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**COHABITATION AND MARRIAGE EXPECTATIONS  
AMONG SINGLE WOMEN IN THE U.S.**

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**ABSTRACT**

Cohabitation has surpassed marriage as the most common union experience in young adulthood. We capitalize on a new opportunity to examine whether cohabitation is viewed as a stepping stone to marriage by analyzing both marital and cohabitation expectations among young single women in recently collected, nationally representative data (National Survey of Family Growth 2011-2013) ( $n=1,467$ ). Overall, women have stronger expectations to marry than cohabit. About one-third expect to follow a traditional relationship pathway into marriage, to marry and not cohabit, while the two-thirds view cohabitation as a pathway to marriage. In addition, the least advantaged young women report the weakest expectations to marry. Our use of recently collected data provides insight into the contemporary context of union formation decision-making for the millennial generation.

## **COHABITATION AND MARITAL EXPECTATIONS AMONG YOUNG SINGLE WOMEN IN THE U.S.**

Cohabitation has now surpassed marriage as the typical relationship experience in young adulthood; the majority of young adults have cohabited, but they have not married (Lamidi, 2015; Manning & Stykes, 2015). In addition, recent studies suggest that the link between cohabitation and marriage has been gradually changing. Cohabitation has shifted from a relationship that typically served as a stepping stone toward marriage to one that most often does not (Guzzo, 2014; Kao & Raley, forthcoming; Lamidi et al., 2015), resulting in growing shares of young adults living with multiple cohabiting partners (Vespa, 2014).

While studying cohabitation or marriage behaviors provides one lens on the contemporary relationship climate, it does not reveal preferred relationship patterns because it is limited to those who have actually entered into relationships. With most young adults not yet having married, it is particularly challenging to understand the links between cohabitation and marriage in young adulthood with behavioral data. Moreover, because cohabitation is often “unplanned” (Manning & Smock, 2005; Manning et al., 2014; Sassler, 2004), behavioral measures are limited in their ability to tap relationship preferences; understanding the preferences of recent cohorts of young adults is vital for gauging the current ideational context surrounding union formation.

Drawing on data from a nationally representative survey (National Survey of Family Growth [NSFG] 2011-2013), we take advantage of new questions added to the NSFG on cohabitation expectations to enhance our knowledge about single women’s union formation goals by investigating both cohabitation and marital expectations. Specifically, we have two goals. Our first is to examine how marriage and cohabitation “rank” in terms of expected future

relationship options by evaluating whether expectations to marry are stronger than to cohabit. That is, is marriage the ideal and preferred over cohabitation? Or have marriage and cohabitation become more equivalent, with both similarly expected by young adults? Second, we evaluate whether and to what extent young women's expectations for marriage also rest on expecting to cohabit. Focusing on those who expect to marry, we assess whether cohabitation is viewed as a pathway towards marriage or whether direct marriage without cohabitation is preferred. Given evidence that young adults perceive a high economic bar for marriage and that marriage is increasingly the domain of the college educated, we also assess whether patterns of young women's relationship expectations depend on their socioeconomic circumstances (Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005; Smock, Manning, & Porter, 2005).

## BACKGROUND

During the young adult years, cohabitation rather than marriage is the most common union experience. Among women aged 25-29 three-quarters (73%) have cohabited but less than half (46%) have married (Lamidi, 2015; Manning & Stykes, 2015). The latter reflects increasing median age at first marriage, which now stands at 27.1 for women and 29.2 for men (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2015). The link between cohabitation and marriage has weakened, with fewer cohabitators making the transition to marriage. In the 1980s, one in two cohabitations led to marriage within three years of starting to live together, and this has declined to only one in three in recent years (2005-2009) (Guzzo, 2014; Lamidi et al., 2015).

While behavioral trends regarding cohabitation and marriage are clear, little is known about how single young women view their relationship horizons in a climate in which cohabiting relationships dominate marriage. Studies of union formation behavior are of limited utility for understanding young adults, a group in which only half have entered marriage by their late

twenties. Focusing instead on expectations provides insight into the ideational aspect of preferred relationship options. While some prior studies have analyzed marital expectations (Bulcroft & Bulcroft, 1993; Gassanov, Nicholson, & Kock-Turner, 2008; Licher et al., 2004; South, 1993; Tucker, 2000; Willoughby & Carroll, 2015), this is out of sync with the reality that cohabitation is the central feature of the young adult relationship trajectories. Our focus on cohabitation and marital expectations also aligns with arguments about the importance of ideational shifts as drivers of social change (Kuo & Raley, forthcoming; Lesthaeghe, 2010). Our measures tap young adults' perceptions, which we argue serve as a rough proxy for ideation. This is consistent with recent work that uses retrospective marital expectations of cohabitators as an indicator of ideation (Kuo & Raley, forthcoming).

