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COHABITATION AND MARITAL EXPECTATIONS IN YOUNG ADULTHOOD

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Abstract. About two-fifths of adolescents are expected to spend some time in a cohabiting parent family (Kennedy and Bumpass 2011). Drawing on 23 waves (1979-2008) of data from the 1979 National Longitudinal Study of Youth (NLSY79) main youth and two waves (2008 and 2010) of the NLSY young adult (YA) surveys (n=683), we explore the connections between experiences of parental cohabitation during childhood, young adults' union formation expectations, and subsequent cohabitation. Among a sample of young adults who have never cohabited or married we find considerable variation in union expectations: 49% have no expectation of cohabiting and 38% report at least even odds of cohabiting in the next two years while 37% have no expectation of marrying and 30% have at least a 50/50 chance of marrying within two years. One-third of young adults report some expectation of a contemporary union pattern (both cohabit and marry), but one in seven expect to do so in the next two years. Parental cohabitation is linked to greater odds of expecting to cohabit, but this association can be explained by either religious attendance or maternal characteristics (age at first birth or education level). Parental cohabitation is not associated with expectations to marry. In addition, we find that expectations to cohabit are associated with higher odds of entering a cohabiting relationship. These findings underscore the importance of individuals' expectations for understanding union formation, and more broadly, for understanding family change.

KEYWORDS: Family, Cohabitation, Marriage, Young Adults, Emerging Adulthood

Young adults are experiencing a revolution in union formation behaviors with widespread growth in cohabitation and delays in marriage. The role of cohabitation in family formation in the United States continues to increase such that nearly two-thirds (63%) of young adults have ever cohabited and three-quarters of first marriages are preceded by cohabitation (Manning 2010). At the same time, age at marriage is at a historic highpoint with continued delays in age at first marriage (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2011). While change in family experiences has been well documented, less attention has been paid to tracing the processes that may continue to fuel family change (Bumpass 1990, Smock and Greenland 2010). A striking 40% of young adults today have experienced parental cohabitation (Kennedy and Bumpass 2011). This paper thus examines the intergenerational transmission of cohabitation expectations and experiences, focusing on parents and their young adult children in the United States.

Drawing on social learning theory and data from a large, longitudinal, nationally representative U.S. survey of parents, adolescents and young adults (the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth or NLSY), this paper extends knowledge about the role of parents' cohabitation and marital histories on children's expectations and subsequent union formation behavior. To date, no national-level study has considered whether and how parental cohabitation influences expectations to cohabit and subsequent entry into a cohabiting union. This study is intended to explore a possible mechanism driving family change.

Background

A central tenet of social psychology is that the primary individual-level factor determining whether a behavior will occur is the intention to perform that particular activity (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975). In this way, analysis of intentions is vital and allows for assessments of possible mechanisms underlying union formation behavior. In addition, intentions for behavior, rather

than the behavior itself, may be interpreted as an early harbinger of changes in social norms. This is so, in part, because barriers to a behavior (e.g., a poor economy) may prevent achieving behavioral goals (Gibson-Davis, Edin and McLanahan 2005; Halpern-Meehin 2012). Thus behavioral measures cannot tap the perceived desirability of a behavior.

Overwhelmingly, research on social norms related to cohabitation assesses *attitudes*. Findings from this work show a dramatic increase in support for cohabitation among youth over time. In 2008 nearly 70% of high school seniors reported that cohabitation was a testing ground for marriage, representing a 75% increase over a thirty year period (Bogle and Wu 2010). Unmarried young adults ages 20-24 largely agreed (70% of cohabitators, 59% of daters, and 60% of singles) that cohabitation is “all right” even if there are no plans for marriage (Scott et al. 2009). The single study focusing specifically on expectations to cohabit indicates that just over half (57%) of 12-19 year olds in a Midwestern city report expecting to cohabit (Manning, Longmore and Giordano 2007). Specific questions about expecting to cohabit have been lacking in national surveys; therefore, the recent addition of questions about cohabitation expectations in the NLSY provides a unique opportunity to investigate the correlates and ramifications of cohabitation expectations.

Young adults’ attitudes and expectations regarding marriage are consistently positive and have not shifted as markedly as those about cohabitation. Over the last thirty years there continue to be high levels (75%) of support for the notion that having a good marriage is important (Bogle and Wu 2010). Another recent study indicates that the vast majority (83%) of young adults (ages 20-24) believe it important to be married someday (Scott et al. 2009). One nuance is that there has been a temporal increase in the perceived ideal timing of marriage. In 1976, only 27% of high school seniors reported the ideal time was more than five years away.

This percent rose to nearly one-half in 2006 (Wood et al. 2008). On the marital expectations side, 70% of 20-24 year olds believe there is a good or certain chance they would be married within the next 10 years (Scott et al. 2009). Similarly, 57% of youth (ages 15-21) in the NLSY 1997 sample think that there is at least a 50/50 chance of marrying in the next five years (Gassanov, Nicholson, and Koch-Turner 2008).

