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## COHABITATION AND MARRIAGE: COMPLEXITY AND DIVERSITY IN UNION- FORMATION PATTERNS

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Sassler, S., & Lichter, D. T. (2020). Cohabitation and marriage: Complexity and diversity in union-formation patterns. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 82(1), 35-61.

### The Study of Cohabitation and Marriage Over Time

The rise in cohabitation is the major reason why the study of marriage is far more complex today than in the past. During the past decade, studies of union transitions, both into and out of cohabiting and marital unions, have proliferated, often centering on the varied demographic, economic, and psychosocial factors shaping individual and societal variation. Growing heterogeneity in union formation and dissolution highlights cultural shifts in values and gender relations, but also uncovers the ways that inequality of all kinds shape and reflect our most intimate behaviors (Lundberg, Pollak, & Stearns, 2016; Sassler & Miller, 2017). Sassler and Lichter's (2020) review focuses on contemporary patterns and trends in union formation, transitions between unions, and the social circumstances differentiating marriage from cohabitation. Specifically, their review encompasses: 1) an overview of key demographic trends in cohabitation and marriage, primarily in the United States; 2) discussions of new theoretical developments and analytical approaches over the past decade; 3) examinations of major substantive research themes, identifying emerging but underdeveloped topics requiring further attention; and 4) a concluding discussion of the substantive and policy implications for theory and research.

### OVERVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY UNION FORMATION

#### **A. Boundaries Between Cohabitation and Marriage:**

1. Cohabitation and marriage are conceptually distinct, but measurement protocols vary across surveys, making comparisons difficult. Cross-sectional measures underestimate cohabitation prevalence, while retrospective reports lack reporting calendars for statistical modeling (Manning, Joyner, Hemez, & Cupka, 2019).
  2. European countries like the Nordic nations and Belgium have population registers that continuously measure coresidential unions, updating union status based on administrative records, providing more reliable data than self-reports (Poulain, Herm, & Depledge, 2013).
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3. While cohabitation carries less stigma today, social boundaries still privilege marriage as the ideal in many countries, with public policies favoring marriage over cohabitation (Pleck, 2012; Lappegård & Noack, 2015; Hiekel et al., 2014).

***By convention, unions and union formation typically refer to coresidential intimate relationships and the various psychological (e.g., love and commitment), social (normative and legal conventions), and economic (e.g., cost-benefit calculus) processes that give rise to them (p. 36).***

### **B. Basic Demographic Facts:**

1. The percentage of currently married Americans, especially young adults, has declined dramatically over recent decades, reflecting a "retreat from marriage." Only 29% of those aged 18-34 were married in 2018, down from 59% in 1978 (Manning, Brown, & Payne, 2014; U.S. Census Bureau, 2018).
2. Non-marital cohabitation has filled the marriage void, with the number of cohabiting couples increasing from 1.6 million in 1970 to 8.5 million in 2018. For ages 25-34, 14.8% were cohabiting in 2018 compared to 40.8% married (Gurrentz, 2015; U.S. Census Bureau, 2018).
3. Marriage has become less central in American society, while cohabitation is more widely accepted, even normative from emerging adulthood to older ages. Union formation processes have become increasingly complex and differentiated by socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, and nativity (Manning & Cohen, 2015; Brown & Wright, 2017; Hummer & Hamilton, 2010).

### **C. Union Formation in Comparative Perspective:**

1. Across many developed countries, there has been a marked delay in marriage, even though most young adults expect to marry eventually. By ages 45-49, less than three-quarters of men had ever married in countries like Japan, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and the Netherlands in 2015 (United Nations, 2017).
2. Informal unions like cohabitation are increasing in prevalence across Europe, North America, and Australia, even in traditionally marriage-oriented societies like Spain and Italy (Klüsener et al., 2013; Dominguez-Folgueras & Castro-Martin, 2013; Gabrielli & Hoem, 2010). However, cohabitation remains less prevalent in East Asia (United Nations, 2011).
3. The U.S. is an outlier with cohabiting unions being less marriage-like and stable compared to Europe. Additionally, cohabitation and marriage in the U.S. are highly stratified by social class, education, and race/ethnicity (Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004; Musick & Michelmore, 2018; Lichter et al., 2016).

