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

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

Having initial intentions to marry increases 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 did not definitely expect to marry their partner, and the odds of definite expectations were lower if respondents' partners had children from a prior union and higher if respondents were expecting a child. Prior union experiences, shared children, and the respondent's own prior children were 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 among cohabitators. 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 the issues introduced by the over-representation of long-term cohabitations in cross-sectional data (Bachrach, 1987) and the accompanying concerns over the selectivity of such unions (Nugent & Daugherty, 2018).

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 are not confident they will 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 analyzes a group of currently cohabiting men and women who, at the time of the survey, retrospectively reported that when they started living together they were either engaged or had definite plans to marry their cohabiting partner. Among this group, analyses examine whether these cohabitators, even though they all initially had marital intentions, still expect to marry their cohabiting partner. Analyses focus 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 in the future than those in which neither partner has children from a prior relationship, especially when stepchildren are from a partner's prior relationship. Put differently, despite having initially planned to marry, cohabitators in a stepfamily relationship will be less likely to definitely expect to marry after having spent some time in the union. 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 have greater confidence about marrying in the future than non-expectant cohabitators, even when both groups reporting plans to marry when they started living together.

An important concern, though, is that currently cohabiting unions identified in cross-sectional survey data tend to over-represent cohabitations of long durations (Bachrach, 1987), 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). The duration of the cohabiting union – how long individuals have lived together – 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 race-ethnic-nativity minorities, have low levels of education, and grew up outside of a two-parent family (Guzzo, 2018).

Data and Methods

Analyses used 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 321 respondents. Missing data on the partners’ children

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

(i.e., stepchildren for the respondent) occurred for another two cases (there were no missing data for the other covariates). These two cases were dropped, producing a final analytical sample size of 531.

The dependent variable, expectations of marriage, was 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 was 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).

For prior union experiences, there were two variables. First, there was 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 had been married before, only the respondent had been married before, only the partner had been married before, and both had been married before. Second, using data from the respondent’s cohabitation history, I created 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.

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.

There were three measures of children. First, there was a measure of whether the respondent was currently expecting a child. Second, there was an indicator of shared children, drawn from direct questions about whether and how many children the respondent and his/her current cohabiting partner had together. Finally, the third measure indicated whether this was a stepfamily cohabitation and which partner, if any, had children. For the respondent, children from a prior union (i.e., stepchildren for the partner) were indicated when their overall individual parity was greater than their shared parity with their partner. The respondent's stepchildren were 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 had children from a past relationship, only the respondent had children from a past relationship, only the respondent's partner had children from a past relationship, and both the respondent and the partner had children from past relationships; note that neither residence in the household nor minor status was required to identify stepchildren for either member of the union.

Analyses also included union-specific and socioeconomic and demographic covariates. Union-specific measures included a dichotomous variable distinguishing between engagement vs. definite plans and a variable capturing the length of the cohabiting union, 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 included the respondent's gender and race-ethnicity-nativity (non-Hispanic White/other, non-Hispanic Black, foreign-born Hispanic, and native-born Hispanic). Age was 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 was measured with a dichotomous indicator of whether the respondent's parents were married at the respondent's birth. Socioeconomic variables included 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 were tested with the Pearson chi-square test. Because the dependent variable was 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 included 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 were restricted to currently cohabiting individuals who reported 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 conducted 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 were 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, at the time of survey, definitely thought they would marry their partner in the future. The first thing to note is that only 80% of the analytical sample definitely expected to marry; recall that 100% of the sample reported that they were engaged or had definite plans to marry when they began cohabiting and had only been cohabiting for three years or less. Thus, one out of five currently cohabiting individuals who had planned to marry when they started living together no longer definitely expected to marry their cohabiting partner. [As noted in the data section, though, most of these individuals (16.9%) still thought they would probably get married.] It is perhaps worth mentioning, too, that the prospective question about marriage immediately followed 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 did not, after living together for some time, definitely think they would marry their partner in the future may be conservative.

At the bivariate level, there was little evidence that prior union experiences were 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 involved at least one person who had been previously married. Although the proportion who definitely expected to marry ranged from 72% if both the respondent and their partner had been previously married to 85% if only the respondent had been married, these differences were 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 thought they would marry (78%) compared to those with no prior cohabitation experience (82%), this difference was not statistically significant either.