A key “feedback loop” that may be generating family change is the family of origin. There is some indirect evidence in past studies that intergenerational processes are operating that may encourage specific family formation patterns (Bumpass 1990; Rindfuss and VandenHeuvel 1990; Smock 2000). As Bumpass and Lu (2000:35) state: “Parents who shared a cohabiting family with their children are likely to find it difficult to argue effectively that their children should abstain from either unmarried sex or cohabitation.” According to social learning theory, the initial and most fundamental socialization environment is the family. Social learning operates through both the process of active parental socialization and also by observing parental relationships. While children do not simply act in accordance with parental views and behaviors, they learn how to form and maintain relationships based on their parents’ experiences. One way parents support young adult behavior is through socialization that lends support, directly or indirectly, to specific types of families, such as cohabiting, married, divorced or step-family households.

Direct evidence of the influence of parental socialization on family formation is generally lacking, but empirical work on intergenerational patterns of family structure and instability is consistent with this notion. For example, children raised in two-biological parent families are more likely to marry and stay married than are children from single-mother or divorced families (Amato and DeBoer 2001; Amato 1996; Cherlin, Kiernan, and Chase-Lansdale 1995;

McLanahan and Sandefur 1994; Ryan et al. 2009). Similarly, children whose parents divorced and whose mothers expressed more approval of cohabitation are relatively more likely to cohabit as young adults than those whose mothers expressed less approval (Axinn and Thornton 1993; Thornton 1991; Thornton et al. 1992). While the findings of Thornton and colleagues are important in their depiction of intergenerational linkages in family patterns, their data have limitations: Their sample is selective and dated, consisting of White married women living in the Detroit metropolitan area who gave birth to a child in 1961.

More recent work is acknowledging the potential significance of parental cohabitation. Sassler, Cunningham, and Lichter (2009) draw on the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) and find that parental cohabitation following divorce is tied to cohabitation behavior of the offspring of NSFH respondents. While this study offers an empirical assessment of the intergenerational linkage of parents' post-divorce cohabitation on their children's odds of cohabitation, the NSFH reflects cohabitation experiences that occurred 25 years ago and does not necessarily represent current union formation patterns. Analyses of a more recent cohort based on Add Health data indicate that parental cohabitation experience is tied to teenage union formation, resulting in lower odds of teenage marriage and greater odds of teenage cohabitation than marriage (Ryan et al. 2009). However, the Add Health family history indicators are retrospective and cohabitation measures for respondents and parents were based on questions using the qualifier "marriage-like" relationships; this may not accurately capture cohabitation experiences (Pollard and Harris 2007). We provide an updated analysis of a contemporary cohort of young adults, not just teenagers, and consider the full range of family experiences using longitudinal rather than retrospective reports.

We anticipate that parental union experiences influence young adult *expectations* to cohabit and marry. Qualitative data indicate that respondents who experienced a parental divorce often articulated deep anxieties regarding their future marriages and concerns that they might follow in their parents' footsteps (Burgoyne and Hames 2002; Manning, Cohen and Smock 2011). One qualitative study finds that some young adults were so negatively affected by their parents' divorce that they reported never wanting to marry, with one respondent stating, "... without marriage, you don't have divorce." Cohabitation was regarded as something that "every couple should do before they get married" and is "kinda practice being married" (Manning et al. 2011).

Quantitative assessments align with qualitative findings. Examining teens in the NLSY, Wood et al. (2008) find that those who lived with two biological parents report significantly more positive attitudes toward marriage than their peers who were not raised by two biological parents. Analyses of the Add Health indicate that adolescent parental family structure is tied to union formation expectations, with males in single-mother families and females in stepfamilies expressing lower expectations to marry (Crissey 2005). Manning et al. (2007) find that parental cohabitation is positively associated with adolescent cohabitation expectations. We build on this work by using a large national sample that is more geographically diverse and highlight young adult cohabitation expectations

To date, no research has examined whether and how expectations to cohabit are linked to cohabitation. In terms of marriage, there appears to be a strong general link between expectations to marry (or positive attitudes about marriage) and marriage (Brown 2000; Clarkberg, Stolzenberg, and Waite 1995; Coast 2009; McGinnis 2003; Sassler and Schoen 1999; Waller and McLanahan 2005). In terms of cohabitation, we know very little. Teens who

reported strong plans *to marry* within a five year time window experience higher odds of both marriage and cohabitation (Wood, Avellar, and Goesling 2008). Another study finds that mothers' supportive *attitudes* toward cohabitation are associated with a greater likelihood of their children entering a cohabiting union in young adulthood (Axinn and Thornton 1993).

