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Cohabitors' Prerequisites for Marriage:

Individual, Relationship, and Sociocultural Influences

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ABSTRACT

Recently, the U.S. has witnessed changing union formation patterns, with dramatic changes centering on increases in cohabitation. While cohabitation is sometimes perceived as a threat to the institution of marriage, it is typically linked to the marriage process. We examine cohabitors' beliefs about determinants of marriage. Prior work emphasizes the importance of economic factors; however, our data allow us to identify other subjective characteristics and processes that respondents identify as needing to be in place before marrying. It is generally accepted that attitudes influence behavior, but in many settings the research has not progressed very far in specifying the content of beliefs and attitudes. We consider what we term "relational factors," which include the cohabitor's evaluation of qualities that one and one's partner bring into the relationship and affect readiness for marriage; aspects of the relationship between the partners; and interactions with the broader social world that affect attitudes and behaviors in relationships. This study uses in-depth interviews of 115 young adults who are currently cohabiting or have recent cohabitation experience. Results from this study demonstrate that it is important to consider relational factors at the individual, relationship, and sociocultural levels as part of marriage decisions. Respondents identify a number of factors that they wish to develop prior to marrying, rather than within the marital relationship, suggesting that cohabitation allows time for marital socialization prior to marriage.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades the United States has witnessed changing union formation patterns, with arguably the most dramatic changes centering around cohabitation. For example, the number of cohabiting unions has increased dramatically since about 1970 (Bumpass, Sweet, and Cherlin 1991; U.S. Bureau of the Census 1998); more than half of all people in their 20s and 30s have cohabited (Bumpass and Sweet 1995); the majority of marriages and remarriages are preceded by nonmarital cohabitation (Bumpass and Lu 2000); and children are increasingly living with cohabiting parents (Bumpass and Lu 2000). Not surprisingly, there is strong attitudinal support for cohabitation among young adults. The majority of high school seniors agree that living together is a good idea before marriage to determine compatibility (Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001). The growth in cohabitation, coupled with increasing support for cohabitation, has radically modified the marriage process in the United States. Cohabitation has been linked, directly or indirectly, to the more general issue of the decreasing centrality of marriage (Popenoe and Whitehead 1999; Smock 2000; Smock and Gupta 2002).

While cohabitation has sometimes been perceived as a threat to the institution of marriage, cohabitation is nevertheless typically linked to the marriage process. The majority (75%) of cohabiting women in 1995 expected to marry their partners (Manning and Smock 2002), and this has remained stable since 1987 (Bumpass and Sweet 1989). The probability of a first premarital cohabitation becoming a marriage is 58% after three years of cohabiting and 70% after five years of cohabiting (Bramlett and Mosher 2002). Despite these statistics, there appears to have been some decline in this transition from marriage to cohabitation over time (Bumpass 1998). Given the dramatic growth in cohabitation and its links to the marriage process, it is important to understand how and when cohabitation leads to marriage. Therefore, studying

cohabitors' views on the prerequisites for marriage is a valuable step in gaining a better understanding of union formation behaviors among young adults in the U.S.

This paper examines beliefs about the determinants of marriage from the perspective of cohabitors themselves. Quantitative studies have tackled some aspects of this question (Brown 2000; Carlson, McLanahan, and England 2004; Manning and Smock 1995; Sanchez et al. 1998), but they have largely focused on socioeconomic measures that are available in large-scale surveys. Other qualitative studies have either not directly addressed this issue or focus only on low-income parents (Edin 2000; Gibson and Edin 2003; Sassler 2004). Drawing on in-depth interviews with working and lower-middle class young men and women, we examine subjective appraisals of what is necessary to move from a cohabiting relationship to marriage. In this paper, we look beyond the often-studied economic factors to uncover a broader scope of factors that shape the decision to marry.

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

This paper assumes that individuals' attitudes about what must be in place in order to marry are related to marriage formation behaviors. "[B]ehavior can be meaningfully interpreted only when we understand the system of beliefs that surrounds that act" (Tucker 2000, p. 166). Indeed, there is substantial empirical evidence that attitudes regarding marital and family processes influence those processes. For example, individuals who approve of premarital cohabitation are more likely to cohabit than those who do not (Axinn and Thornton 1993), individuals who have a positive attitude towards marriage marry more quickly than those who do not (Axinn and Thornton 1992), and a positive attitude towards children and childbearing increase the rate of marital childbearing (Barber 2001). Attitudes and values concerning work,

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family, leisure time, money, sex roles, and marriage also influence the choice between cohabitation and marriage for young adults (Clarkberg, Stolzenberg, and Waite 1995). A good deal of past research has focused on economic conditions and the transition to marriage (Clarkberg 1999; Lichter et al. 1992; Lloyd and South 1996; Manning and Smock 1995; Oppenheimer 1994; Oppenheimer 2003; Sassler and Schoen 1999; Smock and Manning 1997; Sweeney 2002; Xie, Raymo, Goyette, Thornton 2003). The weight of this research suggests that marriage, and marriage specifically among cohabitors, is more likely when economic situations are good and that marriage appears more sensitive to men's than women's economic characteristics.

For most Americans though, decisions to marry are not based solely on the economic position of themselves or their potential spouse. Prager (2000) describes the multiple levels and contexts under which relationship intimacy is developed. In the individual context, the characteristics of the individual partners are considered, including personality traits, previous experiences, and attitudes. The relationship context includes the interactions between partners in a relationship. Finally, the sociocultural context involves larger social and cultural norms that dictate partners' behavior. In a similar fashion, we consider what we term "relational factors." Relational factors include the cohabitor's evaluation of qualities in him/herself and his/her partner that are brought into the relationship and affect one's readiness for marriage. They also include aspects of the relationship between the partners. Finally, relational factors entail interactions with one's broader social world that affect attitudes and behaviors in relationships. These include meanings and symbolism attributed to aspects of family life and marriage. Therefore, the relational views about what needs to be in place to marry may range from factors

associated with the individual context, to those from the relationship context, or characteristics of the sociocultural context.