Because questions about cohabitation expectations have been unavailable to date, it remains unknown whether young adults have similar expectations to cohabit as to marry. Most scholarly evaluations of the state of American marriage reference the increasing age at marriage, but observe that the delay does not mean that marriage is not valued because most Americans expect to marry (Bogle, 2010; Lichter et al., 2004; Pew, 2010; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2015). Thus, the story goes, young adults are not rejecting marriage; instead, they are just waiting longer to marry. In 2010, over two-thirds (69%) of unmarried 18-29 year olds report wanting to get married (Pew, 2010) and eight in ten young adults believe it is important to be married someday (Scott et al., 2009). Despite experiencing low marriage rates themselves, even low-income mothers dream of getting married (Edin & Kefalas, 2005). The majority, 61%, of both parents in unmarried couples who recently had a child report relatively high expectations for marriage (greater than 50/50 chance of marriage) (Waller & McLanahan, 2005).

If marriage is still considered the ideal relationship, we anticipate that expectations to marry will outpace expectations to cohabit. Family scholars argue that marriage is a “capstone” event that has retained high symbolic value in American culture (Cherlin 2009; Smock, 2004; Smock & Manning, 2005). Indeed, there is some evidence that cohabitation is not typically viewed as being as “good” as marriage (Sassler, 2004; Huang et al., 2011; Manning & Smock, 2005). In this scenario, cohabitation is not a substitute for marriage, but instead a short-term ‘place holder,’ and marriage remains the preferred status. Lower expectations to cohabit than to marry may also be a function of the way couples move into together. Cohabitation is often not a relationship one aspires to enter, but one that just happens (Manning & Smock, 2005; Sassler, 2004). A qualitative study suggests that young adults often ‘slide’ into cohabitation without deliberate plans to cohabit (Manning & Smock, 2005). The authors thus argue that cohabitation “should be reconceptualized as a “slide” or “drift” into (and out of) cohabitation (p. 1000). Along the same lines, a recent quantitative study indicates that 30% of young adults who cohabited in 2010 had entered into “unplanned” cohabitations (Manning et al., 2014). These findings align with work 40 years ago by Macklin (1978) who established that the transition into cohabitation is “gradual, often unconscious, escalation of emotional and physical involvement” (p. 6).

Another possibility is that cohabitation and marriage may be considered akin to one another, and in this case we anticipate that single women will have equivalent expectations to cohabit as to marry. This is consistent with the idea that cohabitation is an alternative form of marriage or indistinguishable from marriage (Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004; Kiernan, 2000). A version of this model of cohabitation is similar to what exists in some contexts other than the U.S., including Quebec, Canada, France, and Sweden (Hiekel, Liefbroer, & Poortman 2014;

LaPlante, 2014; Noack, Bernhardt, & Wiik, 2013; Perrelli-Harris, & Gassen, 2009). Even in the U.S., public opinion increasingly supports cohabitation as a legitimate family arrangement (Bogle, 2010; Pew, 2010; Scott et al., 2009; Stykes, 2015). A popular view among some younger Americans is that ‘marriage is becoming obsolete,’ with 44% of all 18-29 year olds concurring with this statement and even higher percentages agreeing among single young adults (Pew, 2010).

An important aspect of union formation is that decisions about cohabitation and marriage do not appear to be forged in isolation of one another. For example, two-fifths of cohabitators plan to marry at the start of cohabitation and a growing share of high school seniors view cohabitation as a testing ground for marriage, rising from 40% in 1976 to nearly 70% in 2008 (Bogle, 2010; Guzzo, 2009). If cohabitation is viewed as a stepping stone towards marriage, we anticipate that more young women will expect to cohabit with their future spouse rather than expect to marry without cohabitation.

Social class also matters. Much past research has shown that cohabitation and marriage patterns differ markedly according to socioeconomic status. What has come to be known as the “diverging destinies” perspective suggests that marriage remains within the reach of the college educated, but is declining among those with more modest levels of education (Lamidi, 2015; McLanahan, 2004). As far as cohabitation goes, the education gap is growing with substantially higher levels of cohabitation among those without a high school degree (Manning & Stykes, 2015). For example, the vast majority of women (89%) with less than a high school degree cohabit as their first union in contrast to just over half (56%) of women with a college degree (Manning et al., 2014). This class divide has emerged in part because of the high economic bar for marriage, wherein young adults wish to be “financially set” prior to marriage. Meeting that

bar involves attaining a degree of economic stability, the ability to afford a home and have a “real wedding,” thus discouraging disadvantaged couples from marrying although not from cohabiting (Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005; Lee, 2015; Smock et al., 2005). Indeed, the sharpest decline in marriage following cohabitation has been experienced by those without college degrees and a number of studies report that positive economic circumstances are more strongly related to marriage than cohabitation (e.g. Addo, 2014; Kuo & Raley, 2014; Lamidi et al., 2015; Smock & Manning, 1997; Uecker & Stokes, 2008).

