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2019 Working Paper Series

**A RESEARCH BRIEF ON PROSPECTIVE MARITAL EXPECTATIONS
AMONG COHABITORS WITH INITIAL MARITAL INTENTIONS**

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This research was supported in part by the Center for Family and Demographic Research, Bowling Green State University, which has core funding from the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (P2CHD050959). An earlier version of this paper was presented as a poster at the 2017 meeting of the National Council on Family Relations, Orlando, FL.

A Research Brief on Prospective Marital Expectations among Cohabitors with Initial Marital Intentions

Having initial intentions to marry increase cohabitators' likelihood of marriage, yet some cohabitators with such plans do not marry. One explanation for non-marriage may be that prior union experiences and the challenges of raising shared or stepchildren could temper initially strong marital intentions. Using the 2011-15 National Survey of Family Growth, I examine prospective marital expectations among 531 current cohabitators in short-term unions (≤ 36 months) who report they were engaged or had definite plans to marry at the start of coresidence, focusing on prior union experiences, stepchildren, shared children, and pregnancy. A fifth of current cohabitators with initial marital intentions do not definitely expect to marry their partner, and the odds of definite expectations are lower if respondents' partners have children from a prior union and higher if respondents are expecting a child. Prior union experiences, shared children, and the respondent's own prior children are unrelated to expectations.

Most people cohabit at least once, and although most marriages are preceded by cohabitation (Hemez & Manning, 2017), cohabitations have become decreasingly likely to transition to marriage (Guzzo, 2014; Kuo & Raley, 2016; Lamidi, Manning, & Brown, 2019). The reasons for this are unclear. At the most basic level, there is evidence that fewer cohabitators begin their unions with marriage in mind (Vespa, 2014), yet even cohabitators with strong initial marital intentions have experienced a decline in the chances of marriage (Guzzo, 2014).

Why might cohabitators who initially expect to marry not actually make the transition to marriage? One explanation is that many cohabitators have prior union experiences (Guzzo, 2017) and children (Manning, Brown, & Stykes, 2015), both of which may impact relationship processes and outlooks. For instance, individuals with past failed unions could be less optimistic about their current union's future, and having children from a prior union can be a source of conflict (Cherlin, 1978; Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000; Ganong, Coleman, & Jamison, 2011). Cohabitations also often include shared children (Eickmeyer, 2019), and as cohabitation becomes an increasingly acceptable site for childrearing (Stykes, 2015), cohabiting parents may feel less need to marry. Additionally, given that young children seem to reduce relationship quality (Doss & Rhoades, 2017), the stressors of having children may make cohabitators less confident in their union's long-term stability.

One of the issues that arises when examining why cohabitations do not transition to marriage is determining whether those in the union *never* expected to marry, or if they expected to marry but changed their minds. Unfortunately, identifying the latter scenario requires following cohabitators over time to periodically gather information about marriage expectations, but no such data is available. In this research brief, I take advantage of unique measures in the 2011-2015 cycle of the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) to roughly approximate

changes in expectations of marriage. Using a retrospective question about engagement or definite plans to marry at the start of cohabitation to identify current cohabitators with strong marital intentions, I then examine prospective marriage expectations based on a question asking how sure they are about marrying their partner in the future. I account for key differences in past union experiences and childbearing to allow for a glimpse into whether these factors are associated with expectations of actually marrying and limit the analysis to cohabitators in unions of three years or shorter to avoid concerns over the over-representation of long-term cohabitations in cross-sectional data.

Cohabitation and marriage

Cohabitation is now the modal first union (Rose-Greenland & Smock, 2013), and most people cohabit at least once during their lifetime (Hemez & Manning, 2017). But cohabitation's lack of institutionalization (Cherlin, 2004) means that there are no widely accepted rules, titles, and norms that outline how a cohabiting union should progress. Although having firm initial marital intentions are strongly associated with transitioning to marriage (Guzzo, 2009), it is possible that a subset of cohabitators with such plans do not strongly expect to actually marry their partner. In some cases, the commitment that engagement implies may be sufficient; they have access to formal social titles – fiancée and fiancé – and perhaps have a public marker of commitment and status in the form of an engagement ring. For others, though, there may be intervening factors and conditions that weaken expectations of marriage. The wide variation in who cohabits and under what circumstances suggests that some individuals may be less able to realize their initial marriage plans, even if they do not dissolve their union. Below, I focus on how prior union experiences and the presence of children could be key factors that intervene between initial intentions to marry and prospective expectations of marriage.