The importance of relational factors in the decision to marry may be due in part to our conceptualizations of "good marriage." Fowers (1998, p. 518) asserts that "there is remarkable consensus in our society about what constitutes a good marriage" and "that communication has been identified as the key to developing and maintaining a good marriage." Researchers, theorists, and therapists share this idea that communication skills are key determinants of marital satisfaction (Burleson and Denton 1997). Trust between spouses has been found to be an important indicator of marital relationship quality (Kurdek 1990) and marital adjustment (Quinn and Odell 1998). As hallmarks of a good marriage, these and other relationship qualities may be viewed by cohabitors as critical factors that must be in place prior to marrying. Rather than attempting to develop the qualities of a good marriage during marriage, individuals may use cohabiting relationships as venues for developing these qualities in themselves, their partners, and their relationships. In a study of high school seniors, 60% of females and 67% of males think that living together before marriage is a good way to test compatibility (Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001). Similarly, 61% of young adults (18-24) in Oklahoma report that cohabitation will improve the likelihood that they will have a good marriage (Johnson et al. 2002). Bumpass et al. (1991) report that a majority of respondents believe that an important reason for cohabitation is to be sure that partners are compatible before marriage, and about 63% gave that as a reason for cohabiting. Their results are consistent with the idea that cohabitation is a testing ground for marriage and a place in which to work relationship problems prior to marrying. Furthermore, Bumpass et al. (1991) also report that the majority of cohabiting respondents do not think anything in their relationship will change if they marry. This suggests

that cohabitors do not expect marriage to change them; rather, the relationship must be sorted out prior to marrying. Therefore, a focus on relational factors may be particularly important for understanding cohabitors' transition to marriage.

Only a handful of studies have recognized the importance of relationship qualities in the transition to marriage among cohabitors. The quantitative research indicates that couples in which neither partner is happy, or only the woman is happy, have a lower likelihood of marriage compared to couples where both partners are very happy (Brown 2000). Similarly, distrust of the other gender significantly decreases the odds of marriage among low-income mothers (Carlson et al. 2004). Waller (2001) reports that unmarried, low-income mothers and fathers who have high gender mistrust, view fewer advantages of marriage, and report greater conflict have lower expectations for marriage. The bulk of prior quantitative research focuses on economic circumstances.

Also, only a few qualitative studies have inquired about cohabitors' potential movement to marriage. Research employing qualitative techniques is able to elicit open-ended responses about reasons for marriage. Results are often consistent with the idea that perceptions of a good marriage may help to determine cohabitors' readiness to marry. Issues that have emerged are that unmarried parents are not ready for marriage, they want to wait to ensure that marriage will last, or the timing is not right (Gibson and Edin 2003). Furthermore, Sassler's (2004) college-based qualitative data also suggest that perceived immaturity may be a barrier that keeps cohabiting couples from marrying.

The qualitative research used in this study provides an important complement to the quantitative research already pursued by social scientists. Despite a large body of research resulting in a considerable amount of information on cohabitation, our understanding of this

phenomenon has been limited to what can be garnered from secondary analysis of existing data sets. There is growing recognition in the social scientific research community that qualitative studies on the U.S. families, including cohabitors, are needed. As Lin (1998) argues, qualitative data can provide answers to questions regarding the mechanisms underlying behavior by answering the "how" and "why" questions. This study extends prior research on the transition from cohabitation to marriage by using a qualitative approach. There is ample empirical and theoretical evidence that relationship-oriented and subjective factors are part of the decision to marry. We move beyond these studies by asking cohabitors to express what they feel needs to be in place in order to marry using open-ended questions. This approach improves upon prior studies because it allows us to examine the full range of factors that matter to cohabitors. Rather than being limited to factors that are included in a quantitative survey, cohabitors are able to speak about any factors that may influence their readiness for marriage. Exploring these factors is an important step in understanding the marital decision-making of cohabitors. We are able to examine whether cohabitors are considering good marriage ideas when determining their readiness to marry and the individual, relationship, and sociocultural influences on this decision.

DATA AND METHODS

We draw on in-depth interviews of 115 young adults who are either currently cohabiting or who have had recent (within five years) cohabitation experience. The respondents were interviewed in 2002, primarily between April and October. We focus on young adults who are between 21 and 35 years old, although a few respondents are less than 21 or slightly older than 35. Our sample is divided such that we have at least 15 interviews with each gender and race/ethnic group (White, African American, Latino). However, for analyses in this paper, we focus on a more general picture of the entire sample.

The respondents all live in the vicinity of Toledo, Ohio. The population of Toledo is quite similar to the distribution of the population in the nation with regard to race, marital status and income. Our sample is largely working class and lower middle-class (i.e., generally high school graduates and those with some college or technical school training). The educational breakdown is as follows: less than high school (11.4%), high school (25%), some college (44.7%); college graduate or more (18.4%). The vast majority of our respondents are currently employed (82%), although a few are enrolled in school full time, and some are both employed and enrolled in school part-time. Yearly incomes range from approximately $15,000 to $50,000, with most reporting incomes in the $20,000 to $40,000 range. At the time of the interview about 44% of the respondents were currently cohabiting, 29% had broken up with their recent cohabiting partner, and 27% had married their recent cohabiting partner. The descriptive characteristics of our sample are provided in Table 1.

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

To perform analyses, we use a computer program for qualitative data analysis called *Atlas/ti.* This program, termed a "code-based theory builder," assists with coding, analysis, and theory-building of qualitative data (Weitzman 1999). The program provides tools to manage, store, extract, compare, explore, and reassemble meaningful pieces of our data flexibly and systematically.

Analyses for this study entail searching for instances in which the respondent discussed what would have to be in place or changed in order to marry his or her partner. While the interviewer asked specific questions on "what needs to be in place to marry" the marriage topic was pervasive during the interviews. Therefore, information was elicited throughout the interviews

on what respondents deemed to be necessary in order to marry their partners. A number of dominant themes emerge in the interviews, which are discussed in the next section.

RESULTS
What Needs to Be in Place to Marry?