Current Investigation

Our central goal is to examine whether and how parents' cohabitation experiences are linked to union formation expectations and behaviors among a contemporary cohort of young adults in the United States. Parents' union experiences during childhood represent an important source of potential heterogeneity impacting young adult's union expectations and behavior. We have two specific empirical goals. We ask, what role, if any, do cohabitation family experiences play in young adult's expectations about forming cohabitating or marital unions in the future? Second, we address the role of childhood family experiences and later expectations on actual entrance into cohabitation and marriage. A key issue for understanding family change is whether prior intentions, which arguably reflect broader-scale norms, predict subsequent union formation net of individual characteristics. Our models thus include variables that have been found to be linked to cohabitation and marriage (e.g., Raley, Crissey and Muller 2007; Wood et al. 2008).

We move beyond prior studies in four ways. First, we focus on expectations for cohabitation (and marriage) in addition to behaviors. When the research goal is to understand and not simply to predict a behavior such as cohabitation, the factors determining expectations (or intentions) need to be analyzed (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975). Second, our work relies on longitudinal data of mother's cohabitation experience. Some prior work has considered only a subset of children's family experiences such as cohabitation at time of interview or cohabitation among only divorced respondents or been limited to rather conservative measures of parental

cohabitation experience. Extending beyond experiences at the time of interview is critical because about half of children's experiences in parental cohabitation are missed when relying on a static indicator such as cohabitation at age 14 (Manning and Bulanda 2006). Third, some of the more nuanced intergenerational studies by Thornton and colleagues drew on data from select samples of Whites, and yet cohabitation is quite common among African American and Latino men and women. We use a diverse sample of young adults. Finally, prior studies have been limited to the experiences of older men and women. This study highlights the experiences of young adults and extends through 2010. A key task during the early adult years is relationship development (Arnett 2004) and sets a trajectory for later life relationships. In addition, the recent rapid spread of cohabitation requires analyzing the most contemporary data available.

Data and Methods

We draw on 23 waves (1979-2008) of nationally representative data from the 1979 National Longitudinal Study of Youth (NLSY79) main youth and 2 waves (2008 and 2010) of the young adult (YA) surveys. Born between 1957 and 1965, main youth respondents represent the later Baby Boom and very early Generation Y birth cohorts and entered young adulthood in the late 1970s and early 1980s when divorce rates were still increasing and cohabitation was on the rise. These NLSY79 respondents have been interviewed every year from 1979 through 1994 and biennially thereafter. The NLSY79 ascertains information on fertility and union experiences, and permits the construction of detailed living arrangement and childbearing histories.

In 1986, biennial interviewing began with all children born to the NLSY79 women, and starting in 1994 all children ages 15 and older were interviewed every other year as "Young Adults." We focus on these young adults and link their data to information about their mothers, female NLSY respondents, on their own relationship histories. Because men's biological

children were not included in the YA sample, they were not eligible for inclusion in our analyses. The young adult questionnaire also includes a wealth of information relating to education, training, employment, health, dating, fertility parent-child conflict, sexual activity, participation in delinquency, and expectations for the future. To date, no other data set in the United States includes such rich data on mother, adolescent, and adult child experiences.

Our base analytic sample includes young adults ages 18 to 30 in 2008 whose mothers were also interviewed at least until their child's 18th birthday. Of the original NLSY79 cohort there were 6,283 total women and 3,978 were eligible for the construction of our sample of young adults because they (1) were alive in 2008 so we have access to full relationship history data, (2) had been consistently interviewed during their child's first 18 years of life and (3) did not miss more than 5 total or 3 consecutive surveys. These 3,978 women collectively had given birth to 8,283 children by the time of the 2008 survey. Of these 8,283 children, 3,367 were 'firstborn' children. We select first-born children for our analyses for two reasons. First, this decision results in a good distribution of "mother's ages" when these young adults were born (11-45 with a mean of 23.2). Second, first born children are not influenced by the living arrangements and union choices of older siblings.

Of the 3,367 firstborn children, 2,769 were 18 or older as of 2008. We limited the sample of children to ages 18-30 in 2008 to focus on the experiences of young adults. In addition, nearly all sample members were born in 1979 or later, affording the most accurate measures of maternal relationship histories. If we were to also include children born prior to 1979, we would have to rely on mothers' retrospective union histories rather than prospective data. Further, we would miss some instances of maternal cohabitation because we would have had to rely on household roster data prior to 1991. Members of our analytic sample are limited to those who were living

with their mother when they were born, were alive in 2008, and spent at least 75% of their childhood with their mothers. This limitation is important because the key predictors are based on the child's exposure to mother's relationship histories.

From the resulting group of 2,158 respondents, we limit analyses to those who participated in the 2008 interview (1,878) and were not cohabiting or married at the time of interview (1,219). We also focus solely on men and women who had not already married or cohabited at the time of the 2008 interview (848). We excluded 84 respondents who did not reply to questions about expectations (764). The final restriction was to exclude 81 respondents who did not respond to the 2010 interview. Our final analytic sample is 683 respondents ages 18-30 who had never cohabited or married in 2008.