Prior Union Experiences

Although there is extensive research on cohabitators' expectations of, and transitions to, marriage in terms of meeting the economic marriage bar (Ishizuka, 2018), another important factor is that many cohabiting unions are higher-order unions in which one or both partners have cohabited or married in the past (Guzzo, 2017). The experience of prior failed relationships does not seem to discourage forming new unions (Cherlin, 2009), but it could indicate underlying issues in maintaining relationships and/or could make individuals wary of forming legal partnerships such as marriage (Sassler & Miller, 2011a; Wu & Schimmele, 2005). Engaged cohabitation might be a valuable intermediary status between 'just living together' and being married for those with past unions, in that a couple has the advantages of coresidence as well as a public signifier of commitment but can more easily dissolve the union without the lengthy legal and economic issues that accompany divorce. Thus, we might expect that, among those who began their cohabitation with firm marriage plans, those who had been married before (or had partners who had been married before) would be less likely to be confident that they will marry. However, work on actual transitions to marriage suggest that previously married cohabiting women are actually more likely to marry than never married cohabitators, with no association between their male partners' prior marriage history and cohabitation outcomes (Guzzo, 2018). Similarly, we might expect that those who had cohabited in the past (in a relationship that did not result in marriage) would have lower expectations of marriage, as they already experienced at least one cohabitation that did not end in marriage. Prior cohabitation experience, though, has a nonlinear association with outcomes – first cohabitations are more likely to dissolve than remain intact compared to second cohabitations, but third or higher cohabitations are less likely to dissolve and more likely to transition to marriage than second cohabitations (Guzzo, 2014). As such, it is

unclear if expectations of marriage would vary based on whether either partner had prior union experiences, conditional on accounting for selection into cohabitation with initial marriage plans.

Children in Cohabiting Unions

Children from past unions may also present a challenge. Just over four in ten cohabiting unions are stepfamilies (Guzzo, 2017), which, like cohabitation, also lack institutionalization and rules to guide interactions (Cherlin, 1978). Although having children from a prior union reduces the odds of initial marital intentions (Guzzo, 2009), the difficulties of stepfamily life may lead even those who initially planned to marry to become less sure about their unions' chances of marriage over time. Biological parents and stepparents often report tensions and conflicts over childrearing (van Eeden-Moorefield & Pasley, 2013). Biological parents may feel torn between partners and children, and stepparents may be unsure of how to interact with their stepchildren and of their roles and obligations, particularly during the first few months (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). This could especially be the case when stepfamilies are created via the partner's – rather than the respondent's – children from a prior union, as individuals experience stepfamilies differently depending on whether they are a stepparent or not (Guzzo, Hemez, Anderson, Manning, & Brown, 2019). Thus, it is likely that when either or both partners have children from a prior union, even cohabiting individuals who initially had marital intentions would be less confident about marriage than when there are no stepchildren.

There is some evidence that cohabitators often marry not because they explicitly want to marry but because they have been together for a long time, with marriage seeming like the inevitable next step (Miller, Sassler, & Kusi-Appouh, 2011; Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004; Stanley, Markman, & Rhoades, 2006). But the social pressures that may lead such couples to marry may be weaker for those with shared children. To the extent that many Americans view

having children as a reason to marry (Geiger & Livingston, 2018), couples who already have children together could be less motivated and face less social pressure to marry. This possibility is supported by evidence that cohabitators who have a child during their union remain cohabiting (rather than break up or marry) longer than cohabitators who do not have a child (Lamidi, Manning, & Brown, 2019). Additionally, raising children entails a substantial amount of work and effort, and the demands of childrearing may relegate relationship factors – especially finding the time, money, and energy to plan a wedding – to the back burner (Chaney & Monroe, 2011). Relationship quality also declines after having children (Doss & Rhoades, 2017), perhaps because focusing on childrearing reduces the time and energy available for the romantic relationship. If cohabitators with shared children have lower relationship quality than non-parents or are focused on parenting rather than their romantic relationship, they could be less likely to expect to actually marry than cohabitators with no shared children. It is also possible that, with the ongoing decoupling of marriage and childbearing, cohabitators with shared children are no different than those without shared children in terms of marriage expectations, at least when a strong commitment to the future of the relationship has already been expressed.