We ask respondents what would have to be in place or what was in place before they would marry their cohabiting partner. Most respondents answered this question with respect to their current or most recent partner. However, some respondents did not want to marry that partner, so they spoke more generally about prerequisites to marry. A very small minority of respondents (about 4%) had no response to this because they did not ever want to marry.

To obtain a broad view of their responses we categorize replies into four groups: only economic, only relational qualities, both relational and economic factors, and no response. The economic factors include issues associated with money, employment, assets, and education. The relational factors we uncover include those associated with the individual in relationships (age or maturity); relationship-centered factors (more time in the relationship, relationship qualities, and substance abuse or violence); and factors associated with broader social and symbolic meanings in relationships (weddings and children). As shown in Table 1, most respondents provide both relational and economic replies, suggesting that these factors are sometimes difficult to differentiate and are often intertwined. In our total sample, 22.6% of the cohabitors name only economic criteria, 23.5% name only relational criteria, and 49.6% name both economic and relational factors. Thus, about three-quarters of cohabitors mention relational factors. Clearly, relational factors are significant prerequisites for marriage for the majority of the cohabitors.

Our results in Table 1 illustrate that women and men share similar criteria for marriage. In our sample, African American respondents less often provide only economic factors and more often reply with both economic and relational factors than Whites or Latinos. Our results

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suggest that very young cohabitors rarely consider only economic factors and that respondents with high education levels more often consider only economic factors when discussing marriage. Respondents without children more often report that only economic factors matter, but similar percentages of respondents with and without children report that both economic and relational characteristics are associated with reasons for marriage. The perceived economic prerequisites for marriage can be found in a companion paper (Smock, Manning and Porter 2004). Our focus is on another, less often studied set of factors, which we have termed "relational factors."

Throughout the interviews, respondents discuss a number of relational factors that they feel need to be in place prior to marriage. Relational factors range from individual-centered factors, to characteristics of the relationship, to meanings and symbolism influenced by the respondent's broader social milieu. An individualistic relational factor is the need for greater age or maturity in one or both partners. Relationship-centered factors include needing more time in the cohabiting relationship and the development of specific qualities, skills, and feelings in the relationship. For some respondents, issues involving substance abuse or violence have to be resolved prior to marrying. Societal influences affect the meanings and symbolism cohabitors attribute to family events, such as weddings, childbearing, and childrearing. These factors are often overlapping and not distinct. Table 2 provides the proportion of respondents who cite each of these relational factors as needing to be in place in order to get married.

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Individual Context

As previously mentioned, in the individual context, the characteristics of the individual partners are considered, including personality traits, previous experiences, and attitudes. Cohabitors not only focus on dyadic qualities but also what individuals bring into the

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relationship. Certain characteristics, although centered on the individual, affect how cohabitors see themselves or their partners within the relationship and with respect to marriage.

Greater Age/Maturity. An individual characteristic on which cohabitors consistently focus is the need to be older or have greater maturity before marrying. This involves the individual's own sense of time and not necessarily time in the relationship. We go beyond identifying this factor to also specify what cohabitors believe makes a person mature or immature. We find that for some cohabitors, there is a specific age that specifies readiness for marriage, or ages that imply that one is too young or has too little life experience. Peggy, a 34-year-old associate buyer describes her need to have been older in order to have married her former cohabiting partner: "I think I would've just wanted to have been older…I always wanted to not get married until I was 35. I didn't want to have any kids until I was that age…I always just had this goal of what I wanted or what I thought I wanted my life to be." Calvin, a 24-year-old formerly-employed assembly line worker, tells why a certain age is necessary for him to marry:

> R: I just don't right now – I think the best time to get married, and this is me personally you know what I'm saying, is like when you're older and you did - you did live a little bit…
> I: What would older, what constitutes age?
> R: I would like to be married like around 30. I think at around 30 is a good time to get married. So not 20 or 18 or…I think that's too young I mean.

He views marriage as requiring a greater level of commitment to his partner than cohabitation; therefore, he wants to wait until he is older to make this greater commitment. Others have more general ideas about the age or level of maturity that is necessary in order to marry. Keith, a 34-year-old male surgical technologist, explains how maturity relates to readiness to marry by saying, "Maybe I wasn't mature, maybe that goes along with thinking about what is going on in your life, or what direction you want to go goes along with the level of maturity. Maybe I just

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didn't reach that level yet, the maturity where you think about things, think about getting married and having a family."

For a small group of both male and female cohabitors, lack of maturity is tied to spending time with friends. They feel that in order to become mature enough to marry, they or their partners will have to limit the time spent "hanging out" or "running" with friends. Shirley, a 23-year-old manager, describes her lack of readiness to marry by saying, "Well, I mean, at the time I wasn't ready. I was still trying to go out, go to the clubs, be with my friends." Similarly, William, a 26-year-old landscaper, explains what needs to be in place before marrying as, "Just quit running with my friends, quit putting my friends before her." For some cohabitors, their partners were spending too much time with friends, at the expense of their relationship, as expressed by Yasmina, a 28-year-old customer service representative:

> I just was down and depressed and things weren't working out for me as far as my life went so I didn't know. I know he liked to hang out with his friends and stuff, and I was just to the point where I was like, "This is what I want to do so either you with me or you're not," and he decided he was with me.

These cohabitors equate readiness to marry with willingness to put their partners and relationships before friends and partying.

In some cases, age and maturity are seen as linked to economic factors for cohabitors. Some respondents feel that with greater age or maturity, they or their partners can achieve financial security, finish school, get a job, or acquire other assets. Smock et al. (2004) elaborate further on the notion that cohabitors' acquisition of education, employment or income indicates that someone is "grown up" and ready for marriage. John, an 18-year-old side cook, expresses this by stating that he will marry "when I turn 20-something, when everything, when I'm financially stable." Others convey the same link between age or maturity and economic factors, like Crystal, a 19-year-old educator: "And not, not that he can't work but he's so young-minded

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you know…And I think, but then again [he] does not want to realize, 'I've got to work to have a nice house, a nice car,' and if he like matures, hopefully by then." Susan, a 28-year-old childcare provider, also describes how maturity is linked to economic factors by saying, "Maturity was number one. Because at the time, neither one of us really had money…School – neither one of us were finished with school. We were still going. It was really maturity. Goin' out."