Measures

Our key dependent variables index cohabitation and marriage expectations measured in 2008. We build the indicators from parallel sets of questions asked about cohabitation and about marriage. In the case of cohabitation, the first reads: "Do you think you will [ever/ever again] live with an opposite sex partner, to whom you were not married?" A subsequent question, answered by those who responded affirmatively, asks "On a scale of zero to 100, where zero means you are sure this will not happen and 100 means you are sure it will, how likely are you to live with an opposite-sex partner, to whom you were not married in the next two years?" Similar items assess marital expectations. Note that the second question in the sequence introduces a timing component (e.g., next two years); thus, a "yes" to the first does not necessarily indicate a high number on the second.

To capture how cohabitation and marriage expectations are interwoven we constructed a measure that combines the questions into the following four categories: *Traditional* means that

there is less than a 50% chance of expecting to cohabit and a greater than 50% chance of marriage; *Contemporary* (includes those with at least a 50% chance of both cohabiting and marrying; *Cohabitation Only* includes respondents indicating at least a 50% expectation of cohabitation and less than 50% chance of marriage. *None* references respondents who had less than a 50% chance of cohabitation or marriage. We explored alternative cutoff points but this approach distinguished those with low or no expectations from those who reported at least a fifty percent chance of forming a union. We present an indicator of ever expecting to marry and ever expecting to cohabit based on the initial question, no timing component, and the combined indicator in the descriptive table. However, our multivariate analyses rely on the indicator that provides the most information: one that use the full range from 0 to 100 for both marital and cohabitation expectations. Given the skewed distribution of the responses (many respondents have no expectations), in analyses predicting behavior we shift to a log of each indicator. The statistical significance is similar regardless how expectations are measured.

Subsequent union formation *behavior* is based on responses to questions about the start of cohabitations and/or marriages since the 2008 interview. Due to sample size limitations, we identify respondents who entered a cohabitation for the first time (e.g., only cohabit or cohabit and later married), giving them a value of 1 on this variable and all other respondents a value of zero. Clearly, the two year time frame provides only a short time for union formation. Thus, while we create an indicator predicting marriage, we do not present multivariate models due to small sample size (n=39).

Our key set of independent variables focus on the child's exposure to particular family types from birth to age 18, drawing on mothers' reports of union experiences. Creating family change histories is complex and time-consuming but we believe that the quality of the data

produced is high. At each survey, respondents reported whether they were currently in a residential relationship, provided information on relationship type (marriage, cohabitation, single), up to three changes in relationship status that occurred since the prior survey (divorce, move out, marriage, move in), and start and end dates of each relationship (coded as century months). Since 1990, the NLSY79 has included a series of additional cohabitation questions about whether the participant cohabited before marriage (including a retrospective report of cohabitation prior to their current marriage). In later survey years, respondents are asked if the cohabiting relationship was continuous, if a cohabiting partner was present at the time of the survey, whether there was a gap of singlehood in the past year in which cohabitation could occur, the month cohabitation began and ended, and the number of cohabitations occurring during the past year.

We also drew on the NLSY79 Fertility File and Household Roster because it provides two constructed variables allowing us to identify individual men in the household: A unique partner ID number for every residential partner, and a variable identifying cohabiting partnerships where men were identified as living in the household, but for which no cohabitation data was collected prior to 1990. Because each of the mother's partners was given a unique ID number that was maintained for every year the man was present in the household, it is possible to identify birth fathers and calculate the total amount of time children lived with biological and step fathers. This strategy allows for the quantifying of several characteristics surrounding each birth, including the mother's relationship to the father (e.g. marital, cohabiting, or separated) and the marital status of the birth (marital or nonmarital). Importantly, it also makes it possible to link children to specific residential relationships, with corollary information on the biological mother's and father's relationship start date, end date, duration, and type.

We create a variable, *parental cohabitation*, to measure whether the respondent ever lived in a cohabiting parent family between birth and age 18. There are several ways to code family experience, but given our interest in parental cohabitation and sample size restrictions we select this simple specification. The results are similar when we rely on more complex indicators.

Our analyses also include several controls used in prior work on union formation expectations and union formation more generally. The *dating status* of respondents is established with a question in the 2008 interview that asks “Are you going out with one particular person, or are you dating more than one person?” We account for the respondent’s *parenthood* status with a dummy variable indicating whether he or she had given birth to a child prior to the 2008 interview. An indicator of *activity status* was generated to measure whether the respondent was in school or employed in 2008. The variable has three mutually exclusive categories: enrolled in school (may be working or not); employed at least 10 hours a week, and neither in school or working. While it is challenging to measure employment and education during young adulthood, we believe this measure is a reasonable proxy. *Religiosity* is included as a continuous variable that is based on a question in 2008 asking “In past year how often have you attended religious services: more than once a week, once a week, two to three times a month, once a month, several times a year, or not at all?” and was reverse coded to go from low to high religious attendance. The models include five indicators of the young adult’s sociodemographic characteristics measured as of the 2008 interview. We include *age*, *gender*, *race/ethnicity* (non-Hispanic White, non-Hispanic Black, Hispanic), *region* and *urban residence*. Finally, two indicators of mother’s background are included in the models: *age at first birth*, and *education*

level. Mother's education is a four category variable measured when the child was age 15: less than high school, high school, some college, and college graduate.