### CURRENT INVESTIGATION

We examine two research questions. First, how do cohabitation and marriage compare with regard to two possible scenarios: cohabitation as equivalent to marriage and marriage as preferred over cohabitation? Second, we examine patterns of expectations: Do young women report high levels of intending to cohabit *and* marry or a more traditional pathway that delinks cohabitation and marriage with expectations to only marry? Focusing on the subset of respondents who expect to marry, we examine the extent to which cohabitation with their future spouse is also expected. For both research aims, we evaluate how socioeconomic circumstances shape women’s views of their future relationship pathways. Drawing from the diverging destinies perspective, we expect that socioeconomic factors will be more closely linked to marital expectations than to cohabitation expectations. More advantaged women will more often express preferences for direct marriages, while the less advantaged may view cohabitation as a pathway toward marriage

Our analyses rely on the National Survey of Family Growth 2011-2013 interviews and focus on women ages 18 -29 who are single (not cohabiting or married) at the time of interview. We rely on four-category indicators of expectations to marry and expectations to cohabit, with



categories ranging from “definitely yes” to “definitely no.” While our primary focus is on the views of women who are single, we provide supplemental estimates of the share of all women who expect to cohabit or are cohabiting at interview as well as the percentage who expect to marry or are married at interview. Our measure of socioeconomic status partitions our sample into three broad groups: most advantaged based on having a mother who earned a college degree, least advantaged for respondents who had mother’s without a high school education, and women who have mothers with modest levels of education. We rely on mother’s education as proxy for social class because many young adults in our sample are not old enough to have completed a college degree. When we substituted mother’s education with respondent’s education similar results emerged regarding the least advantaged.

Our multivariate analyses include covariates that have been used in prior work on cohabitation and marriage. Prior marital and cohabiting experiences are anticipated to be associated with weaker expectations for future relationships (Guzzo, 2006). Given the growth in serial cohabitation in young adulthood (Lichter et al., 2010), it is increasingly important to account for all cohabitation experiences. We also take account of parenthood. The vast majority, 89%, of single women without children intend to marry compared to a substantially lower two-thirds (69%) of single mothers (Lichter et al., 2004). We thus anticipate that women with children will have lower marital expectations and greater cohabitation expectations than those without children. Based on prior research, we anticipate that age will be positively associated with expecting to marry, racial and ethnic minorities will have lower marital expectations than White women, respondents from two-biological parent families will express greater expectations for marriage, and women in urban areas will report stronger expectations for cohabitation (Gassanov et al., 2008; Landale et al., 2010; Smock, 2000; Snyder, Brown, & Condo, 2004;

Uecker & Stokes, 2008). A proxy for traditional beliefs is religiosity; we expect religiosity will be associated with lower odds of cohabitation and higher odds of marital expectations (Eggebeen & Dew, 2009; Gassanov et al., 2001; Mahoney, 2010).

## DATA AND METHODS

Data for this study were obtained from the 2011 to 2013 continuous cycle of the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG). The NSFG is a nationally representative cross-sectional survey conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) and includes information regarding marriage, cohabitation, fertility histories, family background, demographic indicators, family attitudes, and measures of socioeconomic status. Analyses are weighted to account for the complex survey design of the NSFG. These data are unique because two questions regarding expectations to marry and/or cohabit were included. To date, no other cross-sectional, nationally representative survey has included items about cohabitation expectations.

Our analytic samples were drawn as follows. In the NSFG there were 1,517 single (not currently married or cohabiting) female respondents between ages 18-29, of which 1,497 had valid responses on cohabitation and marital expectation questions. Our analytic sample is limited to 1,481 women with valid responses on all independent variables. To capture whether cohabitation is viewed as a stepping stone toward marriage, responses to the question about cohabitation with a future spouse were analyzed. Only women who reported expecting to marry (score 2, 3 or 4 on marital expectations) were asked the question resulting in a sample of 1,415 women. Supplemental analyses include 2,496 women, all women ages 18-29 at interview.

Our dependent variables are based on responses by single women (e.g. never married, divorced, separated or widowed) to the following questions regarding their intentions for marriage and cohabitation: “Do you think you will (ever/ever again) live together with a man to

whom you are not married?"; "Do you think that you will get married (again someday/someday)?" and "Do you think that you will live together with your future husband before getting married?" Response categories include the following: (1) "Definitely yes," (2) "Probably yes," (3) "Probably no," and (4) "Definitely no." The variables were reverse coded so higher values indicated greater chances of marriage or cohabitation. Given the nature of the dependent variables, we rely on ordered logistic regression models to assess chances of cohabitation and marriage.

The key independent variable is education, used to roughly proxy social class. Mother's *educational level* is measured as an ordinal level variable and assesses whether the mother has less than a high school degree (1), has completed a high school degree or a GED (2), has attended an education program post high school (3), or has a college degree (4). Those without a high school degree or GED are used as the reference category. Our measure of relationship history includes prior marriage and prior cohabitation. *Prior marriage* is operationalized as a dichotomous variable, measuring whether the respondent had a prior marriage or not. Those who had were given values of 1 and those who had never been married were given values of 0. Given our young sample only a small number (n=135) has previously been married. *Prior cohabitation* measures whether the respondent had ever cohabited with a man outside of marriage and is measured as a dichotomous variable. *Maternal status* is coded into those who were mothers (had ever given birth to a live child) and those who had not had children. *Age* is operationalized as a continuous variable. Respondents' *race/ethnicity* is measured as a categorical variable including non-Hispanic White (reference category), non-Hispanic Black, Hispanic, and non-Hispanic other race. Respondents who lived with their biological or adoptive parents from birth until the age of 18 are coded 1 and otherwise 0. Respondents' location of

residence is measured as a dichotomous variable. Those who are currently living in a metropolitan statistical area (MSA), *urban*, were given values of 1 and those living in a non-metropolitan statistical area, non-urban, were assigned values of 0. *Importance of Religion* is measured as an ordinal variable based on the following question: “Currently, how important is religion in your daily life?” Response categories include: (0) Not important (reference), (1) Somewhat important, (2) Very important.