Yet, for some cohabitors, economic issues and maturity are not so closely intertwined. Nikki, a 27-year-old clerk, loves her cohabiting partner and claims she does not care about the money, but realizes his level of maturity is inadequate for marriage. She explains this by saying, "Money's not important to me, but like, if he would just grow up and know what has to be done."

For these cohabitors, marriage should only be undertaken when one has reached a certain level of maturity, life experiences, or age.

Relationship Context

Within the relationship context, we explore characteristics of the relationship and interactions between the cohabiting partners. These factors include the need for more time, specific relationship qualities, and the presence of substance abuse or violence.

More Time

Many respondents express the need for more time before marrying. In a relationship-centered sense, respondents want to spend more time with their partners in the cohabiting relationship before marrying. Our narrative data are useful in providing a window on the specific beliefs about what it is that will be accomplished with additional time.

"Iron Out the Wrinkles." We find in our sample that cohabitors express a need to check compatibility, to work on relationship problems, and to "be sure" about their partners before

committing to marriage. And presumably, this takes time. Caroline, a 29-year-old female housecleaner explains her need for more time in the relationship by saying, "Just to iron out the wrinkles in our relationship. When you bring two people together, especially living in the same household…we both have different ways. And then we both have children…just ironing out those things that need to be worked out." In other words, cohabitors need time to identify and resolve relationship problems and conflicts before marrying, which takes time and effort from the partners. Another commonly held belief is that cohabiting provides the opportunity to learn more about one's partner before committing to marriage. Calvin, a 24-year-old formerly-employed assembly line worker, expresses this by saying, "I have to work on my relationship and iron out problems and make things smoother before I take a leap like that…I'm not going to go out because I've been drinking booze or alcohol and I feel good say, 'Oh lets get married…' And then tomorrow you're arguing and fighting and you're divorced. That's what happens." These respondents believe that spending more time cohabiting will allow them to "iron out the wrinkles" in their relationship before committing to marriage.

Fear of Divorce. A variation on this theme of needing more time occurs when respondents highlight the dangers of rushing the decision to marry. Along with the desire to "iron out the wrinkles" is the idea that if one commits to marriage too quickly or too rashly, there will be inevitable problems, including divorce. Cohabitors express the desire to avoid divorce or later conflicts in their relationships by remaining in a cohabiting relationship until they feel they are "sure" about their partner and their decision to marry. This finding accords well with Waller and Peters' (2003) work that unmarried parents are concerned about divorce and view concerns about divorce as an impediment to marriage. Family background even influences this desire for more time, as cohabitors who experienced parental divorce express concerns about rushing into

marriage. Imogene, a 32-year-old salesperson, and her partner Steve are both children of

divorce, so they attempted to avoid a divorce of their own by spending more time cohabiting:

> We both had things that we had to agree on before we could get married. And I
> don't know if everybody does that, but I hope everybody does that. The divorce
> rate is very high, and that's just very scary that you can go into something and
> build something, a family, a unit, in a matter of a smack on the gavel,
> everything's done and over with. I mean cohabitation is important to know that
> person and their habits and their tendencies. Plus I think that your mindset in
> the direction that you're heading is very different, like you have to be on the
> same page.

Angela, a 21-year-old retail marketer, acknowledges that she and her partner have sources of

disagreement that should be resolved before marrying in order to avoid later marital disruption:

"I just wanted to make sure that he was ready and I was ready. We still fought and everything,

and I just wanted to make sure all of that was out before we got married, otherwise we would

have had problems later on during the marriage." Our data allow us to see how respondents feel

that more time cohabiting will allow them to safeguard against divorce. For example, more time

in a cohabiting relationship allows couples to "be on the same page," be sure they are ready to

marry, and resolve conflicts prior to marriage.

 Alternatives to the Relationship. The marriage decision includes the recognition that

there may be better alternatives to one's current relationship. Taking more time in a cohabiting

relationship allows one to also take time to ensure that there is not a more favorable alternative to

the relationship somewhere. Heidi, a 23-year-old female caseworker says that she needs more

time in her relationship "…to know that I'm content with the way I feel and…that I want to be

with that person forever and that…there's not something else that'll make me more happy and not

necessarily a person, but some other lifestyle, or some other place." Respondents want to be

certain that marriage with their particular partner is the best choice among their set of options.

Relationship Qualities

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A number of respondents see their cohabiting relationship as a venue for developing relationship qualities that they believe are necessary for marriage and part of the process for learning more about their cohabiting partner. The relationship qualities include fidelity, trust, communication, and love.

Fidelity. A primary factor is fidelity. Respondents commonly express concerns about fidelity and view being unfaithful as the "dealbreaker" or the primary reason they would end their relationship. As reported by Smock and Manning (2003), about half of respondents immediately mention "cheating" or "infidelity" as dealbreakers. Thus, there appears to be a norm of fidelity in cohabiting relationships. Actual instances of infidelity are revealed in a significant minority of interviews (approximately one-quarter), sometimes in reference to a past cohabiting relationship, but at least as often in the current one (Smock and Manning 2003). It is also significant that more than half of these instances are self-reports – that is, the respondent reveals that he or she had been unfaithful. Therefore, despite a normative expectation of fidelity in cohabiting relationships, the lack of formal or legal ties in a cohabiting relationship may make this norm difficult to support or enforce. The need to develop a sense of trust in a partner's fidelity is cited as necessary prior to deciding to marry. Jamal, a 27-year-old laborer states that confidence in fidelity is necessary prior to marriage: "Um, what would make me ready? Knowing that I could provide and she's faithful….Like, I truly love you and I'm not going to cheat on you, and I feel the same way about you…I feel you're not going to do that to me."

Trust. We find that trust also involves issues that are not explicitly sexual. Respondents feel the need to develop more general trust in a partner. This trust involves the ability to put reliance and confidence in their partner's emotions or actions. This sometimes involves trusting your partner to provide economically, and in other cases trust involves revealing emotions or self to another.

