.

4. Suggested that as marriage duration increases the differential disappears, perhaps reflecting dissipation of (i) the impact of a less committed subgroup of cohabiters

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21 See, for example, for Canada, Burch and Madan (1986), Balakrishnan et al. (1987) and Halii and Zimmer (1991); for the US, Booth and Johnson (1988), Bumpass and Sweet (1989), Teachman and Polonko (1990), Bumpass et al. (1991a), Teachman et al. (1991), DeMaris and Rao (1992) and Schoen (1992); for New Zealand, Ferguson et al. (1984); for Australia, Glazer et al. (1992); for the UK, Haskey (1992b); for Sweden, Bennett et al. (1988), Hoem and Hoem (1992), Trussell et al. (1992) and Ghiagarini (1993); and for the Netherlands, Netherlands Central Bureau of Statistics (1991) and Marting (1994).

22 Teachman et al. argue that their, and Teachman and Polonko's results differ because the latter controlled for marriage to a previously married partner, which is a much more common circumstance where marriage is preceded by cohabitation.
Childbearing in Consensual Unions

Significant increases in proportions of births occurring outside marriage across a range of MDCs and their line with more widespread consensual partnering notwithstanding, studies have concluded that cohabiting women have much lower fertility than 'comparable' married women; larger numbers and proportions of nonmarital births primarily reflect increased exposure to risk (through rising incidences and mean durations of cohabitation), not higher rates of fertility within consensual unions. Even for Sweden and Denmark this is so (Bernhardt and Hoem, 1985; Hoem and Rutenfranz, 1986; Ettlinger, 1986; Hoem, 1988; Ostby, 1988), for while childbearing in cohabiting unions may be common, such unions have also largely captured the 'going steady' phase of traditional courtship (Hoem, 1986; Hoem and Hoem, 1992). Hoem and Rutenfranz (1985) and Ettlinger (1988) for Sweden do note, though, in changing patterns of fertility by age at entry to union and duration of union, evidence of cohabitation becoming a more accepted setting for parenthood. Kellman (1988:22) writes of the Netherlands that 'the character of (non)marital fertility has drastically changed', from births occurring outside relationships to births occurring to cohabiting women. A similar trend, generally incorporating a shift in the maternal age distribution of nonmarital births from the teens to more normative childbearing ages, has developed elsewhere, including in Australia and New Zealand (Carmichael, in preparation). It reflects not just the upsurge in cohabitation, but also improved nonmarital fertility control at younger reproductive ages (Desplanches and de Saboulin, 1986 cited by London, 1990b). Something of the evolution of the elevated role of consensual unions in family formation emerges from Rajulton and Balaskishan's (1990) Canadian study. Comparing mothers aged 35-49, 25-34 and 18-24 in 1984 they found that 87, 88 and 39 per cent had made transitions from single to married to first birth; 3, 23 and 26 per cent from single to cohabiting to married to first birth; and 2, 8 and 26 per cent from single to cohabiting to first birth. Only 58 per cent of the youngest cohort, compared to 86 and 90 per cent, were mothers, but there clearly had been a marked increase in the importance of first births within consensual unions.

In most MDCs the transition to parenthood is held to be a major catalyst to the conversion of cohabiting unions into marriages. Moors and van Nimwegen (1991) state thus be so for European nations generally and note that, in view of it, lower fertility in consensual unions is expected. Wiersma (1983) and Kellman (1988) argue the same way for the Netherlands, and Festy (1980) and Carlson (1985) and Lindgren et al. (1993) make similar claims for France, Germany and Finland, although Hoem and Seamer (1984) reach a contrary conclusion for Denmark. Lindgren et al. go on to associate cohabitation for longer than three years with a higher likelihood of childlessness, and to claim negative relationships between duration of premarital cohabitation and both intensity of first birth activity and completed family size.