An exception to this, though, might be during pregnancy. Despite growing acceptance of cohabitation as a site for childrearing, childless cohabitators continue to express a preference for marriage over cohabitation as the ideal setting in which to raise children (Sassler & Cunningham, 2008). Although many couples now respond to a pregnancy conceived outside of a residential union by cohabiting (Lichter, Sassler, & Turner, 2014), unmarried expectant couples tend to have an idealized notion of their future family life and are highly optimistic about marriage (Edin & Kefalas, 2005), having yet to face the actual challenges of parenting that reduce relationship quality, at least in the short term (Doss & Rhoades, 2017). As such, among cohabitators with

initial marital intentions, expectant cohabitators may be more likely to expect to marry than those who are not expecting a child.

Current Research

In sum, this brief investigates whether current cohabitators with initial marital intentions (engaged or with definite plans to marry) actually think they will marry, focusing on two key factors: 1) prior union experiences and 2) the presence of children (children from a prior union, shared children from the current union, and a current pregnancy). Although the evidence is mixed as to whether either partners' past relationships may be associated with expectations of marriage, I hypothesize that cohabitators in a stepfamily will be less likely to definitely expect to marry than those in which neither partner has children from a prior relationship, especially when stepchildren are from a partner's prior relationship. Similarly, I expect that cohabitators who have shared children with their partner will be less likely to think they will definitely marry than those with no shared children, though it is possible they are no different from those without shared children. However, cohabitators who are currently pregnant, or whose partner is pregnant, will be more likely to have definite expectations of marriage than non-expectant cohabitators.

An important concern, though, is that currently cohabiting unions identified in cross-sectional survey data tend to over-represent cohabitations of long durations, which may be selectively different than other cohabitations. In general, cohabitations are a short-lived union form – the majority cohabitations end or transition to marriage within two years (Copen, Daniels, & Mosher, 2013), and after three years, there is little further change in outcomes (Lamidi, Manning, & Brown, 2019). Long-duration cohabitations – those lasting more than three years – are unique; they tend to more socioeconomically disadvantaged (Mernitz, 2018) and are likely different from short-term cohabitations in unmeasured ways, including orientation toward

marriage. Additionally, recall bias about cohabitation dates (and likely attitudes) is an issue when recalling over longer time periods (Hayford & Morgan, 2008). As such, the analysis is restricted to current cohabitations three years or less.

Several socioeconomic and demographic factors are linked to both marital intentions and expectations of marriage. There is evidence that men and women differ in how they view the future of cohabiting relationships (Manning, Smock, & Porter, 2005; Sassler & Miller, 2011a). Black cohabitators are more likely to begin cohabiting with marital intentions than their White counterparts but less likely to expect to marry or actually marry (Guzzo, 2009; Manning & Smock, 2002). Foreign-born Hispanics (but not native-born Hispanics) are also more likely to be engaged or have definite plans to marry at the start of cohabitation than Whites, although they are less likely to marry (Guzzo, 2009). More advantaged individuals are more likely to be engaged, expect to marry, and actually marry (Guzzo, 2009; Manning & Smock, 2002; Sassler & Miller, 2011b), and individuals whose own parents were married during childhood are more likely to have marital intentions (Guzzo, 2009). Among cohabitators in the childbearing years, age is positively associated with engagement and transitions to marriage (Guzzo, 2009) but somewhat negatively associated with expectations of marriage (Manning & Smock, 2002). Union duration is also negatively associated with expectations of marriage (Manning & Smock, 2002), and it is likely that those who are formally engaged may have stronger expectations of marriage than those with definite plans but who do not identify themselves as engaged. Many of these same factors are also linked to prior union experiences and the presence of children. For instance, compared to non-stepfamily unions, a greater proportion of stepfamily cohabitations are comprised of individuals who are minorities, have low levels of education, and grew up outside of a two-parent family (Guzzo, 2018).