## RESULTS

Our first research question addresses the strength of cohabitation expectations relative to marital expectations and the distribution of these variables are presented in Table 1. In terms of cohabitation expectations, half of single women expect to cohabit in the future but only one in six report a definite chance. The mean response to the chance of cohabiting in the future (four point scale) is 2.4 for single women. The vast majority, nearly 90%, of young single women report a probable or definite chance of marriage with three in five reporting a definite chance of marriage. The mean response to chances of marriage (four point scale) is 3.5. Supplemental analyses based on all young adult women, regardless of marital or cohabitation status, indicate that 92% of all women ages 18 through 29 were married or expected to marry while 61% of all women were cohabiting or expected to cohabit. Thus, young women report greater expectations to marry than to cohabit.

[Table 1 about here.]

We next determine whether expectations to marry surpass expectations to cohabit across all of the socioeconomic indicators (Table 2). Table 2 presents the distributions of the independent variables and mean values of the cohabitation and marital expectations. Marital expectations significantly surpass cohabitation expectations for all women, and this holds for

each of the independent variables. Women who were previously married report the smallest observed difference in marital and cohabitation expectations, but they represent a small minority (5%) of young adult single women. Similarly, single mothers have a relatively small difference in cohabitation and marriage expectations. With regard to socioeconomic status, the gap in cohabitation and marital expectations is lowest among the least advantaged women (mother has less than 12 years of education) and the gap is greatest among the most advantaged (mother has a college degree).

[Table 2 about here]

Table 3 demonstrates how expectations to marry and cohabit differ according to social class in both bivariate and multivariate models (Table 3). Table 3 presents the results of ordered logistic regression models, and the first set of columns in Table 3 shows the odds of expecting to marry and the second set of columns shows the parallel results for expecting to cohabit. The zero order models indicate that mothers' education is positively associated with expecting to marry. The least advantaged have the lowest expectations to marry. Respondents who did not graduate from high school also report low expectation to marry (results not shown). Prior marital or cohabitation experience is associated with lower odds of anticipating marriage. Single mothers report lower odds of expecting to marry than their counterparts without children. There are no significant differences in the odds of expecting to marry according to racial and ethnic group or urban residence. Younger women report greater odds of expecting to marry as do women who grew up in a two biological parent family. The greater the importance of religion the stronger the expectation to marry. The second model includes all the covariates and shows that significant differences according to mother's education persist, with lower expectations for marriage among the least advantaged single women. Women who are the most advantaged do

not report greater expectations than their counterparts with more modest education levels, high school degree or some college (results not shown). In this model, prior cohabitation experience, motherhood status and importance of religion continue to be significantly related to expectations to marry.

[Table 3 about here]

The next set of models show how cohabitation expectations differ according to social class. The least and most advantaged single women report similar odds of expecting to cohabit. Further analyses indicate that the most advantaged women report lower expectations to cohabit than women with more modest education levels (some college) (results not shown). Prior cohabitation experience is associated with higher odds of expecting to cohabit again. Women who have been previously married and single mothers share similar odds of expecting to cohabit as women without children. African Americans have lower levels of expecting to cohabit than do Whites. Single women who grew up with two biological parents report lower odds of expecting to cohabit. Religion is associated with lower cohabitation intentions. In the full model, the only indicator that remains associated with cohabitation intentions is importance of religion.

Our second research question asks whether cohabitation is viewed as a stepping stone toward marriage (Table 1). The bottom panel of Table 1 shows that among single women who reported some degree of expectation to marry (not 'definitely no'), nearly two-thirds (64%) expected to cohabit with their future spouse and just over one-third did not. There is some polarization with one in four reporting definitely expecting to cohabit and one in five definitely expected not to cohabit. The mean value of expecting to cohabit with a future spouse on a four point scale was 2.7 which is higher than the mean value of expectations to cohabit among all

single women (2.4). It appears that cohabitation is viewed as a stepping stone toward marriage for most young women, but a substantial minority expect to marry without cohabitation.

Table 4 presents models that determine whether there are social class differentials in viewing cohabitation as a stepping stone toward marriage. Greater expectations to cohabit signify cohabitation is viewed as a pathway toward marriage. Advantaged and disadvantaged women share similar expectations of cohabitation as a pathway toward marriage so there does not appear to be a social class differential. There are some differentials in expectations to cohabit according to the remaining independent variables. Single women who have previously cohabited more often expect to cohabit prior to marriage. Women who were previously married and single mothers do not indicate greater expectations to cohabit with a future spouse. Women who grew up with two biological parents indicate lower expectations to cohabit prior to marriage. Stronger beliefs about the importance of religion are associated with lower odds of expecting to cohabit with a future spouse. In the full model younger respondents report greater expectations to cohabit and marry while cohabitation experience and religious importance remains significantly associated with future relationship expectations.

