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Class Differences in Cohabitation Processes

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Abstract

Despite the burgeoning cohabitation literature, research has failed to examine social class variation in processes of forming and advancing such unions. Drawing upon in-depth interviews with 122 working- and middle-class cohabitators, we examine the duration between dating and moving in together, reasons for cohabiting, and subsequent plans. Transitions to cohabitation are more rapid among the working class. Respondents often cohabited for practical reasons—out of financial necessity, because it was convenient, or to meet a housing need. Regardless of social class status, few couples move in together as a “trial marriage.” Nonetheless, middle-class cohabitators were more likely to have become engaged than their working-class counterparts. Our findings indicate the need to reassess common beliefs regarding the role served by cohabitation and suggest that cohabitation has become another location where family outcomes are diverging by social class.

Keywords

cohabitation; engagement; relationship tempo; social class; union formation; young adult transitions

Over the past few decades there have been unprecedented changes in American’s union formation patterns. Many young adults are deferring marriage and the majority have cohabited with a romantic partner by their late twenties (Chandra, Martinez, Mosher, Abma, & Jones, 2005; Schoen, Landale, & Daniels, 2007). In fact, cohabitation prior to marriage is now normative (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008). Yet the function that cohabitation serves is poorly understood, in part because its role may differ by cohort, social class, or racial and ethnic group membership. Although cohabitation was once considered mainly a stage in the progression to marriage (Manning & Smock, 2002; Rindfuss & VandenHeuval, 1990), changes in the resolution of cohabiting unions and increases in the proportion of births to cohabiting couples suggest that its meaning may be shifting (Lichter, Qian, & Mellott, 2006; Musick, 2007).

Even as cohabitation has become a normative step in the transition to adulthood, little attention has focused on class variation in young adults’ likelihood of forming cohabiting unions, their reasons for doing so, when in their relationships such a transition occurs, and the consequences for subsequent union behavior. Cohabitation has become widespread across all social classes (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008). Yet its increase has been greatest

among those with a high school degree or some college. Between 1987 and 2002, the proportion of women with a high school degree who had ever cohabited increased 115%; among women with some college schooling (but no degree) the proportion grew by 93%. Growth in cohabitation among college-educated women was considerably smaller—only 45% (Chandra et al., 2005). Class differences in transitions from cohabitation to marriage also appear to be widening, with living together more likely to serve as a springboard to marriage for nonpoor women than for those who are disadvantaged (Lichter et al., 2006).

Research has begun to explore what meanings cohabitators assign to their living arrangements (Manning & Smock, 2005; Reed, 2006; Sassler, 2004), but to date these qualitative studies have not examined whether the processes underlying the formation and progression of cohabiting unions are similar across the social class spectrum. Our study addresses this gap, focusing on cohabiting couples where both partners generally share being moderately educated (having obtained either a high school degree or attended some college classes but not having completed a 4-year degree) or are highly educated (having at least a college degree). As of 2006, the moderately educated accounted for about 58% of the population aged 25 and older, whereas the highly educated comprised 28% of those in their mid-twenties or older (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). We examine variation in the tempo of entrance into cohabiting unions, explore reasons cohabitators give for entering into shared living arrangements, and assess the extent to which future plans were discussed upon moving in together and subsequently, particularly those centered on engagement and marriage. We rely on qualitative methods traditionally used to expose social processes (Altheide & Johnson, 1998). Data are from in-depth interviews with 30 working-class and 31 middle-class cohabiting couples living in Columbus, Ohio.

Relationship Progression and Cohabitation

A great deal of research attention has been devoted over the past few decades to cohabitation. Because the majority of cohabitators who formed their unions in the 1980s or earlier subsequently married (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Manning & Smock, 1995), the assumption that cohabitation was a precursor for marriage was widely accepted (cf. Smock, 2000). In fact, the majority of cohabitators interviewed in large-scale surveys report plans to wed their partners (Brown, 2000; Guzzo, 2009; Manning & Smock, 2002). Yet relatively small shares of those cohabitators married within 2 years of moving in together (Brown; Sassler & McNally, 2003), and among recent cohorts the proportion that wed has declined (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008; Lichter et al., 2006). Such dissonance between expressed plans and actual outcomes highlights the need for additional assessment regarding cohabitation's function.