Methods

First, we present descriptive statistics on all the variables. Next we estimate tobit regression models of marriage and cohabitation expectations. This method is appropriate because it accounts for the skewed distribution of cohabitation (or marital) expectations; a substantial proportion do not expect to cohabit or marry. The tobit model uses all the information available, including information on censoring, and tobit regression results in less biased and more consistent estimators than ordinary least squares regression (DeMaris 2004). A zero-order model is presented and then the full model with all the covariates. We next assess how expectations are related to subsequent cohabitation behavior, using logistic regression models. We present models that predict the log odds of cohabiting within a two-year time frame. We first present zero-order models with parental cohabitation and relationship expectations, next a model that includes parental cohabitation and relationship expectations together and then a full model that includes all control variables.

Results

Table 1 shows weighted descriptive statistics. For our sample of young adults who have never cohabited or married, 51% expect to cohabit and 63% expect to marry at some point in the future. Once timing is incorporated into the measure with responses ranging from zero to 100% chance, on average 29% expect to cohabit and 26% expect to marry during the next two years. These mean levels of expectations are heavily affected by the proportion not expecting to form a union. Among those who do expect to form a union, on average the expectation to cohabit is greater than the expectation to marry in the next two years. Two-fifths (41%) expect marriage

and about 57% expect to enter cohabitation within the next two years (results not shown). The variation in expectations is further illustrated by a focus on the strength of expectations: 30% express at least 50/50 chance of getting married in the next two years while 38% report at least a 50/50 chance of cohabiting (results not shown).

[Table 1 about here.]

When considering cohabitation and marriage expectations in conjunction with one another, about one-third (35%) expect to eventually follow the contemporary union formation pattern (both cohabit and marry) (results not shown). Assessments of expectations in the next two years indicate that the modal category is to not expect or have low expectations to form a union, nearly half or 47%. About one in seven or 14% expect to follow the contemporary pattern of both cohabitation and marriage in the next two years. We find 16% expect to follow the traditional pathway of only expecting to marry and not cohabiting in the next two years. Nearly one-quarter (24%) expect to cohabit and not marry over a two year time horizon.

Table 1 also provides information on parental cohabitation. About one-fifth (19%) of respondents ever experienced parental cohabitation. This is substantially lower than reported by Bumpass and Lu (2000) for the 1980-84 birth cohort; however, our analyses are limited to young adults who have not yet formed a union. If we expand the sample to include all young adults (18-30) in 2008 and eliminate other sample criteria, we find 38% experience parental cohabitation. This percentage is quite similar to that reported by Bumpass and Lu (2000) for a comparable birth cohort (1980-1984). Further investigation shows that among respondents who experienced parental cohabitation three-quarters spent time in a cohabiting step-parent family and one-third were born to cohabiting parents, 10% spent time living in both cohabiting step-parent and cohabiting two biological parent families (results not shown).

Table 2 presents estimates from tobit regression models predicting cohabitation expectations (first two columns) and marriage expectations (last two columns). For each outcome the first column presents the zero-order models and the second column the full model. As anticipated, young adults who spent some time in cohabiting parent families report higher expectations of cohabitation than their counterparts who never lived in a cohabiting parent family. The next column shows results with all controls included in the model. Somewhat surprisingly, parental cohabitation is no longer associated with cohabitation expectations. Analyses not shown indicate that two sources absorb the zero-order linkage between parental cohabitation and cohabitation expectations. One is respondent religiosity measured at the 2008 interview. This is consistent with prior studies that suggest religiosity has a negative relationship to cohabitation (e.g., Eggebeen and Dew 2009). Further investigation indicates that one-quarter of young adults who experienced parental cohabitation attend services at least one per week while one-third who did not experience parental cohabitation attended at least once per week. An interaction term shows that religiosity is negatively tied to cohabitation expectations regardless of parental cohabitation but the effect is stronger when parents have not cohabited. Similarly, parental cohabitation has a greater effect as religiosity increases. A second source is two characteristics of mothers: Age at birth and her level of education. Women who had children at younger ages and had lower levels of education more often cohabited while raising their eldest child. Yet, the interaction terms with these maternal characteristics and parental cohabitation are not statistically significant.

[Table 2 about here.]

The next two columns in Table 2 turn to expectations to marry as the dependent variable. Results from the zero-order model indicate that parental cohabitation is not associated with

marriage expectations. This implies that young adults who lived in cohabiting parent families share similar marital expectations as young adults who never lived with a cohabiting parent. Many young adults (82%) who lived in a cohabiting parent family also lived in a married parent family at some point; this may, in part, explain why they also see marriage in their future (results not shown). The next column includes the full set of variables and, as would be expected, parental cohabitation is not associated with marital expectations in this model.