[Table 4 about here]

## DISCUSSION

As marriage continues to be delayed in the United States and growing shares of Americans experience cohabitation, it is increasingly important to incorporate cohabitation into family research on young adults. To date, due to a lack of data, few studies have considered young adult single women's expectations regarding cohabitation as well as marriage. Our focus on expectations provides new insights into the underlying norms or ideational aspects related to contemporary union formation patterns and how cohabitation and marriage fit together into the

American family system. We argue that assessments of patterns of marriage and cohabitation cannot rest solely on analysis of behavior.

Our findings indicate that nearly one in seven (16%) single women report definite expectations to cohabit and 35% indicate they probably would cohabit. At the same time, the vast majority of single women expect to marry (61% definitely yes and 29% probably yes), suggesting there does not appear to be a general “retreat” from expecting to marry. Young single women indicate greater chances of marriage than cohabitation and this holds true across sociodemographic indicators that tap social class. Thus, cohabitation is on the relationship horizon for a sizeable share of single women, but does not surpass marriage.

We also find that roughly two-thirds of young women expect to cohabit with their future husband. This suggests that cohabitation is a stepping stone toward marriage for many young women, although a substantial minority expects to marry without sharing a residence beforehand. Given that about three-quarters of recent marriages were preceded by cohabitation, this suggests that more brides had entered cohabitation than intended to do so. This is consistent with prior work that cohabitation may often be ‘unplanned’ (Manning et al. 2014b; Sassler 2004). Taken together, our findings suggest that the ideational climate regarding cohabitation is that it is not viewed as an alternative or substitute for marriage, but more an experience linked to marriage (Huang et al., 2011).

Our work only partially supports the diverging destinies perspective. We find that more advantaged women report greater expectations to marry than their less advantaged counterparts. Similar results emerged when relying on women’s education level rather than their mothers’ education (analyses not shown). However, expectations to cohabit (overall or with a future spouse) do not follow the same pattern. Average values of expectations to cohabit follow a



pattern of lower expectations among the advantaged, but there is very little difference between women with college-educated mothers and those with mothers who have not obtained a college degree. Analysis of respondent's education suggest that those with modest educations (12 years or some college) report greater expectations to cohabit than their peers with have not graduated from high school. While we recognize challenges in the assessment of the social class of young adults, our results are suggestive of a social divide with regard to marriage but not with regard to cohabitation.

While not the focus of this study, our findings showcase some important differentials in cohabitation and marital expectations for key sociodemographic subgroups of women. First, a growing group of single young adults have had prior cohabitation experience, and we find this group is more likely to expect to cohabit and less likely to expect marriage. This suggests that there may be some movement toward a retreat from marriage and a potential increase in serial cohabitation. Second, one group of single women facing potential challenges in the labor and relationship markets are single mothers. Consistent with prior work (Lichter et al., 2004), we find single mothers overall have lower odds of expecting to marry, but share similar expectations to cohabit as their counterparts without children. Their expectations may be based on the reality that their chances of marriage are low. Among single mothers who intend to marry (81%), their expectations to follow the traditional path to marriage is similar to women without children. Although many single mothers will eventually cohabit, their expectations to cohabit and cohabit on the way to marriage are quite low. A third observation is relevant to earlier work focused on race and ethnic differentials in expectations to marry. We do not find a racial gap in expectations to marry, but do find lower expectations to cohabit among Black single women than their white counterparts. These patterns do not align with the union formation behavior of young adults

suggesting that there may be structural barriers that specifically thwart Black women from achieving their expectations to marry. Fourth, family background is associated with union formation expectations. Growing up with two biological parents appears to be positively associated with expectations to marry and negatively tied to expectations to cohabit. Finally, consistent with prior work, religiosity is a strong predictor of expecting to marry and strongly associated with lower expectations to cohabit. Looking forward, there may be continued bifurcation in cohabitation and marital behavior based on religious views.

While our study provides new insights into expectations surrounding union formation, there are a few limitations. First, the NSFG is a cross-sectional survey. As such, we do not argue that these factors we explore are causally related to expectations. Also, the survey design prevents us from assessing whether and under what conditions expectations are predictive of subsequent union formation. Second, the cross-section design means our findings may be biased as young women who were in a union at the time of interview are selected out of the analysis. Our analytic sample of single women skews towards those who have not had a child, have not had prior relationships, have a mother with a high school degree, and are African American. Ideally, assessments of expectations would be measured at regular intervals to capture views about cohabitation and marriage prior to forming unions, but we are limited to one point in time. Third, cohabitation and marriage require a willing partner and their views most likely play a role in expectations to marry or cohabit. Information about whether single respondents are currently in a relationship is not available. We cannot determine whether expectations are based on future prospects with a particular partner or a diffuse sense of expectations. Similarly, the questions do not reference a specific time period, thus our measures could be interpreted more as a general desire rather than a specific expectation.