Notwithstanding the presumption that cohabitation serves as a stepping-stone to marriage, relatively little is known about the formation and development of such relationships prior to entrance into shared living. What little research exists suggests that the transition to cohabitation is often rapid (Sassler, 2004) and that couples frequently "slide" quickly into shared living without serious commitment to a shared future (Manning & Smock, 2005; Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006). In one qualitative study of cohabitators living in New York City, Sassler found that over half of those interviewed had moved in with their partners within 6 months of their relationships' beginning. When asked why they had decided to live with their partners, these respondents mentioned factors such as convenience, finances, and housing needs; few stated that they had plans for marriage upon first moving in with their partners. Many justified shared living because they were already spending so much time together (Manning & Smock; Sassler). Pregnancy also precipitates the entrance into shared living for some (Reed, 2006; Sassler, Miller, & Favinger, 2009).

To date, neither qualitative nor quantitative studies have examined whether social class differentiates the pace of moving in with a partner and subsequent relationship trajectories. But there are tantalizing hints that, as with other family outcomes, the function served by cohabitation may differ across population groups. Economically advantaged women are significantly more likely to transition from cohabitation to marriage, for example, than are less advantaged women such as single mothers (Lichter et al., 2006; Musick, 2007). Economically disadvantaged women are also more likely to cohabit serially (Lichter & Qian, 2008; Williams, Sassler, & Nicholson, 2008). Furthermore, conception within cohabiting unions is more likely to result in marriage prior to the birth of a child among women with college degrees than for women with lower levels of education (Musick).

The possibility that cohabitation processes are diverging by social class has important implications for child well-being, union stability, and income inequality. Recent estimates indicate that about 40% of nonmarital births—which account for nearly 40% of all births in the United States in 2007—are to cohabiting women (Chandra et al., 2005). Relatively few new parents who do not marry before the birth of their child do so subsequently (Graefe & Lichter, 2002), which diminishes children's likelihood of coresidence and involvement with both biological parents (Carlson, 2006). If less advantaged individuals form cohabiting relationships for different reasons than the college educated, we would expect differences to emerge in subsequent relationship quality. In fact, Stanley, Rhoades, and Markman (2006) have argued that couples who rapidly slide into cohabitation, rather than actively deciding to live together on the basis of commitment and love, are more likely to end up in unhappy and unstable relationships. Clearly, a better understanding of the processes involved in entering into cohabiting unions and whether they diverge for working- and middle-class adults is necessary.

The Present Study

Despite changes in the outcomes of cohabiting unions, little is known about the reasons cohabitators give for entering into their shared living arrangements or how their relationship plans change over time. Nor do we know whether reasons for forming cohabiting unions differ by social class at the point of union formation or subsequently. The purpose of this study is to explore how cohabitation processes differed by social class. Specifically, three research questions guided our study: (a) How do cohabitators describe their processes of entering into shared living in terms of their tempo and reasons for cohabiting? (b) Does the pace of entering into cohabiting unions, or the reasons given for doing so, differ by social class? (c) How (and when) do couples discuss plans for marriage? Answers to such questions will enable us to assess the meaning that cohabitation holds for respondents at the time they enter into their shared living arrangements and subsequently and whether the process of cohabitation differs for the highly educated relative to those with moderate levels of schooling.