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In some cases, there seems to be general mistrust of the opposite sex. For example, John, an 18-year-old side cook, states, "I just don't trust females." Other respondents speak more specifically about trust issues. Aileen, a 32-year-old computer technician, describes the barrier a lack of trust in her partner produces by saying, "I wouldn't trust that he would go to work everyday, even if…for a whole year, he went to work everyday. As long as he keeps this job, I am never going to believe that that is going to be his pattern." Henry, a 33-year-old information systems manager, speaks about the need to develop more emotional trust in his partner:

> And I think that…in getting married, you take a lot more of those [walls] down than you normally would. Because you're saying to this person…"Alright, you know, I'm exposing exactly who I am, and you're accepting of that, and we're moving forward together, and I don't need all these safety nets."

Henry's need for more trust in the relationship stems from the qualities he attributes to marriage – a union in which both members are accepted for themselves and no "safety nets" are needed.

Some respondents have relationship histories that involve violations of trust. This may have occurred earlier in their current relationship or in prior relationships. Concerns about violations of trust may deter marriage because respondents fear being hurt again and may require more guarantees before proceeding in the relationship. For Olivia, a 30-year-old bartender, the violation of trust occurred earlier in her current relationship, when her partner took money from her. Until this trust is restored, she will not marry her partner. She states that it would take a lot to get married and "…it would have to be years of trust, 'cause there's just a lot. The trust you have to have. I've never broken my trust to him, but he's broken it with me and that's very hard for me to have and not be able to trust somebody." Ben, a 30-year-old railroad conductor had his trust breached in a previous relationship. This has carried over into his relationship with Kristen and his feelings toward marriage: "I wanted to make sure that it was right. I mean I wanted to

make sure that obviously I could trust them because I have certain trust…issues that ya know, I had been burned once before so I really wanted to be sure."

In these interviews, respondents describe why the development of trust – and its violations – influences their thoughts about marriage. Whether one has been "burned" before or just does not trust the opposite sex, there is recognition that trust is an important quality in a relationship, particularly marriage.

Communication. A specific relationship skill that cohabitors, both men and women, want to develop before marrying their partner is better communication. This type of communication may act as a way for cohabiting couples to establish whether or not they share similar views about the relationship.   The lack of communication may reflect uncertainty about the relationship. Norman, a 25-year-old landscaper says that a lack of communication skills has been a barrier to marriage and the he and his partner need to "make sure our communication skills are there, making sure that we, we most definitely want to live together forever, being with her or whatever." Henry describes why communication skills are necessary and how lacking of these skills was a barrier to marriage with his former partner:

> I think greater openness, greater ability to talk about emotions. Just the ability to be…emotional…tell someone how you feel and to um, and reciprocate and to, and to be on the same page moving forward, whether that be to talk about kids or to talk about whatever. We were never at that level. We could never after all those years talk about things like that. They were too... they were avoided. And I knew there was always something missing because of that.

Respondents explain why communication skills are so important to develop for marriage. Good communication allows partners to "talk about emotions" and "be on the same page moving forward."

Love. Finally, cohabitors express the need to have stronger love and emotional involvement in place before they marry their partners.   Many current cohabitors express that

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they love their partner, and this love seems to be a prerequisite for marriage. For example, Sandra, a 19-year-old office clerk, states, "I want to marry him. I love him. I, I thought that we, if we're this close now, if we stay together long enough, in a few years, we'll probably get married." Some cohabiting partners do not yet feel they have sufficient love or emotional commitment to get married. They express the need for their love to grow in order for marriage to occur. Myron, a 28-year-old entertainer explains why more love must be developed within his relationship: "There would have to be mutual respect and true honest love, unconditional love. You know she would have to know…how to put me first and not put her first. You know I put her in front of everything and everyone but I feel like I'm second to her, even to her baby's daddy, and I don't know if I can accept that." Many cohabitors want to "be sure" that the love and emotional involvement really is present, like Juan, a 21-year-old substance abuse prevention program worker:

> R: I guess in a sense to see how much she loved me.
> I: What does that mean exactly?
> R: Um…to see if she's actually going to be willing to stick it out like I would be willing to stick it out.

For many respondents, evaluating feelings of "unconditional love," or lack thereof, in the relationship provides a way to measure one's readiness to marry. They feel that love between partners must be in place before deciding to marry.

Substance Abuse/Violence

Although we find a low base rate (about 4%) of substance abuse and violence affecting the decision to marry in our sample, these examples dramatically illustrate how aspects of oneself, one's partner, and one's relationship can delay or prevent the transition to marriage. A small number of respondents speak about either their own or their partner's substance abuse as impeding the transition to marriage. An end to this substance abuse is seen as necessary before

committing to marriage. Ian, a 34-year-old sanitation city worker, describes how ending

substance abuse was necessary in order to be a better person for his partner:

> I had to stop being dependent on any kind of substance. That was my main goal,
> and after that everything else fell into place when I stopped. Then I stopped
> doing some of the other things, you know, and like waking up in people's
> garages, I'll just use that as an example. I mean my main thing was to get off
> substances and to let Julie see me for who I truly was.

For Owen, a 30-year-old furniture store employee, marriage would not occur until his partner

stopped partying and limited her drinking:

> R: Probably, she would probably have to get her shit together.
> I: What does get her shit together mean? That's your words.
> R: She has problems that she turns into a bottle and she'll party all night, all day,
> make it to work you know amongst other things that she's doing…I could give
> her an ultimatum…Quit drinking a little, slow down, maybe not quit completely.

These cohabitors feel that they or their partners are not marriage material given their

problems with substance abuse.

Along with substance abuse, some respondents state that an end to physical abuse is

required before marrying a partner. Matilda, a 32-year-old cashier explains, "I mean I think if he

wasn't so, if his temper and his attitude wasn't so harsh then I think maybe we could have gotten

married, but I mean with all the attitude and loudness and abuse." It appears that both substance

abuse and physical abuse lead to conflicts that undermine the cohabitors' optimism about the

future of their relationship. In fact, quantitative studies suggest that substance abuse and

domestic violence are associated with lower odds of marriage among cohabitors (Carlson et al.