Nonetheless, the survey items used here provide evidence about women's perceived relationship horizons. Overall, our findings underscore the importance of considering not only behavior, but also individuals' expectations for understanding union formation, and more broadly, family change. We believe expectations can be interpreted as an early signal of broader-based ideational changes in marriage and cohabitation. Moreover, this study is a clear call for the importance of expanding the focus on marriage and marital expectations to include cohabitation. Such an endeavor is vital for gauging the changing nature of union formation for a generation facing more varied and arguably, more uncertain relationship trajectories.

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| <i>Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Martial and Cohabitation Expectations</i> |      |      |       |       |
|--|------|------|-------|-------|
|  | M    | SE   | Range | %     |
| Expectations of cohabitation <sup>a</sup>  | 2.39 | 0.05 | 1 – 4 |       |
| Definitely no  |      |      |       | 27.75 |
| Probably no  |      |      |       | 21.49 |
| Probably yes   |      |      |       | 35.10 |
| Definitely yes   |      |      |       | 15.66 |
| Expectations of marriage <sup>a</sup>  | 3.48 | 0.04 | 1 – 4 |       |
| Definitely no  |      |      |       | 3.29  |
| Probably no  |      |      |       | 6.58  |
| Probably yes   |      |      |       | 29.31 |
| Definitely yes   |      |      |       | 60.82 |
| Expecting to cohabit with future husband <sup>b</sup>                            | 2.71 | 0.06 | 1 – 4 |       |
| Definitely no  |      |      |       | 20.77 |
| Probably no  |      |      |       | 15.08 |
| Probably yes   |      |      |       | 36.78 |
| Definitely yes   |      |      |       | 27.37 |

*Source:* National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) 2011 – 2013.

*Note:* All values are weighted. Single women aged 18 to 29.

<sup>a</sup>Sample size is 1,481. <sup>b</sup>Sample size is 1,415 (women who report expectations to marry).



Table 2. *Percent Distribution Of Independent Variables and Differences In Mean Expectations To Cohabit and Marry By Groups (N = 1,481)*

|   | %     | Mean<br>Expectations<br>to Cohabit<br>(SE) | Mean<br>Expectations<br>to Marry<br>(SE) | N    |     |
|---|-------|--|--|------|-----|
| <b>Mother's educational attainment</b>  |       |  |  |      |     |
| Less than high school                   | 14.82 | 2.40 (.09)                                 | 3.18 (.10)                               | 276  | *** |
| High school/GED                         | 30.68 | 2.44 (.09)                                 | 3.49 (.05)                               | 454  | *** |
| Some college                            | 29.55 | 2.46 (.08)                                 | 3.54 (.04)                               | 442  | *** |
| Bachelor's degree +                     | 24.96 | 2.22 (.09)                                 | 3.56 (.06)                               | 309  | *** |
| <b>Marital history</b>                  |       |  |  |      |     |
| Never married                           | 94.96 | 2.39 (.05)                                 | 3.51 (.04)                               | 1363 | *** |
| Prior marriage                          | 5.04  | 2.42 (.13)                                 | 2.83 (.12)                               | 118  | *   |
| <b>Cohabitation history</b>             |       |  |  |      |     |
| Never cohabited                         | 72.25 | 2.32 (.06)                                 | 3.54 (.04)                               | 977  | *** |
| Prior cohabitation                      | 27.75 | 2.56 (.07)                                 | 3.30 (.05)                               | 504  | *** |
| <b>Maternal status</b>                  |       |  |  |      |     |
| Not a mother                            | 76.95 | 2.36 (.06)                                 | 3.57 (.04)                               | 988  | *** |
| Mother                                  | 23.05 | 2.47 (.06)                                 | 3.16 (.05)                               | 493  | *** |
| <b>Age at interview</b>                 |       |  |  |      |     |
| 18 to 19                                | 25.81 | 2.39 (.07)                                 | 3.55 (.06)                               | 389  | *** |
| 20 to 24                                | 48.65 | 2.39 (.08)                                 | 3.58 (.05)                               | 602  | *** |
| 25 to 29                                | 25.54 | 3.39 (.09)                                 | 3.21 (.06)                               | 490  | *** |
| <b>Race/ethnicity</b>                   |       |  |  |      |     |
| Non-Hispanic white                      | 53.09 | 2.42 (.09)                                 | 3.53 (.05)                               | 601  | *** |
| Non-Hispanic black                      | 20.69 | 2.18 (.07)                                 | 3.50 (.05)                               | 436  | *** |
| Hispanic                                | 19.65 | 2.52 (.09)                                 | 3.38 (.06)                               | 357  | *** |
| Non-Hispanic other                      | 6.57  | 2.32 (.08)                                 | 3.22 (.17)                               | 87   | *** |
| <b>Urban residence</b>                  |       |  |  |      |     |
| Urban                                   | 39.10 | 2.44 (.08)                                 | 3.44 (.04)                               | 666  | *** |
| Not urban                               | 60.90 | 2.35 (.07)                                 | 3.50 (.05)                               | 815  | *** |
| <b>Family background</b>                |       |  |  |      |     |
| Lived with bio/adopted parents until 18 | 56.15 | 2.30 (.07)                                 | 3.55 (.04)                               | 727  | *** |
| Did not live with bio/adopted parents   | 43.85 | 2.49 (.06)                                 | 3.38 (.04)                               | 754  | *** |
| <b>Importance of religion</b>           |       |  |  |      |     |
| Not important or no religion            | 29.21 | 2.72 (.10)                                 | 3.26 (.07)                               | 406  | *** |
| Somewhat important                      | 28.80 | 2.57 (.06)                                 | 3.43 (.06)                               | 424  | *** |
| Very important                          | 41.99 | 2.03 (.08)                                 | 3.66 (.03)                               | 651  | *** |