However, turning to the presence of children, there were significant differences in definite expectations of future marriage at the time of the survey among those currently cohabiting. Four in ten current cohabitators with initial marital intentions were in a stepfamily cohabitation in which one or both partners had a child from a prior relationship. The percentage of current cohabitators in a stepfamily who definitely thought they would marry their partner ranged from 69% when only the partner had children from a past relationship to 78% when only the respondent had children from a past relationship. In comparison, 85% of current cohabitators in which neither partner had children from a prior relationship definitely expected to marry their partner. The differences among stepfamily types approached statistical significant ($p = 0.089$). Among those with initial marital intentions in short-term cohabitations, more than a fifth had a shared child; only 70% of those with a shared child definitely expected to marry their partner compared to 84% of those with no shared children, and this difference was statistically significant ($p = 0.033$). In general, then, having children – shared or non-shared – was negatively associated with definite expectations of marriage, with one exception: being currently pregnant. About 10% of the analytical sample were expectant parents. The association with definite marital expectations showed the opposite pattern as shown above, with significantly more pregnant cohabitators definitely expecting to marry their partner (92%) than those who were not pregnant (79%) ($p = 0.015$).

- 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 confirmed the bivariate findings – prior union experiences were not significantly associated with definite plans to marry among current cohabitators with initial marital intentions. Children seemed to be more strongly linked to marital expectations in the hypothesized directions. Compared to those who were not in stepfamily cohabitations, the presence of children from a past union was associated with lower odds of definitely expecting to marry, but this difference was statistically significant only when the respondent had a stepchild (OR = 0.33, $p = 0.019$). If the partner had a child from a prior union but the respondent also did, there were no significant differences in the odds of definitely expecting to marry relative to those not in a stepfamily cohabitation. That is, respondents with a stepchild (but no child from a prior union themselves) were significantly less likely – by about 70% – to report that they had definite expectations of marriage in the future than those with no stepchildren, even though both those with and without stepchildren originally planned to marry. Changing the omitted category to look at differences with those in stepfamilies, there were no differences in the odds of expecting to marry depending on which partner has children (not shown).

- Table 3 here -

Having shared children was not significantly associated with the odds of definite expectations of marriage in the presence of controls, though this measure was significant in the bivariate associations. The inclusion of race-ethnicity-nativity was the primary measure that attenuated the differences in expectations of marriage by the presence of shared children seen descriptively; both foreign-born and native-born Hispanic cohabitators had significantly higher

levels of shared children (42% and 45%, respectively) than non-Hispanic Black (25%) or White (15%) cohabitators ($p = 0.000$, not shown). However, although shared children was not a significant predictor of definite marriage plans in the presence of controls, being pregnant remained important. Current cohabitators who were pregnant/whose partner was pregnant had substantially higher odds of expecting to marry, nearly quadruple ($OR = 3.7$, $p = 0.016$) the odds of non-pregnant cohabitators. Of the full set of sociodemographic characteristics accounted for in the multivariate model, few were significantly associated with definite plans to marry. Foreign-born Hispanic cohabitators were significantly less likely than non-Hispanic White cohabitators to definitely expect to marry; the contrast between foreign-born Hispanic and Black cohabitators approached significance, suggesting that foreign-born Hispanics were also less confident in marriage than Black cohabitators as well. Compared to 20-24 year olds (the modal category), there were no significant differences across age in definite expectations of marriage, though the difference for those aged 40-44 approached significance and suggested they may be less likely to definitely expect to marry than their younger counterparts. There were no educational, economic, or family background differences.