Data and Methods

Analyses use the 2011-15 cycle of the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG). The NSFG is a nationally representative cross-sectional survey of 20,621 individuals aged 15-44 with a detailed history of unions and childbearing. Of the full sample, 2,605 men and women were currently cohabiting and had begun their union age 15 or later. For each current and past cohabitation, respondents were asked, “At the time you began living together, were you and [partner] engaged to be married or did you have definite plans to get married?” with response categories of “Yes, engaged to be married;” “Not engaged but had definite plans to get married;” and “No, neither engaged nor had definite plans.” Grouping together those who reported being engaged or having definite plans – about a third of all current cohabitators (not shown) – produced an initial analytical sample of 854 respondents. Excluding long-duration cohabitations (those over 36 months)¹ reduced the sample by 323 respondents, producing a final sample size of 531.

The dependent variable, expectations of marriage, is based on the question “Do you think that you and [partner] will marry each other?” Response categories included “definitely yes” (80.4%), “probably yes” (16.9%), “probably no” (1.6%), “definitely no” (1.1%), and “don’t know/refused” (0.003%). In multivariate analyses, this is collapsed into a dichotomous variable of “definitely yes” versus all other categories (including don’t know/refused). A supplementary model using the full categories, analyzed with ordinal logistic regression, was substantively similar (not shown).

¹ Sensitivity analyses (not shown) comparing current cohabitations 36 months or less with those 37 months or more revealed that long-term cohabitators were considerably more disadvantaged (a third had not completed high school and more than half were on public assistance), and the proportion who were foreign-born Hispanic was three times as high (27%) as among short-term cohabitators (9%), even among those with initial marriage intentions. The mean duration of cohabitation among long-term cohabitators was about eight years (compared to just over one year for short-term cohabitators), and two-thirds had shared children. These measurable differences are likely accompanied by unmeasured difference that could affect expectations of marriage.

For prior union experiences, there are two variables. First, there is a measure capturing both the respondent's and the partner's prior marriages. Using data from the respondent's marital history and the respondent's report on whether their partner had ever been married, I created a four-category variable: neither member has been married before, only the respondent has been married before, only the partner has been married before, and both have been married before. Second, using data from the respondent's cohabitation history, there is a measure indicating whether the respondent had a prior nonmarital cohabitation (i.e., a cohabitation that did not end in marriage); including cohabitations that transitioned to marriage (but of course have since dissolved) did not substantively change the results. Unfortunately, respondents were not asked whether their partner had ever cohabited with a different partner.

There are three measures of children. First, there is a measure of whether the respondent is currently expecting a child. Second, there is an indicator of shared children, drawn from direct questions about whether and how many children the respondent and his/her current cohabiting partner have together. Finally, the third measure indicates whether this is a stepfamily cohabitation and which partner, if any, has children. For the respondent, children from a prior union (i.e., stepchildren for the partner) are indicated when their overall individual parity is greater than their shared parity with their partner. The respondent's stepchildren are identified with the question, "When you and [partner] first began living together, did he/she have any children, either biological or adopted, from any previous relationships?" I combined this information to create a four-category stepfamily variable: neither member has children from a past relationship, only the respondent has children from a past relationship, only the respondent's partner has children from a past relationship, and both the respondent and the partner have

children from past relationships; note that neither residence in the household nor minor status is required to identify stepchildren for either member of the union.

Analyses also include union-specific and socioeconomic and demographic covariates. Union-specific measures include a dichotomous variable distinguishing between engagement vs. definite plans and union duration, measured as a categorical variable: ≤ 6 months, 7-12 months, 13-18 months, 19-24 months, and 25-36 months (recall that durations greater than 36 months are excluded from the analysis). Demographic covariates include the respondent's gender and race-ethnicity-nativity (non-Hispanic White/other, non-Hispanic Black, foreign-born Hispanic, and native-born Hispanic). Age is included as a categorical variable (15-19, 20-24, 25-29, 30-34, 35-39, and 40-44), as preliminary analyses indicated that the association with expectations of marriage was nonlinear. The respondent's family background is measured with a dichotomous indicator of whether the respondent's parents were married at the respondent's birth. Socioeconomic variables include the respondent's level of education (less than high school, high school/GED, some college/Associate's degree, or Bachelor's degree or more), labor force status (employed full-time, part-time, or other), and whether the respondent received any public assistance (food assistance, housing assistance, or help with childcare, a job search, or transportation) in the past year. The distribution of these characteristics is shown in Table 1.