Source: National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) 2011 – 2013.

Note: All values are weighted. Single women aged 18 to 29.

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

Table 3. *Ordered Logistic Regressions and Odds Ratios Of Cohabitation and Marital Expectations* (N = 1,481)

|  | Marital Expectations |             |           |            |             |           | Cohabitation Expectations |             |           |            |             |           |
|--|----------------------|-------------|-----------|------------|-------------|-----------|---------------------------|-------------|-----------|------------|-------------|-----------|
|  | Zero-Order Models    |             |           | Full Model |             |           | Zero-Order Models         |             |           | Full Model |             |           |
|  | <i>B</i>             | <i>SE B</i> | <i>OR</i> | <i>B</i>   | <i>SE B</i> | <i>OR</i> | <i>B</i>                  | <i>SE B</i> | <i>OR</i> | <i>B</i>   | <i>SE B</i> | <i>OR</i> |
| Mother's education attainment<br>(Less than high school) |                      |             |           |            |             |           |                           |             |           |            |             |           |
| High school or GED                                       | 0.665                | 0.230       | 1.945 **  | 0.657      | 0.253       | 1.930 *   | 0.084                     | 0.221       | 1.088     | 0.066      | 0.221       | 1.068     |
| Some college   | 0.770                | 0.250       | 2.160 **  | 0.473      | 0.275       | 1.606     | 0.111                     | 0.190       | 1.118     | 0.234      | 0.222       | 1.263     |
| Bachelor's degree +                                      | 0.808                | 0.252       | 2.244 **  | 0.541      | 0.237       | 1.718 *   | -0.306                    | 0.203       | 0.736     | -0.105     | 0.236       | 0.900     |
| Marital history <sup>a</sup>                             | -1.549               | 0.267       | 0.212 *** | -0.956     | 0.322       | 0.384 **  | 0.053                     | 0.240       | 1.054     | -0.146     | 0.253       | 0.864     |
| Cohabitation history <sup>b</sup>                        | -0.616               | 0.169       | 0.540 *** | 0.146      | 0.188       | 1.157     | 0.417                     | 0.165       | 1.517 *   | 0.334      | 0.216       | 1.396     |
| Maternal status <sup>c</sup>                             | -1.008               | 0.146       | 0.365 *** | -0.681     | 0.195       | 0.506 *** | 0.184                     | 0.139       | 1.202     | 0.096      | 0.198       | 1.101     |
| Age at interview   |                      |             |           |            |             |           |                           |             |           |            |             |           |
| 18 to 19   | 0.891                | 0.244       | 2.438 *** | 0.619      | 0.280       | 1.857 *   | 0.002                     | 0.192       | 1.002     | 0.123      | 0.229       | 1.130     |
| 20 to 24   | 0.986                | 0.214       | 2.680 *** | 0.808      | 0.230       | 2.244 *** | 0.001                     | 0.199       | 1.001     | 0.116      | 0.203       | 1.123     |
| (25 to 29)   |                      |             |           |            |             |           |                           |             |           |            |             |           |
| Race/Ethnicity   |                      |             |           |            |             |           |                           |             |           |            |             |           |
| (Non-Hispanic white)                                     |                      |             |           |            |             |           |                           |             |           |            |             |           |
| Non-Hispanic black                                       | -0.123               | 0.208       | 0.884     | -0.007     | 0.213       | 0.993     | -0.423                    | 0.216       | 0.655 *   | -0.255     | 0.287       | 0.775     |
| Hispanic   | -0.401               | 0.222       | 0.670     | -0.288     | 0.215       | 0.750     | 0.161                     | 0.227       | 1.175     | 0.264      | 0.239       | 1.302     |
| Non-Hispanic other                                       | -0.728               | 0.433       | 0.483     | -0.904     | 0.521       | 0.405     | -0.198                    | 0.198       | 0.820     | -0.097     | 0.196       | 0.908     |
| Urban residence <sup>d</sup>                             | -0.201               | 0.195       | 0.818     | -0.132     | 0.171       | 0.876     | 0.155                     | 0.175       | 1.168     | 0.146      | 0.171       | 1.157     |
| Family background <sup>e</sup>                           | 0.407                | 0.156       | 1.502 *   | 0.330      | 0.154       | 1.390 *   | -0.325                    | 0.157       | 0.723 *   | -0.173     | 0.175       | 0.841     |
| Importance of religion                                   |                      |             |           |            |             |           |                           |             |           |            |             |           |
| Not important  | -1.065               | 0.176       | 0.345 *** | -1.191     | 0.192       | 0.304 *** | 1.274                     | 0.258       | 3.575 *** | 1.205      | 0.281       | 3.337 *** |
| Somewhat important                                       | -0.643               | 0.201       | 0.526 **  | -0.650     | 0.199       | 0.522 *** | 0.974                     | 0.176       | 2.649 *** | 0.889      | 0.191       | 2.433 *** |
| (Very important)   |                      |             |           |            |             |           |                           |             |           |            |             |           |
| -2 Log likelihood <sup>f</sup>                           | 2,754.602            |             |           |            |             |           | 3,811.627                 |             |           |            |             |           |