Many of the variables associated with marriage expectations are associated with cohabitation expectations in similar ways, although there are some key distinctions. Respondents who were in a dating relationship at the time of interview expressed higher union formation expectations for both cohabitation and marriage. Parenthood status is not tied to cohabitation expectations, but is negatively associated with expecting to marry. Young adults who are parents have lower marital expectations than their counterparts who do not have children. Gender is not associated with cohabitation expectations, but being female is associated with stronger marital expectations than being male. Age is positively associated with marital, but not cohabitation expectations. Race and ethnicity is not tied to cohabitation expectations, although results suggest that Hispanics have lower marital expectations than their white counterparts. Young adults living in the North East have lower odds of expecting to marry than in any other region of the United States. The coefficients for activity status indicate that enrollment in school is not tied to cohabitation or marital expectations, but young adults who are not in school or employed have lower expectations to marry and cohabit than those who are employed. Religiosity is strongly associated with union formation expectations, being positively linked to marital expectations and negatively associated with cohabitation expectations

Table 3 presents results from models predicting cohabitation based on expectations and childhood family cohabitation experience. As seen in Table 1, most of the single sample in 2008 had not entered a union by 2010 (82%). Few young adults married (6%), and just 14% cohabited. Ten percent of those who formed a union both cohabited and married within the two year time window.

[Table 3 about here.]

The first column of Table 3 shows that expectations to cohabit and marry are both positively associated with higher odds of cohabiting. Not all expectations results in the desired outcome; 79% who reported at least a 50/50 chance of cohabiting did not do so within the time between interviews and 7% who had low or no expectation to cohabit did cohabit (results not shown). The inclusion of the parental cohabitation indicator shows, first, that expectations remain positively associated with the odds of cohabiting and, second, that parental cohabitation is associated with 86% greater odds of cohabiting. These findings indicate that childhood experience and expectations have independent effects on entrance into a cohabiting union. Employing an interaction coefficient of expectations and parental cohabitation, we find that the influence of cohabitation expectations on behavior do not differ according to parental cohabitation experience (results not shown).

The next model adds the control variables. Expectations for cohabitation are still positively tied to cohabitation, but marital expectations are no longer associated with the odds of cohabiting. Also, parental cohabitation is not significantly ($p=.11$) associated with the odds of cohabitation. Further analysis indicates that mothers' age at first birth "explains" the association between parental cohabitation and the odds of entering a cohabiting union. Mothers who cohabited also had their first child at a younger age. Young adults who were dating at the time

of interview have higher odds of cohabiting than those who were not in a relationship. Females experience higher odds of cohabitation than males. Black young adults more often cohabit within the two year time period than Whites while Hispanic and White respondents experience similar odds of cohabitation. Activity status is tied to the likelihood of cohabitation. Respondents who were enrolled in school have lower odds of cohabiting than respondents who were working and not enrolled in school. Young adults living in the North Central region of the United States experience higher odds of cohabiting than young adults the North East region.

A last set of analyses not shown focus on bivariate results and indicate that cohabitation expectations are negatively associated with marriage while marital expectations are positively tied to entering a marital union. In those analyses, parental cohabitation is not associated with the odds of marriage. The sample of married respondents is small so the marital outcome findings are suggestive and multivariate analyses cannot be conducted.

Discussion

Despite the widespread concern about the decline of American marriage, most young adults have married or expect to marry. In our sample of young adults who have not yet married or cohabited, the majority expects to marry (61%), but their assessments of the chance of marriage in the next two years are rather modest. Among those who report some expectation of marriage, the average perceived chance is 41%. Compared to marriage, a smaller share, about half, expect to cohabit, but among those who indicate any chance of cohabiting the average expectation of cohabiting in the next two years is better than even odds (57%). One-third (35%) of young adults envision following the “contemporary” union formation pathway sometime in the future and one-in seven in their immediate future, a sequence that includes both cohabitation and marriage.

Many young adults have experienced parental cohabitation, but past research has paid scant attention to how this family experience may influence the expectations and behavior of a contemporary cohort of young adults. The goal of this paper has been to trace the ramifications of parental cohabitation during childhood for young adults' own expectations about cohabitation and marriage and their actual union formation behaviors. One-fifth of our young adults who have never cohabited or married spent at least some time in a cohabiting family while growing up. In most cases, these were instances of living with his or her mother and her mother's cohabiting partner (i.e., cohabiting stepfamilies).

In general, our findings lend support to the notion that intergenerational linkages via social learning are important for young adult expectations for cohabitation: parental cohabitation is associated with expecting to cohabit although the effect is absorbed by the inclusion of control variables (e.g., mothers' education, mothers' age at birth, respondent religiosity). Without the inclusion of control variables, parental cohabitation raises the odds of entering a cohabiting relationship by a striking 86%. Moreover, parental cohabitation is associated with forming a cohabiting union net of cohabitation expectations. These findings indicate that the influence of parental cohabitation on young adult cohabitation does not operate via expectations to cohabit. The linkage between parental cohabitation and actual cohabitation in our sample is fairly robust and remains statistically significant when all the covariates are entered in the model with the exception of mother's age at first birth. Young adults who had mothers who cohabited also had mothers who had their first child at a younger age.