2004; DeMaris 2001).

Sociocultural Context

The sociocultural context involves interactions with the broader social world that affect

attitudes and behaviors in relationships and includes meanings and symbolism attributed to

aspects of family life and marriage. We find that cohabitors attribute symbolic meanings

particularly to weddings and having children.

Symbolic Meaning of Wedding

In order to be legally married, couples must publicly promise their commitment to one

another. This may occur at a courthouse or at a more formal wedding ceremony. Not

surprisingly, weddings are intricately woven into individuals' thinking about marriage. Beliefs

about marriage often reflect broader family and social beliefs about what is required to have an

appropriate wedding. These beliefs about marriage are reflected in cohabitors' interviews.

During our interviews, cohabitors' discussions about marriage often led to talk about weddings.

Respondents attribute different symbolic meanings to the wedding event, which help dictate their

ideal or the "right" kind of wedding. Both young men and women see the value of a wedding as

an opportunity to publicly announce their commitment to one another in front of friends and

family members. Respondents are concerned about going "downtown," which means being

married in the courthouse. Religious beliefs or parents' religious beliefs are associated with

desires to get married and be married in a church.

For a number of respondents, the issue of marriage is closely tied to specific notions of

their desired wedding. Resolving barriers to this desired wedding is required before they will

commit to marriage. Some respondents are concerned about the financial cost as well as the

effort, in terms of time and trouble, required to organize a wedding. Families have some

influence over the timing and nature of the wedding. Respondents express a desire to have a

wedding that will include their families, and some married to satisfy their families. One female

respondent was going to get married in the courthouse until her sister talked her out of it.

Respondents have visions about having their father walk them down an aisle, standing next to

their mother, or having their grandmother at their wedding. Erin, a 22-year home health aide, describes how her partner wants to get married downtown at the courthouse, but she wants to have a church wedding:

> So that's what I'm waiting for is for him to change his mind [laughs] about the church, and until he does we just won't get married. I'm not going downtown. My cousin went downtown. It's not special enough, everybody sees, my mom had the big church wedding, and I was already born when she got married so, he has to want the big wedding. That's what I say, "You don't want a big wedding, we're not going to get married."

For Gloria, a 25-year-old customer service representative, and her partner, a wedding is something that is only done once, so it should be done right and not rushed. She explains her ideal wedding and the merit of waiting:

> We want to have a big wedding. We want to have, you know both of our families enjoy it. We want to both and we had talked about that several times over the course of the four years and whatever and that's why we said, "No, we'll just live together and save money."

Petra, a 29-year-old administrative assistant describes her ideal wedding and the difficulties associated with attaining it: "I think I would want family participation. I would want a traditional Mexican wedding, and that would be hard because most of my relatives, I would say 85% of my relatives live in either Arizona or Texas. So I would want them here so my friends could come and the time that, it's just a lot of planning, probably several years away."

While both males and females mention issues about weddings, this factor is more prevalent for females. Furthermore, when females mention wedding issues, they focus more on having the "right" kind of wedding, as shown above. However, as explored by Smock et al. (2004), when males discuss wedding requirements, their concern is usually centered on the financial costs associated with the wedding. Marc, a 27-year-old production supervisor, states that he is "just trying to get caught up on some bills and that and be able to afford a wedding." Similar sentiments are expressed by Victor, a 27-year-old construction worker who says, "Well, I

mean, we have a plan to get married, but uh, it just costs so much nowadays to get married."

Finally, Wesley, a 28-year-old supervisor, feels that he needs more "financial time" because he says, "She's talking about some big 30, 40 thousand [wedding], you know, and I'm not quite ready for that."

Yet weddings are not always a prerequisite for marriage. For example, Heidi, a 21-year-old assistant manager who is living with her cohabiting partner's parents, has a wedding dream that includes a church, walking down the aisle with her father, and dancing with her grandfather. She seems willing to forgo her dream wedding to marry the person she loves:

> When it got to the point where Evan would bring up, "Well, let's just go downtown.." It just made me think, you know, I just want to be with you, I don't care what we do! Like, I would love a church wedding, I've always wanted a church wedding, but if it came down to the point where Evan was just like, I really don't want to have a church wedding, let's just go downtown, I, I love him so much, I want to be with him so much, that I probably would do it.

The symbolic meanings that cohabitors attribute to weddings help dictate the sort of ideal weddings to which they aspire. Often, the means to achieving these weddings are not immediately within reach. Realizing this, many respondents say that they will wait to marry until they can achieve their ideal wedding.

Children

Despite changing contexts of childbearing (e.g. Pagnini and Rindfuss 1993), children are still closely associated with individuals' notions of family life. Having children may be seen as the next step after getting married, an impetus to get married, or a reason to delay marriage. The presence of children, either currently or anticipated in the future, adds greater social meanings and responsibilities to relationships. For example, the addition of children may symbolize the transition from a couple to a family. Whether or not cohabitors already have children,

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consideration of children is closely tied to many people's ideas about marriage and what must be in place for marriage. Issues concerning children are raised by a number of respondents.

"Package Deal." Cohabitors seem to connect marriage and childbearing and sometimes view children as accelerating the timing of marriage. As shown in Table 1, approximately 55% of the respondents have children. In 26 cases, these are biological children of both partners; in 18 cases, they are biological children of one partner; and in 19 cases, there is a combination of biological and non-biological children of the partners. Other respondents have children who do not live with them. Fifty-two respondents do not have any children.

Especially prevalent among many of the cohabitors who do not have children is the idea that marriage will lead to children and a family, as expressed by Ellen, a 22-year-old eligibility worker. Regarding expected changes in her life when she marries, Ellen says, "I think we'll start having kids. I think that's probably going to be the first thing that we do." Consequently, some cohabitors feel pressure to have specific things in place – many of which are mentioned above – in order to provide the right environment for children. Edgar, a 19-year-old grocery store clerk, equates marriage with having children and describes the stability needed for children:

> Well I mean, we still have to grow, regardless. I mean everybody grows, but I mean, established means as, ready for kids. 'Cause when there's marriage, there's kids, and if we had kids right now we wouldn't be able to support them. So that's why I said we'd have to be more established, more financially stable for marriage.