- Table 1 here -

Analytical Approach

I begin by showing the distributions and bivariate associations between the dichotomous indicator of marital expectations and the key measures of past union experiences and children; significant differences at the bivariate level are tested with the Pearson chi-square test. Because the dependent variable is dichotomous ("definitely yes" vs. all other responses), I then present

odds ratios from a multivariate logistic regression model predicting definite expectations of marriage. This model includes the key measures of past union experiences and the child measures, along with union-specific characteristics and socioeconomic and demographic measures. The main descriptive, bivariate, and multivariate analyses are restricted to currently cohabiting individuals who report either being engaged or having definite plans to marry when they started living together and who had been living together for three years or less. Due to concerns over the selectivity of current cohabitations in cross-sectional data, I also conduct sensitivity tests restricting the analytical sample to those who had been cohabiting for two years or less and briefly mention, but do not show, these analyses. Analyses are weighted using Stata 14's *svy* commands to account for the NSFG's complex sampling.

Results

Descriptive Results

Table 2 shows the distribution of the key indicators of prior union experiences and the presence of children and their bivariate association with whether the respondent definitely thinks they will marry their partner. The first thing to note is that only 80% of the analytical sample definitely expect to marry – and recall that this sample is entirely comprised of individuals who reported that they had marital intentions when they began cohabiting and have only been cohabiting for three years or less. It is perhaps worth mentioning, too, that the prospective question about marriage immediately follows the retrospective question about engagement and definite plans in the questionnaire. The desire to be logically consistent would suggest, if anything, that an estimate that one in five cohabitators with initial marital intentions do not definitely think they will marry their partner may be conservative.

At the bivariate level, there is little evidence that prior union experiences are associated with marital expectations, at least among those in short-term cohabitations with initial marital intentions. One fourth of current cohabitators with initial marital intentions included at least one person who had been previously married. Although the proportion who definitely expect to marry ranges from 72% if both the respondent and their partner had been previously married to 85% if only the respondent had been married, these differences are not statistically significant. About a third of respondents reported that they had at least one prior cohabitation that did not end in marriage. Although fewer individuals with a prior cohabitation definitely think they will marry (78%) compared to those with no prior cohabitation experience (82%), this difference is not statistically significant either.

However, turning to the presence of children, there are significant differences in definite expectations of marriage. Four in ten current cohabitators with initial marital intentions are in a stepfamily cohabitation in which one or both partners have a child from a prior relationship. The percentage of cohabitators in a stepfamily who definitely think they will marry their partner ranges from 69% when only the partner has children from a past relationship to 78% when only the respondent has children from a past relationship. In comparison, 85% of current cohabitators in which neither partner has children from a prior relationship definitely expect to marry their partner. The differences among stepfamily types are marginally significant ($p = 0.089$). Among those with initial marital intentions in short-term cohabitations, more than a fifth have a shared child; only 70% of those with a shared child definitely expect to marry their partner compared to 84% of those with no shared children, and this difference is statistically significant. Thus, it seems that having children – shared or non-shared – is negatively associated with definite expectations of marriage, with one exception: being currently pregnant. About 10% of the

analytical sample are expectant parents. The association with definite marital expectations shows the opposite pattern as shown above, with significantly more pregnant cohabitators definitely expecting to marry their partner (92%) than those who are not pregnant (79%).

- Table 2 here -

Multivariate Results

Table 3 presents the odds ratios (OR) from multivariate logistic regressions predicting definite expectations of marriage. For past unions, the results confirm the bivariate findings – prior union experiences are not significantly associated with definite plans to marry among current cohabitators with initial marital intentions. Children seem to be more strongly linked to marital expectations in the hypothesized directions. Compared to those who are not in stepfamily cohabitations, the presence of children from a past union is associated with lower odds of definitely expecting to marry, but this difference is only statistically significant when only the respondent has a stepchild. Specifically, when the respondent's partner has a child from a prior relationship, the respondent is about 70% less likely to definitely expect to marry their partner than when neither the respondent nor his/her partner has a child from a prior relationship. Note that if the partner has a child from a prior union but the respondent also does, there are no significant differences in the odds of definitely expecting to marry relative to those not in a stepfamily cohabitation. Across the types of stepfamily cohabitations, there are no differences in the odds of expecting to marry depending on which partner has children (not shown).