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The most comprehensive published investigation of fertility in consensual unions is Leston's (1990b) analysis of French data. Comparing triennial cohorts of first unions formed before age 30 between 1968-70 and 1980-82, he finds for the earliest and most recent cohorts that while a fifth and two-thirds of unions were consensual, a quarter and a ninth of those unions yielded a nonmarital birth within three years. Across all consensual unions, conditional probabilities of a nonmarital first birth were unrelated to duration of union and were only a fifth to a quarter as large as probabilities of first births to married couples who had cohabited premaritally at equivalent durations. Marriage was associated with a sharp discontinuity in fertility behaviour, though a less sharp one if cohabitation exceeded two years. There was little evidence of the probability of marriage rising upon occurrence of a nonmarital birth, but near elimination of a peak in first birth intensity at marriage durations 10-12 months between earlier and more recent marriage cohorts testified that more widespread cohabitation had reduced sexual inexperience and anxiety to conceive at marriage. Though numbers and proportions of nonmarital births had risen constantly, rates of fertility for cohabiting women aged 20-24 and 25-29 had fallen through the 1970s before turning upward again. For cohabiting union cohorts of the late 1970s to mid-1980s fertility had risen to levels in years 3-5 about 40-50 per cent of those of equivalent marriage cohorts at their peak fertility durations (years 1 and 2). Lately, then, rising numbers and proportions of nonmarital births reflected rising fertility within, as well as the increased prevalence of, consensual unions.

At least two studies (Bernhardt and Hoem, 1985; Khoo and McDonald, 1988) have linked chidbeating within consensual unions with lower socioeconomic status. The latter authors suggest that such behaviour is often a reflection of middle class values in the face of economic circumstances that promote hesitancy to marry.

**Consensual Partnering following Marital Breakdown**

Consensual partnering following marital breakdown has been relatively neglected in the flood of cohabitation research published since 1970. It has not been the 'new' phenomenon premarital cohabitation has been; when living together unmarried was for most morally unconscionable, couples with at least one partner separated or divorced were, along with the poor and the avant garde, its major practitioners (Kieman, 1990; Leston, 1990a).

Cohabitation among the separated/divorced is, however, a significant component of total consensual partnering in contemporary MDCs, especially beyond age 35 (e.g., Leston and Villeneuve-Gokalp, 1989). Higher divorce rates and an increasingly cautious approach to remarriage have seen it become ever more commonplace, in parallel with the upsurge in premarital cohabitation. A Canadian study (Wu and Balakrishnan, 1994a) is illustrative of its extent and expanded role. Among women aged 55+, 45-54, 35-44 and <35 in 1990 who had experienced a marital breakdown 14, 31, 42 and 47 per cent had ever cohabited thereafter, including 26, 60, 69 and 68 per cent of those who had remarried; corresponding figures for males were 23, 43, 47 and 56 per cent, and 31, 52, 58 and 65 per cent. For the US, Bumpass and Sweet (1989) report 29, 40 and 54 per cent of second marriages celebrated during 1965-74, 1975-79 and 1980-87 being preceded by cohabitation with the spouse. Haskey and Kieman (1989) for a British sample found 38 and 26 per cent of divorced males and females aged 18-49 to be cohabiting, compared to 13 and 17 per cent of bachelors and spinsters. And Blanc (1987), analyzing 1977 Norwegian and 1981 Swedish data, shows overwhelming and growing preferences for consensual second unions among women whose marital first unions broke down before and after 1970 (and even higher rates of consensual repartnering where disrupted first unions were consensual).

Declining rates of remarriage following divorce and lengthening intervals between divorce and remarriage are widely attributed to increased cohabitation (Spanier, 1982; Blanc, 1987; Haskey and Kieman, 1989; Bumpass et al., 1990; Bumpass et al., 1991b; Wu and Balakrishnan, 1994a). Moreover, postmarital consensual unions are of longer average duration than premarital ones (Bumpass et al., 1991b), longer periods are spent cohabiting before post-divorce remarriages than before first marriages (Brown and Kieman, 1981; Haskey and Kieman, 1989), and prior cohabitation is more likely if both parties to a marriage are divorced than if only one is (Brown and Kieman, 1981; Carmichael, 1984). The legal process divorce entails long has made consensual partnering the only alternative to living apart early in many postmarital relationships. Times taken by this process have, however, contracted, and first-hand experience of the contemporary fragility of marriage, consequent wariness of precipitate remarriage, and growing community tolerance of cohabitation largely explain the expanded role of informal re partnering among the separated and divorced.