Yet young adults' expectations are tied to eventual union formation behavior, albeit imperfectly. As the age at first marriage continues to rise and a troubled economy makes it difficult for many young adults to form independent households, we believe studying

expectations is an important avenue for understanding changing social norms surrounding families in addition to their value in signaling future union formation behavior. In addition, cohabiting and marital expectations appear to have independent influences on later union formation. This provides some evidence that cohabitation and marriage are not “competing” with one another and there is little threat that cohabitation will replace marriage. However, expectations to cohabit in the next two years are usually not met. One-fifth (21%) of young adults who had strong expectations to cohabit in a two year time horizon did so, and over three-quarters did not. Further analyses of these optimistic singles and their perceived barriers to both marriage and cohabitation may be helpful in understanding the types of societal changes that would facilitate young adults’ achieving their relationship aspirations.

In addition, our findings regarding union formation indicate that twice as many entered a cohabiting union (14%) than married (6%) between 2008 and 2010. It is quite possible that these percentages may be dampened, particularly in the case of marriage, because our time span encompasses a recessionary period. The ability to meet expectations, as suggested above, might be somewhat diminished (Hartnett and Kuperberg 2011). Numerous studies have shown that marriage is perceived as requiring a certain level of economic stability and good prospects for the future (Cherlin 2004; Gibson-Davis et al. 2005; Smock, Manning, and Porter 2005). Those who are not in school or employed have lower expectations to marry and cohabit than those who are employed. Past research has also suggested that school enrollment deters not only marriage, but cohabitation as well (Thornton, Axinn, and Teachman 1995). Our results are consistent with this research; school enrollment is associated with lower odds of entering a cohabiting union.

Also consistent with prior work, we find that religiosity is negatively tied to cohabitation expectations and positively linked to marital expectations (Hewitt and Baxter 2011; Manning et

al. 2007; Wiik 2009). We find a similar pattern even we rely on mother's frequency of religious attendance at the time of the 1979 interview (analyses not shown). Not surprisingly, young adults who lived in cohabiting parent families report lower levels of religiosity. However, these two indicators are not perfectly correlated. One-third of young adults who did not experience parental cohabitation attend services at least weekly in contrast to one-fifth who were raised in a cohabiting parent family. The significant interaction between religiosity and parental cohabitation indicates that parental cohabitation has a stronger influence on cohabitation expectations among more rather than less religious young adults, and that religiosity has a stronger influence among young adults who experienced parental cohabitation. Further, including cohabitation expectations in the model fully accounts for the negative and statistically significant bivariate association between religiosity and the odds of entering a cohabiting union. There likely is some cognitive dissonance operating in that even quite religious young adults do not always behave or expect to behave in ways consistent with their religious views. Qualitative data suggests that religious beliefs may create a frame around union formation decisions, but frames can be trumped by personal and economic factors (Manning et al. 2011).

Our findings show a potentially important way to distinguish "single" adults in order to better understand union formation. Dating relationships are significant, with dating positively associated with union formation expectations. Daters likely contemplate the future direction of their relationship on a regular basis compared to young adults who do not report being in a dating relationship. Not surprisingly, being in a dating relationship is also positively linked with forming a cohabiting relationship. Our findings imply that future research might consider not only whether respondents are dating, but how the quality or nature of their relationships influence both expectations and later union formation behavior.

Given that cohabiting unions increasingly include children and that growing shares of children are born into cohabiting unions (Kennedy and Bumpass 2011), it is important to consider how children shape union formation expectations and behavior. In this analysis of singles, already having a child does not appear to influence expectations to form a cohabiting union or the odds of actually cohabiting. However, single young adults who already have children are less likely to expect to marry in the next two years. There may be countervailing forces operating in that having a child may be a motivation to form a union but at the same time could engender caution on the part of mothers to form stepfamilies (Gibson-Davis, Edin and McLanahan 2005; Manning et al. 2010).

While this paper illuminates an intergenerational mechanism that is arguably part of the story of family change, we acknowledge several limitations. First, while we focus on expectations at a single point in time, expectations may be somewhat fluid and vary according to the qualities of dating relationships. Second, our sample is limited to respondents 18-30 years old who have never cohabited or married and is thus somewhat selective. Third, our measures of parental union experiences only include those occurring during the respondent's childhood. Parental cohabitation could have occurred prior to the birth of their first child, influencing parents' views and attitudes toward cohabitation. While the children would not have been directly "exposed" to that family form, parental views may be passed down to children by way of espousing attitudes or telling stories about the past. A fourth issue is that sample size limitations prevent more refined distinctions such as between cohabiting step and biological parent families. Fifth, our analyses rest on mother's reports of cohabitation and do not acknowledge paternal cohabitation. Even if a father is not living in the household, his cohabitation experience may influence views of cohabitation. Ideally, we would include maternal and paternal cohabitation,

but the detailed relationship histories necessary to code cohabitation experience in the NLSY are based on mother's reports and not father's reports. Another limitation of this study is the focus on parents without attention to the potentially important influences of peers or the community. These are likely increasingly important for young adults' expectations and behavior, with parents' influence waning as young adults establish greater independence and engage in broader communities (Johnson et al. 2011; Manning et al. 2011). Last, we are limited in our ability to test how marital expectations may be linked to marriage due to the very small number of respondents marrying between interview waves.