- Table 3 here -

Having shared children is not significantly associated with the odds of definite expectations of marriage in the presence of controls. The inclusion of race-ethnicity-nativity is the primary measure that attenuates the differences in expectations of marriage by the presence

of shared children that were seen with the bivariate associations; both foreign-born and native-born Hispanic cohabitators have much higher levels of shared children (42% and 45%, respectively) than non-Hispanic Black (25%) or White (15%) cohabitators (not shown). However, being pregnant is associated with substantially higher odds of expecting to marry, nearly quadruple ($OR = 3.7$) the odds of non-pregnant cohabitators. There are few other characteristics significantly associated with definite plans to marry. Foreign-born Hispanic cohabitators are significantly less likely than non-Hispanic White cohabitators (and marginally less than Black cohabitators, not shown) to definitely expect to marry. Compared to 20-24 year olds (the modal category), only those aged 40-44 are marginally less likely to definitely expect to marry. There are no educational, economic, or family background differences.

To further limit the possibility that the results are not driven by unique unmeasured characteristics of the long-term cohabitators that are typically over-represented in cross-sectional data, I also reran the model presented in Table 3 with a sample of cohabitators who had been cohabiting 24 months or less ($N = 428$), not shown. Not surprisingly, the overall distribution of the key variables of prior union experiences and stepchildren, shared children, and pregnancy are quite similar to the main analytical sample. Likewise, the multivariate results are highly similar, with a few minor differences. Prior union experiences remain insignificant. Having a partner with children from a prior relationship is, as above, associated with lower odds of definite expectations of marriage. This is true for respondents who did not have their own child from a past relationship ($OR = 0.28$) and, unlike the earlier model, is also true for cohabitators who did have a child from a past relationship ($OR = 0.27$). Shared children remain unrelated to expectations, but currently expecting a child continue to be associated with higher odds of

having definite expectations of marriage, though with a smaller odds ratio ($OR = 2.9$) and marginal significance ($p = 0.055$).

Discussion

A substantial minority of cohabiting unions do not transition to marriage (Guzzo, 2014; Lamidi, Manning, & Brown, 2019). Although cohabitators with initial marital plans are more likely to marry, there is evidence that even among this group, some do not make the transition to marriage (Guzzo, 2014). In an era in which marriage is an increasingly privileged status, understanding the barriers to marriage among those who profess to have, at some point, intended to marry may provide insight into declining marriage transitions and suggest potential avenues for intervention.

While the lack of longitudinal data with repeated measures of marital intentions hampers fully understanding the relationship changes and processes cohabiting individuals experience, I took advantage of the NSFG's retrospective and prospective questions to very roughly approximate such change. By excluding long-term cohabitations and restricting the analysis to individuals who said they planned to get married when they started living together, an examination of prospective marital intentions gives a glimpse into whether desires to marry change among cohabitators over time. Of the full population of currently cohabiting men and women, about a third retrospectively reported that they had intended to marry when they started living together. Among those who reported being initially on the path to marriage, though, one in five stated that they did not definitely think they will marry their partner in the future. As noted earlier, the retrospective question about marital intentions and the prospective question about expectations of marriage were asked sequentially; as such, a fifth may be an underestimate due to respondents' desires to be logically consistent. Thus, it seems that some cohabitators do

seem to change their marital outlooks over the course of their union, even in short-term cohabitations.