## **NEW THEORETICAL AND DATA ANALYTIC APPROACHES**

This review of the studies of union formation processes mainly focuses on the following areas: (a) Macro perspectives that emphasize societal or structural factors; (b) Micro perspectives that emphasize individual-level factors; (c) Integrated macro-micro approaches that link individual behaviors to larger societal constraints or forces in shaping union formation.

### **A. Theoretical and Conceptual Developments:**

1. Macro approaches. The theory of the Second Demographic Transition (SDT), attributing union formation changes to ideational shifts towards individualism and self-actualization, has become prominent. However, critics argue the SDT relies too heavily on cross-sectional data, needs to better account for both ideational and material factors shaping family formation (Lesthaeghe, 2010; Lappegård et al., 2018; Zaidi & Morgan, 2017; Thornton, 2005; Johnson-Hanks, Bachrach, Morgan, & Kohler, 2011).

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2. Micro-economic perspectives emphasizing men's economic prospects as "marriageable" mates and women's financial independence remain highly influential in studying union formation decisions (Oppenheimer, 1988; England & Farkas, 1986; Lee, 2015; Cherlin, 2014).
  3. Integrated macro-micro approaches link individual behaviors to larger societal forces, showing how contextual factors like local marriage markets, welfare policies, and country-level indicators shape union formation patterns (Cohen & Pepin, 2018; Lundberg et al., 2016; Lappegård et al., 2018).

#### **B. New Data and Analytical Tools:**

1. New data resources like secure enclaves enabling geo-coded and linked administrative/survey data, maturing longitudinal panels (PSID, NLSY, Add Health), and continuous NSFG data have greatly expanded research possibilities for studying union formation in the U.S. in recent years (Addo & Lichter, 2013; Zhang & Sassler, 2019; Frech et al., 2016).
2. Methodological advances have focused on causal inference techniques like difference-in-difference, fixed effects, and matching models applied to non-experimental data to evaluate marriage/family interventions and policies (McLanahan et al., 2013; Schneider & Hastings, 2015; Su et al., 2015; Tach & Halpern-Meekin, 2012).

### **RESEARCH THEMES**

This review mainly distinguishes among various broad empirical research themes that (a) build on past research traditions, (b) emerged and proliferated during the past decade, and (c) remain undeveloped but nevertheless are especially ripe for family scholarship going forward.

#### **A. Building on Past Research:**

##### **1. Changing Cultural Attitudes and Values:**

Cohabitation precedes most marriages but increasingly serves as an alternative, especially in Europe (Klüsener et al., 2013; Perelli-Harris et al., 2012, 2014). In the U.S., the road to cohabitation often starts as dating (Sassler & Miller, 2017), with intentions differing by social class (Rackin & Gibson-Davis, 2018; Reid & Golub, 2015). Though marriage remains ideal, its role is weakening (Manning et al., 2019).

##### **2. Shifting Economic Foundations of Unions:**

Recent studies examine economic prerequisites for marriage like employment, earnings, assets, especially for disadvantaged groups (Gibson-Davis et al., 2018; Schneider, 2011). Incarceration reduces marriageability (Bacak & Kennedy, 2015). European research explores how economic insecurity impacts cohabitation versus marriage (Jalovaara, 2012; Kalmijn, 2011; Perelli-Harris et al., 2014). Economic needs motivate cohabitation (Cancian & Meyer, 2014).

##### **3. Gender Relations and Independence of Women:**

Research across countries shows women's economic prospects (education, earnings) positively associate with marriage in gender-egalitarian societies (Kalmijn, 2013; Kuo & Raley, 2016), but negatively in traditional societies like China (Yu & Xie, 2015). Gender norms shape whether women's independence facilitates or constrains marriage (Knight & Brinton, 2017; Qian & Sayer, 2016).