Our results are broadly consistent with a social learning perspective. This perspective suggests that observing parents' behavior, and perhaps hearing what they have to say, has long-run implications for the family trajectories of young adults. Indeed, the long reach of parental influence during young adulthood has been found in prior work. At least to some extent, cohabitation and marriage are "transmitted" inter-generationally. What one sees and experiences as a child and adolescent shapes what one thinks and does at later stages in the life course. Thus, as cohabitation becomes a more central part of the life course of children it will most likely act as an engine of family change resulting in greater expectations and eventual cohabitation.

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Table 1. Weighted Descriptive Statistics, N=683.

	Prop./Mean (SD)
Expect to Cohabit (1=yes)	51.0 %
Expect to Marry (1=yes)	63.3 %
Cohabitation Expectations Next Two Years, 0-100%	25.93 (31.57)
Marriage Expectations Next Two Years, 0-100%	25.93 (31.57)
Union Expectations Over Next Two Years	
<i>Traditional, Marriage Only</i>	15.6%
<i>Contemporary, Marriage and Cohabitation</i>	13.7%
<i>Cohabitation Only</i>	24.2%
<i>No or Low Union Expectations</i>	46.6%
Union Behaviors Over Past Two Years*	
<i>Married</i>	5.4%
<i>Cohabited</i>	10.7%
<i>Neither Married Nor Cohabited</i>	83.9%
Child Experienced Cohabitation in Childhood (1= yes)	19.1%
Dating Status (ref.= not dating in 2008)	67.6%
Any Biological Children Reported (1= yes)	43.2%
Gender of Respondent, Female (ref.= male)	43.5%
Age, years	21.57 (2.80)
Race/Ethnicity	
<i>Black</i>	13.1%
<i>Hispanic</i>	5.7%
<i>White, non-Hispanic</i>	81.2%
Activity Status	
<i>Enrolled in School</i>	61.7%
<i>Working</i>	36.2%
<i>Neither Enrolled nor Working</i>	2.1%
Urban Residence (1=yes)	80.3%
Region of Residence	
<i>North East</i>	19.5%
<i>North Central</i>	30.8%
<i>South</i>	37.8%
<i>West</i>	11.7%
Respondent's Religious Attendance	3.00 (1.67)
Mother's Age at Birth	25.49 (3.41)
Mother's Education When Child Was 15	
<i>Less than High School</i>	3.2%
<i>High School Graduate</i>	37.7%
<i>Some College</i>	26.1%

College Graduate

33.0%

Source: NLSY79 main youth and Young Adult (YA) surveys.

Note: *Assessed in 2010. All other measures assessed in 2008.

Table 2. Tobit Regression Models Predicting Cohabitation and Marriage Expectations, N=683.

	Cohabitation Expectations		Marriage Expectations	
	Zero Order	Full	Zero Order	Full
Child experienced cohabitation (1= yes)	11.159 +	4.057	4.082	0.4738
Dating status (1= dating)		18.019 **		15.164 ***
Any biological children (1= yes)		-9.309		-23.868 **
Gender of respondent (1= female)		1.684		29.849 ***
Age, in years		-1.905		3.882 ***
Race/ethnicity (ref= White non-Hispanic)				
<i>Black</i>		0.806		-3.234
<i>Hispanic</i>		-8.295		-12.270 *
Activity status (ref= working)				
<i>Enrolled in school</i>		-7.615		-6.086
<i>Neither enrolled nor working</i>		-33.174 +		-42.423 ***
Urban residence (1=yes)		1.422		-5.026
Region of residence (ref= North East)				
<i>North Central</i>		6.583		11.860 *
<i>South</i>		7.227		13.999 **
<i>West</i>		3.312		18.312 **
Religious attendance, continuous		-13.354 ***		4.579 ***
Mother's age at birth, in years		-1.151		-1.014
Mother's education at 15 (ref = HS graduate)				
<i>Less than high school</i>		11.337		4.520
<i>Some college</i>		-10.697		5.062
<i>College graduate</i>		-4.064		0.077
Constant	-1.887	106.468 +	13.924 ***	-73.892 +
σ	65.444	61.473	48.539	42.610
Log likelihood	-2054.690	-2013.326	-2436.601	-2366.556

Source: NLSY79 main youth and Young Adult (YA) surveys.

+ p < .10, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001, two-tailed.