In this research brief, I focused on two potential possible reasons for changing expectations of marriage over the course of the union – the role of past union experiences and the presence of children. Many cohabiting unions are higher-order unions and involve stepchildren from either or both partners (Guzzo, 2017), and shared children in cohabiting unions is common (Eickmeyer, 2019). Prior failed unions could make individuals less confident in their current union's future, though previous research is mixed on how prior unions are associated with cohabiting outcomes (Guzzo, 2014, 2018). Stepchildren are often a source of conflict, and cohabiting stepfamilies are less likely to transition to marriage (Guzzo, 2018). To the extent that having children together may reflect acceptance of cohabitation as a site for childrearing (Stykes, 2015) or reduce relationship quality (Doss & Rhoades, 2017), cohabitators with shared children may be less likely to definitely expect to marry than those without children or may, at a minimum, be no different than those without shared children. Expectant cohabitators, though, may be an exception to this, as pregnancy seems to be a period in which individuals are highly optimistic and confident in their relationship's future (Edin & Kefalas, 2005).

The results here suggest that prior union experiences are unrelated to expectations of marriage, at least among short-term cohabitators who began their union either engaged or with definite plans to marry. As Cherlin (2009) argued, the high status of marriage in the U.S. encourages individuals to pursue marriage even after experiencing dissolutions in the past, and the findings here are consistent with the view that unsuccessful past unions may not reduce optimism about future unions. However, the presence of children – especially stepchildren – is different. Compared to respondents who were not in a stepfamily cohabitation (neither partner

had children from a prior relationship), respondents who reported that their partner had a child from a prior union were significantly less likely to definitely expect to marry. Thus, respondents seem to experience their partners' – but not their own – prior children in a way that negatively affects their marital outlook. This is consistent with other work that suggests that individuals in stepfamilies perceive more challenges when stepfamilies are created through their partner's children rather than their own (Guzzo et al., 2019). The challenges that occur when stepchildren are present may reduce relationship quality and decrease confidence in the unions' future, though the current analysis could not identify the underlying mechanisms. The finding that, among cohabitators in short-term union with initial marital expectations, those with shared children are no more or less likely to definitely expect to marry their partner provides further evidence that cohabitation is an increasingly acceptable site for childrearing. Expectant cohabitators are an exception to the children-marital expectations link, as they are highly optimistic about their chances of marrying their partner. Pregnancy seems to represent a 'magic moment' for couples, though it remains to be seen whether their expectations are borne out. Other research suggests that if expectant cohabitators do not marry prior to or shortly after the birth, many will not marry at all (Lichter, Micheltore, Turner, & Sassler, 2016).

Limitations

Current cohabitators identified in cross-sectional data are a select group; these individuals and couples may have some unique unmeasured factors that reduce their propensity to marry but also to break up. Limiting the analysis to short-term cohabitations likely reduces, but does not fully eliminate, such selectivity, and so the findings may not extend to cohabitations overall. The current analysis cannot speak to whether the link between initial marital intentions and subsequent expectations of actually marrying has changed over time in the U.S. Unfortunately,

the NSFG changed both its measurement of marital intentions as well as expectations of marriage across cycles, precluding an analysis of trends. Additionally, the latest cycle of the NSFG (2015-17) no longer provides detailed information on the dates of cohabitation; given that many cohabitations last only a few months, the inability to measure duration in months limits the utility of that cycle for analyses of cohabiting unions. There is also no information on partners' expectations of marriage or whether cohabitators became engaged or formed plans between the start of cohabitation and the survey. Finally, because the NSFG only includes individuals of childbearing age, the findings cannot be generalized to cohabiting unions among older adults.

Conclusion

Marriage rates have been declining in the U.S., but cohabitation seems here to stay even as it becomes less connected to marriage. Identifying whether individuals change their minds about wanting to marry, or whether they experience obstacles that could be potentially addressed through healthy relationship programs is an important step in understanding the changing link between cohabitation and marriage. A substantial minority – about one in five – of cohabitators who reported that they had initially intended to marry did not have strong expectations that they would, in fact, marry their partner in the future. This suggests that some cohabitators encounter challenges to fulfilling their marriage goals. The presence of a partner's child from a past relationship appears to be one such obstacle, though more research is needed to unpack the mechanisms through which having a stepchild affects relationship goals and processes. Further, it is important to remember that these families, though they are not marrying, are also not breaking up, and providing support to families in all forms is vital to reducing inequalities between family types.