Method

This research is informed by grounded theory approaches and methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Our study allows participants to present their own perspectives of their relationships, particularly when and why they decided to move in with their romantic partners, as well as to present more nuanced rationales for their decisions than can be obtained through quantitative questionnaires. Data are from in-depth interviews with 30 working-class and 31 middle-class heterosexual couples who were living in a large metropolitan area (Columbus, OH). Interviews were conducted with both members of each couple simultaneously but in different rooms; this enables us to assess partner similarities (and differences) in reasons for moving in, future expectations, and aspects of relationships that involve negotiation. All

couples had shared a residence for at least 3 months. Interviews ($n = 122$), which were conducted by both authors and an additional graduate student, took between 1 and 2.5 hours, were digitally recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Couples received monetary compensation (\$50 per couple) for their participation. Names of all respondents have been altered to protect confidentiality.

Educational attainment, occupation, mobility opportunities, and earnings were used to distinguish our two class groups, which we designate as *working class* and *middle class*. Working-class respondents generally had some college education or less. We initially sought our working-class sample by identifying a community college that offered a variety of 2-year degree programs and prepared students to pursue a 4-year degree at a senior college. Community college students come from families with fewer economic resources, are less likely to have been on an academic track in high school, and have lower rates of attaining a college degree than students who attend a 4-year institution (Goldrick-Rab, 2006). Signs were posted on public message boards at the campus. Despite the recruiting locale, fewer than half of those in the working-class sample were students, and most of them attended part-time or intermittently while working at least part-time. Several non-students who saw the postings or were told of the study by an acquaintance also contacted us; we limited referrals to one per couple. We also established an income threshold; working-class couples had to be earning a combined income greater than \$15,000 from sources other than public or familial assistance. Data collection for the working-class sample took place from July 2004 to April 2005.

The second stage of data collection targeted middle-class cohabitators, also defined predominantly by educational attainment—a college degree. The 31 middle-class couples were recruited primarily through fliers posted in high-end grocery stores, coffee shops, and restaurants, as well as a posting on an online community bulletin board. Middle-class couples were required to earn a combined income of at least \$25,000 to be included in the sample; this level is lower than that often suggested by typologies (i.e., Hickey & Thompson, 1999) because several of the middle-class respondents were currently attending graduate school. Participants in the middle-class sample were interviewed between April 2005 and June 2006.

Four couples in our working-class sample and four in the middle-class sample were educationally heterogamous, in that one partner had a Bachelors' degree, whereas the other did not. The four college-educated partners in the working-class couples were not holding jobs that required a college degree. The partners assigned to our middle-class group who did not have a college degree, in contrast, all were either financially established as owners or managers of businesses at the time of the interview or from well-off middle-class families.

Sample Information

All respondents were between the ages of 18 and 36, the prime family formation years when young adults make key decisions about work, marriage, and fertility. The mean age for the middle-class sample was somewhat greater than for our working-class one—28.3 for men versus 26.4, respectively, and 25.2 for women compared with 24.4 (Table 1). The majority of the middle-class couples ($n = 24$) were White, but the working-class sample was more racially and ethnically diverse. Couples had lived together for an average of 20.4 months for the middle class and 25.3 months for the working class. Finally, average income levels were quite a bit higher among the middle-class sample, with an average couple-level income of \$67,672, compared to \$38,971 for the working-class couples. The jobs of those in the working-class sample included telemarketing, wait staff, and computer technician, whereas middle-class respondents held positions as architects, computer systems analysts, teachers, and respiratory therapists.

Analytic Approach

Data were coded thematically, and common patterns of behavior, reasons, and expectations were identified through repeated readings of the transcripts. Transcripts were each coded line by line by both authors. Open coding was initially used to generate topical themes (reasons for moving in together, plans at move-in) and allowed sections of narratives to be classified into distinct categories for each code (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We referred to previous studies (cf. Sassler, 2004; Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009) for guidance regarding particular reasons for entering into shared living, though further examination of our data resulted in the creation of several additional categories (discussed below). The second stage of analysis involved axial coding or looking at variability and linkages within topics. The third level of analysis involved selective coding, integrating and refining categories, and relating them to other concepts; for example, we looked at class variation among those giving a particular reason (e.g., finances) for moving in or beginning to discuss future plans.