Erin, a 22-year-old home health aide, describes the environment that she feels is necessary to establish prior to marrying and having children: "I think we should go to church more. And um you know to have a better background for our kids if we decide to have kids one day. I want them to be in a safe environment, and I want them to know the difference between right and wrong."

In the two examples above, the cohabitors have financial, religious, and environmental prerequisites for marriage that are tied to having children. Children often bring about added expectations and requirements for marriage, including increased financial needs. For female cohabitors with children, there is often the view that they are a "package deal," as expressed by the one respondent. In other words, a partner will have to accept both the woman and her child(ren) in order to marry, as stated by Laura, a 27-year-old office clerk:

> If your intentions don't add to mine then, and if you can't support me and the three kids and the dogs, the two dogs, then and ready for us to be married, period. This is a package deal.

As these respondents demonstrate, the symbolic meaning of children and family, along with the need to provide for and have the proper environment for children, are inextricably linked with economic factors.

Marriage Acceleration. Prior work suggests that unmarried parents do not approve of 'shotgun marriages' or marriages that occur among pregnant brides (Edin, England, and Linnenberg 2003). There is a sense that this is a premature marriage. Our results support this, with few cohabiting *parents* thinking they should get married for the sake of children. In fact, Ofilia, a 25-year-old homemaker, sees marriage as competing with children. She and her partner are engaged, but they do not have money to pay for a wedding, and they do not want to go "downtown." She says, "And then we came down to the decision of, do we want kids or do we want the marriage. And we, for now we wanted the kids…." Cohabitors seem to believe that children need two caring or loving parents, but marriage is not a prerequisite for raising children. This idea is voiced particularly by the women in our sample, like Crystal, a 19-year-old educator:

> It's like marriage, to me marriage has to be…like me and him have a kid out of wedlock…but who doesn't, you know. So, just 'cause [we have] a kid I don't [feel], "Oh, I have to start thinking about marriage right away," you know, "I have to be a good person and I have to marry him."

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Shirley, a 23-year-old manager reiterates this saying, "Having a kid doesn't mean you have to marry that person…the only thing is, your only responsibility is to take care of that child. That is the only thing that you should feel obligated to do."

On the other hand, children do sometimes influence the timing of marriage. They serve to speed up the marriage process for those who already have some marriage plans rather than initiate the new marriage plans. One young woman states that she did not want to walk down the aisle eight months pregnant, but she wanted to be married before the baby was born, so they pushed up the wedding date. Keith, a 30-year-old surgical technologist says, "We were engaged to get married…so we were planning on like a January, February wedding almost. But then she got pregnant, and we just went in and got married by a judge and decided we could have the marriage blessed…we had discussed our plans with Father Perry because she had wanted to be married and I wanted to be married when the baby was born." Other cohabitors like Barbara, a 28-year-old chemical dependency counselor, describe similar experiences:

> Once I was pregnant with him it became more of a reason…for him to say, "Alright, let's do it like right now," because actually when he first asked me to marry him it wasn't like a date or anything like that. We had set a date and then we, you know, then he said, "Well, we can't do it right now," or whatever. And then once Zach was born, that's when we were like, "Okay." Actually, he was like, "Okay, let's go ahead and get married."

Yet many cohabitors who do not have children and are not pregnant voice more traditional beliefs. Steve, a 30-year-old computer network consultant, explains why he believes that children are better off if their parents are married.

> Because their parents have made the long term commitment to stay together and, as you point out, they might not follow through with that commitment, but it's better if their parents have made that commitment before conceiving them.

For Zoe, a 25-year-old dialysis technician, it is important that parents be married in order to set a good moral example for their children.

> Just because they grow up, and you know they, you can teach them better morals you know, 'cause they look for, you have to set an example for them. So you know, they look up to their mom and dad.

For our respondents, children – either currently present or anticipated – bring about added meanings and responsibilities in their cohabiting relationships. Among those who do not have children, cohabiting relationships often serve as sites for developing themselves and their relationships prior to marrying and starting a family. For many of those who do have children, cohabitation allows two parents, either biological or step, to live together and raise children without necessarily planning to marry.

DISCUSSION

This study uses 115 in-depth interviews of White, African American, and Latino young adult cohabitors to examine attitudes about what must be in place in order to marry. We use qualitative data to address questions about the perceived perquisites for marriage to better understand the processes underlying the decision to marry among young adult cohabitors in the U.S. Respondents identify a number of factors that they wish to develop prior to marrying, rather than within the marital relationship.

This paper is limited by a few shortcomings. First, our findings are based on a non-representative sample of cohabitors who are living in Toledo, Ohio. Despite this shortcoming, the themes in our paper echo themes found in other studies of cohabitors (e.g. Gibson et al. 2003; Sassler 2004). Second, our sample of 115 respondents is not large by quantitative standards, but is more than adequate by qualitative standards. Third, due to the qualitative nature of our study, the results cannot be generalized to a larger population. Our ultimate goal is that the findings from this study be extended to include quantitative analyses of a nationally representative

sample. Finally, we rely on data from respondents at one point in time. We plan future research to include follow-up interviews with respondents in order to gain a better understanding of the changing dynamics of cohabiting relationships. Despite these shortcomings, we draw a number of important conclusions that have implications for future research on union formation.

For most of the respondents in our study, cohabitation is not viewed as an alternative to marriage. The ideal of marriage continues to exist in the minds of cohabitors. Only a very small percentage has no desires or plans to ever marry. The cohabitors expect marriage to occur at some time in the future, although the extent of plans for marriage and timeframes vary. A regular theme was that respondents desire marriage, but they perceive a number of barriers to marrying their partner. This is consistent with the notion presented by Bumpass et al. (1991) that cohabitation serves as a testing ground to work out kinks in the relationship prior to marriage. We are able to specify the content of these barriers, specifically how they pose as obstacles to marriage and strategies that cohabitors may have for overcoming them.