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Table 1. Weighted Descriptives of Short-Term Currently Cohabiting Individuals with Initial Marital Intentions, NSFG 2011-2015 (N = 531)

Type of marital intentions		
	Engaged	29.6%
	Had definite plans	70.4%
Duration of cohabitation		
	0-6 months	30.5%
	7-12 months	24.4%
	13-18 months	16.6%
	19-24 months	10.4%
	25-36 months	18.2%
Gender		
	Female	45.9%
	Male	54.1%
Race-ethnicity-nativity		
	non-Hispanic White/other	61.1%
	non-Hispanic Black	16.9%
	native-born Hispanic	13.0%
	foreign-born Hispanic	9.1%
Age		
	15-19	7.1%
	20-24	36.2%
	25-29	29.5%
	30-34	12.5%
	35-39	8.2%
	40-44	6.5%
Education		
	Less than high school	16.2%
	High school/GED	32.2%
	Some college/Associate's degree	33.9%
	Bachelor's degree or higher	17.7%
Respondents' parents married at respondent's birth		
	Yes	27.7%
	No	72.3%
Employment		
	Not working	28.5%
	Part-time	17.4%
	Full-time	54.2%
Receiving public assistance		
	Yes	40.8%
	No	59.2%

May not total 100% due to rounding.

Table 2. Weighted Bivariate Association between Definitely Expecting to Marry and the Presence of Children among Short-Term Currently Cohabiting Individuals with Initial Marital Intentions, NSFG 2011-2015 (N = 531)

		Distribution	Proportion who definitely think they will marry their partner
Overall proportion			80.4%
Prior marital experiences			
Neither respondent nor partner ever married		75.1%	81.3%
Respondent only previously married		6.2%	84.9%
Partner only previously married		10.8%	78.3%
Both respondent and partner previously married		7.9%	71.5%
Respondent had prior nonmarital cohabitation			
Yes	32.7%	78.1%	
No	67.3%	81.5%	
Stepchildren†			
Neither respondent nor partner have prior children	60.1%	85.0%	
Respondent only has prior children	14.0%	77.5%	
Partner only has prior children	11.7%	68.9%	
Both respondent and partner have prior children	14.2%	73.1%	
Shared children**			
Yes	22.7%	69.2%	
No	77.3%	83.7%	
Currently pregnant**			
Yes	9.9%	92.0%	
No	90.1%	79.1%	

†p≤.1 *p≤.05 **p≤.01 ***p≤.001 from Pearson chi-square tests.

Table 3. Odds Ratios from Logistic Regression Predicting Definite Expectations of Marriage among Short-Term Currently Cohabiting Individuals with Initial Marital Intentions, NSFG 2011-2015 (N = 531)

<i>Prior unions & children</i>		
Prior marital experiences		
	Neither resp. nor partner ever married	--
	Respondent only previously married	2.09
	Partner only previously married	1.48
	Both respondent and partner previously married	1.40
	Respondent had prior nonmarital cohabitation	0.93
Stepchildren		
	Neither resp. nor partner have prior children	--
	Respondent only has prior children	0.60
	Partner only has prior children	0.33 *
	Both respondent and partner have prior children	0.50
	Shared children	0.71
	Currently pregnant	3.69 *
<i>Union characteristics</i>		
Type of marital intentions		
	Engaged	--
	Had definite plans	0.57
Duration of cohabitation		
	0-6 months	--
	7-12 months	0.58
	13-18 months	0.54
	19-24 months	1.12
	25-36 months	0.71
<i>Socioeconomic & demographic characteristics</i>		
	Female	1.69
Race-ethnicity-nativity		
	non-Hispanic White/other	--
	non-Hispanic Black	0.62
	native-born Hispanic	0.51
	foreign-born Hispanic	0.23 **
Age		
	15-19	0.54
	20-24	--
	25-29	0.34
	30-34	0.58
	35-39	0.33
	40-44	0.06 **
Education		
	Less than high school	0.78
	High school/GED	--
	Some college/Associate's degree	1.49
	Bachelor's degree or higher	1.10

Respondents' parents married at birth		1.54	
Employment	Not working	--	
	Part-time	2.22	
	Full-time	0.90	
Receiving public assistance		0.95	
Constant		12.13	***

*p≤.05 **p≤.01 ***p≤.001