##### **4. Comparing Marital and Cohabiting Relationships:**

Studies find cohabiting couples report lower relationship quality than married couples (Brown et al., 2017). Transitioning from cohabitation to marriage yields few relationship quality improvements (Musick & Bumpass, 2012). Once accounting for self-selection, differences in outcomes like health, well-being between marriage and cohabitation are reduced (Perelli-Harris & Styrc, 2018; Williams et al., 2011).

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## 5. Cohabitation and Marital Dissolution:

Recent studies suggest the cohabitation-divorce link is largely due to self-selection rather than a causal effect (James & Beattie, 2012; Kuperberg, 2014). Serial cohabitation, disadvantage, and having children prior to marriage increase divorce risk (Lichter et al., 2010; Rackin & Gibson-Davis, 2018; Tach & Halpern-Meekin, 2012). National divorce rates may drive increases in cohabitation (Perelli-Harris et al., 2017).

*Today, women's economic independence rather than economic dependence is linked to higher rates of marriage. Transitions from cohabitation to marriage also are more pronounced among college-educated women (Kuo & Raley, 2016; Sassler et al., 2018), suggesting that the route from singlehood to marriage-with cohabitation serving as an intermediary stage-is likely to be severed by economic dislocations (p. 43-44).*

## B. New Developments in the 2010s:

### 1. Pathways to Union Formation: Churning and Complexity:

Serial cohabitation has risen (Bukodi, 2012a; Eickmeyer & Manning, 2018; Lichter et al., 2010) and reduces marriage intentions and marital stability (Bukodi, 2012a; Lichter et al., 2010; Vespa, 2014). Having children from previous unions, especially prior to repartnering, decreases union stability (Lichter et al., 2010; Tach & Halpern-Meekin, 2012). Multipartner fertility complicates new family formation (Bzostek et al., 2012; Sassler et al., 2014). Research examines union formation for parents, including differences for fathers versus mothers (Meyer et al., 2017; Reid & Golub, 2015).

### 2. Uncoupling of Marriage and Fertility:

The rise of nonmarital cohabitation has uncoupled marriage and fertility, especially in the U.S. and Europe (Guzzo & Hayford, 2020; Perelli-Harris et al., 2012). Many births occur to cohabiting couples, with transitions between singlehood, cohabitation, and marriage linked to fertility decisions (Lichter et al., 2016; Musick & Micheltore, 2015). Cross-national studies examine childbearing among cohabitators versus married couples and union instability after births (Laplante et al., 2015; Mikolai et al., 2018). The disconnect between marriage and fertility remains weaker in East Asia (Raymo et al., 2015).


### 3. Same-Sex Cohabitation and Marriage:

Same-sex marriage acceptance varies globally, with 26 countries legalizing it since 2000 (Masci et al., 2017). Research on gay and lesbian mating strategies is limited (Potârca et al., 2015), hindering understanding of relationship progression. Cultural acceptance and legalization bolster commitment and stability in same-sex relationships (Joyner et al., 2017). Legal recognition correlates with greater stability (Whitton et al., 2015). However, challenges include data scarcity and fluid sexual identity (Reczek, 2020).

### 4. Mate Selection and Assortative Mating:

Mate selection, termed homogamy or assortative mating, reflects shared traits in marriages and cohabitations (Lichter & Qian, 2019; Schwartz, 2013). Cohabiting unions are more diverse demographically and economically (Qian & Lichter, 2011; Schwartz, 2013). As commitment increases, heterogamous couples decrease (Sassler & Joyner, 2011). Assumptions about educational "marriage mobility" are changing, with highly educated women placing less emphasis on it (Esteve et al., 2016). Cross-border and interracial marriages reflect changing demographics and immigration patterns (Alba & Foner, 2015; Guilimoto, 2012). Intersectional research is crucial, considering gender, immigration, and power dynamics (Qian & Lichter, 2011).