Our findings can be applied to new data collections. Researchers can take respondents' own words, in which they describe their feelings and attitudes on what it takes to marry, to help develop new question items for large-scale surveys. Quantitative surveys also often inquire whether young adults have marriage plans but rarely inquire about what it would take to get married. We believe new data collections should ask about the prerequisites for marriage in an effort to better understand the marriage decision-making process. For instance, we could ask how strongly cohabitors agree or disagree that they (or their partner) are mature enough to get married or feel that a big wedding is an important part of marriage. Our results could be used to improve the measurement and analysis of the link between cohabitation and marriage

Results from this study demonstrate that it is important to consider relational factors at the individual, relationship, and societal levels as part of marriage decisions. Consideration of factors at each of these levels – and their interactions – allows for a broader understanding of cohabitors' prerequisites for marriage. About 73% of the respondents cite relational factors that need, or needed, to be in place before marrying. Sometimes these relational factors are discussed together with economic factors, or they are closely tied to economic factors. For example, some respondents feel that with greater age or maturity, they or their partners will achieve financial security. Additionally, there is evidence that economic troubles create conflict and difficulties for cohabiting couples (Smock et al. 2004; Smock and Manning 2003). Nonetheless, failing to recognize the importance of these relational factors precludes a comprehensive picture of the complex factors that influence cohabitors' decisions to marry.

Beyond identifying relational factors as important, our qualitative data help us to understand *why* cohabitors feel that certain factors must be in place before marrying. Respondents identify qualities within themselves, their partners, and their relationships that are hallmarks of a "good marriage." Therefore, they feel that it is critical that these characteristics are developed prior to marrying their partner, rather than within the marriage. This is consistent Oppenheimer's (1988) arguments about declines in the use of postmarital socialization to improve the quality of the match between partners. As the feasibility and success of postmarital socialization as a matching mechanism declines, this socialization is now increasingly taking place prior to marriage. We propose that cohabitation is one setting in which this premarital socialization is occurring. Cohabitors are able to develop qualities within themselves, their partners, and their relationships that they deem critical for a successful marriage.

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Table 1. Descriptive Characteristics and Prerequisite Factors for Marriage for Cohabitors in the Study

	N	Only Economic	Only Relationship	Relationship & Economic	No Response
Total Sample	115	22.6	23.5	49.6	4.3
Gender					
Male	53	20.8	24.5	47.2	7.5
Female	62	24.2	22.6	51.6	1.6
Race/Ethnicity					
White	51	25.5	29.4	41.2	3.9
Black	33	18.2	18.2	63.6	0.0
Hispanic	31	22.6	19.4	48.4	9.7
Age					
< 20	10	0.0	20.0	80.0	0.0
20-24	29	20.7	20.7	58.6	0.0
25-29	48	27.1	14.6	50.0	8.3
30-34	22	22.7	45.5	31.8	0.0
35-39	6	33.3	33.3	16.7	16.7
Educational Attainment					
< H.S	14	21.4	28.6	50.0	0.0
H.S. or G.E.D.	29	17.2	24.1	48.3	10.3
Some college or technical	51	19.6	21.6	54.9	3.9
College graduate	21	38.1	23.8	38.1	0.0
Children					
Biological with partner	26	7.7	15.4	73.1	3.8
Biological with previous partner	7	14.3	28.6	57.1	0.0
Stepchild(ren)	11	18.2	18.2	54.5	9.1
Combination of above	19	36.8	36.8	10.5	15.8
None	52	26.9	23.1	50.0	0.0
Cohabitation Status					
Currently cohabiting	51	19.6	17.6	58.8	3.9
Broke up with cohab partner	33	21.2	33.3	42.4	3.0
Married cohab partner	31	29.0	22.6	41.9	6.5

Note: Values in factor columns are % of respondents in each demographic category who stated factors.

Table 2. Descriptive Characteristics and Necessary Relational Prerequisites for Marriage

		Individual Context		Relationship Context		Sociocultural Context	
	N	Age and Maturity	More Time Relationship	Qualities in Relationship	Substance Abuse/Violence	Wedding	Issues with Chilren
Gender							
Male	53	32.1	17.0	32.1	3.8	9.4	5.7
Female	62	21.0	27.4	25.8	4.8	12.9	11.3
Race/Ethnicity							
White	51	25.5	23.5	27.5	3.9	9.8	3.9
Black	33	24.2	24.2	39.4	3.0	12.1	15.2
Hispanic	31	29.0	19.4	19.4	6.5	12.9	9.7
Age							
< 20	10	30.0	60.0	40.0	10.0	0.0	10.0
20-24	29	41.4	24.1	34.5	0.0	10.3	17.2
25-29	48	20.8	20.8	22.9	2.1	16.7	4.2
30-34	22	22.7	13.6	31.8	9.1	9.1	4.5
35-39	6	0.0	0.0	16.7	16.7	0.0	16.7
Educational Attainment							
< H.S	14	35.7	28.6	28.6	7.1	0.0	7.1
H.S. or G.E.D.	29	37.9	24.1	20.7	10.3	6.9	10.3
Some college or technical	51	19.6	27.5	33.3	2.0	11.8	11.8
College graduate	21	19.0	4.8	28.6	0.0	23.8	0.0
Children							
Biological with partner	26	57.7	26.9	26.9	3.8	19.2	7.7
Bio. with previous partner	7	28.6	28.6	42.9	0.0	14.3	0.0
Stepchild(ren)	11	18.2	27.3	36.4	0.0	0.0	18.2
Combination of above	19	5.3	10.5	10.5	10.5	10.5	21.1
None	52	19.2	23.1	32.7	3.8	9.6	3.8
Cohabitation Status							
Currently cohabiting	51	17.6	17.6	13.7	2.0	15.7	13.7
Broke up with partner	33	24.2	12.1	39.4	3.0	3.0	9.1
Married cohab partner	31	41.9	41.9	41.9	9.7	12.9	0.0

Note: Values are % of respondents in each demographic category who stated each factor.