To further limit the possibility that the results were not driven by unique unmeasured characteristics of the long-term cohabitators that are typically over-represented in cross-sectional data (Bachrach, 1987; Mernitz, 2018; Nugent & Daugherty, 2018), 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 was quite similar to the main analytical sample. Likewise, the multivariate results were highly similar, with a few minor differences. Prior union experiences remained insignificant. Having a partner with children from

a prior relationship was, as above, associated with lower odds of definite expectations of marriage. This was true for respondents who did not have their own child from a past relationship (OR = 0.28) and, unlike the earlier model, was also true for cohabitators who did have a child from a past relationship (OR = 0.27). Shared children remained unrelated to expectations, but currently expecting a child continued to be associated with higher odds of having definite expectations of marriage, though with a smaller odds ratio (OR = 2.9) that approached 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 within 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. In particular, if the presence of stepchildren is linked to lower odds of definite expectations to marry, even among those with initial plans to marry, this suggests that stepfamilies face unique challenges to relationship functioning (Ganong & Coleman, 2017) that could be addressed by relationship educators, counselors, and other interested parties. Similarly, if having shared children reduces expectations for marriage but being pregnant does not (and potentially increases expectations), this suggests that the challenges of childrearing could be affecting romantic relationship ties and interactions, in which case both micro interventions (such as home nurse visitations for new parents or parent support groups) and macro changes (such as better work-

family policies, more accessible and affordable childcare, and the like) that address the difficulties parents face may have spillover effects into relationship stability and transitions.

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 (most of these did, however, think they would probably marry). 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, or at least become less confident in, 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 – children from prior relationships in a way that negatively affects their marital outlook for their current relationship. 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 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, Michelmore, Turner, & Sassler, 2016).

Limitations

The limitations with this study focus on the limitations of using NSFG to measure the variables, groups, and processes of interest. First, it is unclear how different the categories of "definitely" and "probably" are in terms of expectations of marriage. Some individuals may simply be more cautious or reluctant to be overconfident about a future event and thus select "probably" even when they have fairly solid beliefs that they will eventually marry. That supplementary models that did not dichotomize this measure and instead used the full set of response categories and ordinal regression found virtually identical results (not shown) yields confidence in the results using the dichotomous results. Further, since these individuals are selected on the basis of their reports of having definite plans (and thus were not reluctant to report plans overall) and that prospective marital expectations were asked immediately after the question about plans provides additional confidence in the interpretation of the results.

Second, current cohabitators identified in cross-sectional data are a select group, in that cohabitation is typically such a short-lived union that most individuals' cohabitations are not

captured while they are still intact (before dissolving or transitioning to marriage). Thus, the currently cohabiting men and women in surveys tend to be those in longer-duration unions (Bachrach, 1987). Other research demonstrates that currently cohabiting individuals in the NSFG differ from other groups across a range of characteristics (Nugent & Daugherty, 2018), and they likely differ in ways that are not measured in the NSFG (i.e., different attitudes toward marriage, joint homeownership, family-related pressures, personality or relationship characteristics such as inertia or reluctance to be overconfident, etc.) that reduce their propensity to marry but also to break up. Limiting the analysis to short-term cohabitations likely attenuates, but does not fully eliminate, such selectivity. The reliance on cross-sectional data and the possibility of unmeasured factors means the findings may not extend to cohabitations overall.

Third, 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. Although the NSFG is a repeated cross-sectional survey, it changed its measurement of initial marital intentions; prior to the 2011-15 cycle, marital intentions was collected as a yes/no question rather than multiple categories (engaged, not engaged but had definite plans, no). At the same time, it also changed the expectations of marriage question. Prior to 2011-15, the question was “What is the chance you and partner will marry each other?” with response categories of “no chance, a little chance, a 50-50 chance, a pretty good chance, and an almost certain chance.” Although there is much interest in the changing role of cohabitation over time – including its link to marriage (Sassler & Lichter, 2020) – the change in survey questions precludes an analysis of trends. Fourth, 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.

Fifth, 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. Without partners' direct characterizations, we cannot rule out the possibility that the respondents' partners did not actually consider themselves engaged or with direct plans to marry initially. I also could not identify current cohabitators who became engaged or formed definite marriage plans after they started living together. 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 is likely to remain an important part of romantic and pair bonding even as it becomes less connected to marriage. Identifying whether cohabitators 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 definite 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 thought they would 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 had prior children	60.1%	85.0%
Respondent only had prior children	14.0%	77.5%
Partner only had prior children	11.7%	68.9%
Both respondent and partner had 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 had prior children	--
	Respondent only had prior children	0.60
	Partner only had prior children	0.33 *
	Both respondent and partner had 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