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*Today, it is difficult to study interracial cohabitation and marriage without acknowledging the growth of many different immigrant groups and variation in gender status hierarchies (p. 48).*

### **C. Looking Ahead: Research Themes in Unsettled Times:**

Processes of union formation will become increasingly diverse, fragmented, and complicated. Topics like international migration, racial and ethnic diversity, challenges to traditional gender relations and sexual identities will increasingly reshape the mate-selection process, challenging family scholars to keep up with research in these and other areas.

#### **1. Gender Equality, Gender Relations:**

Greater gender equality is reshaping partner preferences and union formation. Research explores impacts of more egalitarian attitudes, like increased childlessness in gender-essentialist societies (Kim & Cheung, 2015). Research examining work-life balance, relationship quality, and fertility decision-making is needed (Goldscheider & Sassler, 2018).

#### **2. Transnational mobility and super diversity:**

Studies must account for rising ethnic diversity and immigrant populations when examining union formation processes (Meissner & Vertovec, 2015; Qian et al., 2018). Intermarriage provides insights into immigrant integration, but the "mainstream" is broadening and become more inclusive (Alba & Duyvendak, 2019).

#### **3. Global population aging:**

Research on the impact of global population aging on union formation and dissolution highlights the increasing prevalence of cohabitation and divorce among Baby Boomers. Gender differences in relationship processes, influenced by medical innovations, may affect partnering desires. Repartnering in later life, particularly into cohabiting relationships, and alternative union forms are gaining empirical attention, with potential implications for health, well-being, and wealth accumulation (Brown et al., 2019; Lodge & Umberson, 2012; Rendall et al., 2011).

#### **4. Sexual and reproductive health:**

Research on sexual and reproductive health is evolving, particularly regarding union formation among sexual minorities. Studies now compare opposite-sex and same-sex cohabiting partners, exploring mate selection processes. Future research should delve into implications for union quality, stability, and well-being. Expansion into transgender populations is anticipated, indicating societal progress towards inclusivity (Reczek, 2020; Monk et al., 2018; Lamont, 2017; Potârca et al., 2015; Liu & Wilkinson, 2017; Lagos, 2018).

#### **5. Union formation along the rural-urban continuum:**

Union formation along the rural-urban continuum underscores demographic shifts and evolving family structures in rural areas. Despite common perceptions of traditional values, rural regions experience rapid changes, including a retreat from marriage and increased nonmarital cohabitation. These areas serve as vital laboratories for studying marriage and cohabitation patterns amidst evolving economic and social landscapes (Lichter & Ziliak, 2017; Tickamyer, Sherman, & Warlick, 2017; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Lichter, 2013).

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## 6. Social media and the internet:

The internet is changing how partners meet, with specialized dating platforms. Specialized dating sites cater to specific demographics, challenging traditional meeting venues. Research illuminates evolving preferences and questions the efficacy of online unions. Further studies are needed to explore the dynamics of internet relationships and their outcomes (Feliciano et al., 2011; Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012; Rosenfeld, 2017).

***Men who are able to signal and exhibit more gender-egalitarian views may increasingly be selected into marriage or cohabitation, leaving behind their more traditional counterparts, who may be less able to attract partners (p. 49).***

## IMPLICATIONS

1. Traditional patterns of marriage and family formation are declining, even as most young adults aspire to committed marriage. The boundaries between cohabitation and marriage are becoming increasingly ambiguous as cohabitation is more accepted and a precursor to marriage (Carlson & Berger, 2020).
1. Conventional surveys may inadequately capture rare family events like union formation among minorities/immigrants due to small sample sizes. Multimethod approaches emphasizing depth over breadth will be needed going forward to understand this growing complexity and heterogeneity.
2. Despite initiatives, there is little evidence that marriage-promotion policies have successfully increased child well-being by increasing two-parent family structures. New realities require research on emerging issues like internet dating and marriage migration (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019; Ooms, 2019).

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