Source: National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) 2011 – 2013.

Note: All values are weighted. Single women aged 18 to 29. OR = Odds Ratio.

<sup>a</sup>Marital history: 0 = never married, 1 = prior marriage <sup>b</sup>Cohabitation history: 0 = never cohabited, 1 = has cohabited. <sup>c</sup>Maternal status: 0 = not a mother, 1 = mother. <sup>d</sup>Urban residence: 0 = non-urban, 1 = urban. <sup>e</sup>Family background: 0 = did not live with biological or adopted parents until 18, 1 = lived with biological or adopted parents until 18. <sup>f</sup>Based on of unweighted analyses.

\* < .05. \*\* < .01. \*\*\* < .001.

Table 4. *Ordered Logistic Regression and Odds Ratios Of Expecting To Cohabit With Future Husband (N = 1,415)*

|                                   | Zero-Order Models |             |           | Full Model |             |           |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------|-------------|-----------|------------|-------------|-----------|
|                                   | <i>B</i>          | <i>SE B</i> | <i>OR</i> | <i>B</i>   | <i>SE B</i> | <i>OR</i> |
| Mother's education attainment     |                   |             |           |            |             |           |
| (Less than high school)           |                   |             |           |            |             |           |
| High school or GED                | 0.237             | 0.175       | 1.267     | 0.144      | 0.196       | 1.155     |
| Some college                      | 0.181             | 0.162       | 1.199     | 0.322      | 0.190       | 1.379     |
| Bachelor's degree +               | -0.054            | 0.203       | 0.948     | 0.226      | 0.231       | 1.254     |
| Marital history <sup>a</sup>      | 0.179             | 0.269       | 1.196     | -0.038     | 0.303       | 0.963     |
| Cohabitation history <sup>b</sup> | 0.700             | 0.156       | 2.014 *** | 0.675      | 0.179       | 1.964 *** |
| Maternal status <sup>c</sup>      | 0.262             | 0.133       | 1.299 *   | 0.061      | 0.175       | 1.063     |
| Age at interview                  |                   |             |           |            |             |           |
| 18 to 19                          | 0.057             | 0.167       | 1.059     | 0.443      | 0.206       | 1.557 *   |
| 20 to 24                          | -0.095            | 0.142       | 0.910     | 0.184      | 0.136       | 1.202     |
| (25 to 29)                        |                   |             |           |            |             |           |
| Race/Ethnicity                    |                   |             |           |            |             |           |
| (Non-Hispanic white)              |                   |             |           |            |             |           |
| Non-Hispanic black                | -0.104            | 0.206       | 0.902     | 0.223      | 0.228       | 1.249     |
| Hispanic                          | 0.121             | 0.217       | 1.128     | 0.368      | 0.214       | 1.445     |
| Non-Hispanic other                | -0.113            | 0.217       | 0.893     | 0.087      | 0.207       | 1.091     |
| Urban residence <sup>d</sup>      | 0.105             | 0.185       | 1.110     | -0.013     | 0.166       | 0.987     |
| Family background <sup>e</sup>    | -0.445            | 0.156       | 0.641 **  | -0.239     | 0.164       | 0.787     |
| Importance of religion            |                   |             |           |            |             |           |
| Not important                     | 1.556             | 0.226       | 4.740 *** | 1.565      | 0.244       | 4.783 *** |
| Somewhat important                | 1.004             | 0.176       | 2.728 *** | 0.985      | 0.183       | 2.678 *** |
| (Very important)                  |                   |             |           |            |             |           |
| -2 Log likelihood <sup>g</sup>    |                   |             |           |            |             | 3,570.831 |

Source: National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) 2011 – 2013.

Note: All values are weighted. Single women aged 18 to 29. OR = Odds Ratio.

<sup>a</sup>Marital history: 0 = never married, 1 = prior marriage <sup>b</sup>Cohabitation history: 0 = never cohabited, 1 = has cohabited. <sup>c</sup>Maternal status: 0 = not a mother, 1 = mother.

<sup>d</sup>Urban residence: 0 = non-urban, 1 = urban. <sup>e</sup>Family background: 0 = did not live with biological or adopted parents until 18, 1 = lived with biological or adopted parents until 18. <sup>f</sup>Based on unweighted analyses.

\* < .05. \*\* < .01. \*\*\* < .001.