Noting a lack of previous research, Wu and Balakrishnan (1994a) examined the correlates of postmarital cohabitation. Divorced males remarried more quickly and more extensively than divorced females. Because the norm is for husbands to be older than wives they have better access to potential partners who have never married, and they are also less encumbered by children and more anxious to regain a spouse's domestic capital. Wu and Balakrishnan, however, found no similar gender difference in propensity to cohabit after marital disruption. Women, its greater victims, may find the informality of consensual re partnering especially appealing, but their re partnering market, older and more often (i) previously married and (ii) asked to accept children of the previous union, could also be more reluctant to marry. Two age-related variables, time since and age at marital disruption, were strongly inversely related to the likelihood of postmarital cohabitation for both sexes, while year of marital disruption was a positive correlate. The presence of children and age at first marriage had negative impacts
on cohabitation prospects for women only, the latter finding suggesting that lack of market-valued skills prompts women to seek a partner. On the other hand, duration of first marriage had a positive effect on postmarital cohabitation for women, consistent in the authors’ view, with its measuring the gains expected from having a partner.

For Australia, Khoo (1986, 1987) compared 18-34 year old never married and ever married cohabitators, and married persons. Cohabiting ever married females were especially unlikely to be tertiary educated and, if employed, rarely had professional or managerial occupations. By contrast, ever married male cohabitators frequently were in professional or managerial employment and had good incomes. They also supported much more strongly than other males propositions that ‘important decisions should be made by the husband’ and ‘A woman is only fulfilled when she becomes a mother’, attitudes which might help explain their being previously married. Ever married female, but never married male cohabitators were the more likely both to have no intention of marrying and to report pressure from their partner to have children, suggesting that men resist the formalization of premarital consensual unions and women that of postmarital unions most strongly, perhaps on the basis of aversion to commitment24 and experience respectively.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated the significantly increased popularity of consensual partnering in the MDCs since the mid-1960s and has reviewed major research themes in the literature generated by this phenomenon. One theme not explicitly addressed was attitudes to the lifestyle (see, for example, Sweet, 1969; Thornton, 1983; Sweet and Bumpass, 1990b; Wu and Balakrishnan, 1992), but that it is widely and increasingly approved of in many countries is clear. Manting (1994), for example, cites levels of approval of cohabitation as a trial before marriage and with no intention of marrying among the Dutch rising from 60 to 85 per cent and from 41 to 71 per cent respectively between 1980 and 1991. Consensual partnering is an evolving phenomenon, and as such will command continuing research interest. It seems likely, and is desirable, that this dynamic dimension, not exactly absent from recent European research in particular,25 will receive increasing emphasis as social scientists track the process of change for national populations. Ultimately, it should become clearer to what extent current differentials in the level and nature of consensual partnering are enduring or reflective of variable rates of progress along a common path.

Recent research on consensual partnering has relied heavily on techniques of event history analysis. While this work has been informative it has tended to cloud the complexity of the phenomenon and the reality that it has captured in significant measure not only traditional engagement and what might otherwise have been the early years of marriage (and in some instances the whole of marriage), but also earlier, less committed stages of the dating and courtship process. It is to be hoped that future research will pay greater attention to measuring commitment in consensual unions, to documenting cohabitators’ perceptions of their relationships, changes therein and the mutuality of perceptions, and to detailing the functioning of consensual unions in comparison with marriages. Structured questionnaires may yield some of the required insights, but techniques such as in-depth interviewing also have much to offer. Rindfuss and VanderHeuval’s (1990) characterization of cohabitation as an alternative to singleness, whether the majority model among cohabitators at a point in time or not, undoubtedly is a legitimate model for some couples (and individual cohabitators) for at least part of their cohabiting lives. It is highly debatable whether such cohabiting experience should be regarded as offsetting the retreat from marriage in the MDCs; unlikely that in a bygone era marriage would have been contemplated in some circumstances in which consensual unions nowadays begin (whence regarding entry to a first consensual union uncritically as an event of equal moment to marriage is dubious); and doubtful that some contemporary dissolutions of consensual unions are any different from time-honoured breakups of boyfriend-girlfriend relationships. Taken seriously, these thoughts make life awkward for students of family formation and dissolution processes, for they imply a need to disregard some unions and parts of unions as not really relevant. But if that is the reality, it needs to be confronted.

24 Bumpass et al. (1991b) for the US found never married males aged under 35 58 per cent more likely than females to believe that their freedom would be compromised by marriage after adjusting for background variables.

25 See, for example, Hovem and Rennervall (1985) on Sweden; the series of French studies by Leclerq and Villerans-Gotchap (1989, 1988, 1990b) and Villerans-Gotchap (1991); Lindgren et al. (1992) discussion of gradual change in the nature of consensual unions in Finland; and Manting’s (1994:12) analysis of Dutch data in which he passionately argues the need to have regard for the dynamic framework in which individual behaviour evolves.
References