Results

We first describe the amount of time respondents were romantically involved prior to cohabiting for the sample overall and then by class (estimated at the couple level, $n = 61$). Although partners did not always concur regarding how long they were romantically involved before moving in together, responses generally differed by only a few months, and these differences usually were within one category (such as one respondent reporting 4 months and the other 6). Next, respondents' reasons for moving in together are detailed and compared across social class, as well as by duration to shared living. Because partners often mentioned different reasons for why they decided to cohabit, we examine this at the individual level ($n = 122$). Our third analysis examines whether cohabitators discussed their future plans before moving in and subsequently; we also explore this at the couple level, though we note where partners differ. This shift, from the level of the couple to individual factors and then back to the couple, provides a good approximation of how relationships progress, with some steps being more dyadic and others more individualized.

Duration to Moving in Together

Responses to questions regarding how the relationship progressed allowed us to estimate the length of time from when couples began their romantic relationships to when they moved in together. On the basis of prior research (Sassler, 2004), we divided our duration measure into those who moved in within 6 months, from 7 to 12 months after their relationships started, after a year but before the 2-year period, and 2 or more years from when they began dating. As can be seen in Figure 1, over a third of our couples (36.1%) moved in together within 6 months of beginning their romantic relationships, a somewhat smaller share than expected. A fourth of the couples in the sample moved in together within 7–12 months, while slightly more than a quarter waited for over a year but less than 2 years. Only about 13% were romantically involved for over 2 years before entering their coresidential unions.

These overall trends mask considerable class disparity in union tempo. Entrance into cohabiting unions is far more accelerated among the working class, half of whom moved in with their partners within the first 6 months, compared with less than a quarter of the middle-class couples. Overall, nearly three-quarters of the working-class sample moved in within a year of becoming romantically involved. Middle-class couples demonstrated a much more tempered entrance into their shared living arrangements—over half were romantically involved for over a year prior to moving in together.

Reasons for Cohabiting

Respondents often mentioned reasons motivating their entrance into shared living as they discussed how their relationships unfolded. They were also asked an open-ended question about why they had moved in with their partner. Several reasons for moving in with a partner were frequently offered, though generally one or two causes predominated. Respondents' answers could be grouped into seven broad categories: housing needs, convenience, economic rationality, financial necessity, as a sign of commitment, to be able to spend more time together, and in response to a family situation. A handful of respondents also cited other factors—concerns with safety, for example—but never as a first reason. These seven categories are largely consistent with those reported in Sassler's (2004) study of cohabitators in New York City, though we disaggregate the financial category into necessity and rationality. Our categories do, however, differ from those utilized by Rhoades and colleagues (2009), who grouped convenience, economic rationality, and financial necessity into one aggregate measure of "convenience." To justify our distinctions, we discuss reasons that relate to various aspects of practicality consecutively. Findings for two categories that relate specifically to the intensification of the romantic relationship (time together and the next step) are also presented in tandem. We begin and end with reasons that can be conceptualized as "push" factors—housing and family-related issues. Results of chi-squared tests indicate that reasons for cohabiting differ significantly by social class ($p = .01$).

Nearly a fifth of the total sample of cohabitators reported that housing needs spurred their decisions to enter into shared living (Table 2). Housing is the one reason that was mentioned as frequently by working- and middle-class respondents. Respondents described a variety of residence-related factors, including the departure of a roommate or growing discomfort with a roommate situation, leases ending, and the intensification of long-distance relationships that required relocation and a new place to live. Chad, who at 24 was working at several unskilled service jobs, said of his decision to move in with Jackie, "We both needed to find another place." Middle-class respondents also faced housing needs. David, a 30-year-old retirement planner, explained why Justine moved into his house: "The place where she lived, they were selling it and she had to move out. ... I mean it was easier for her to move to my place instead of finding a new place." Housing needs were often described as an impetus that expedited the transition to shared living.

A closer look at the data reveals important social class distinctions in the relationship between duration to shared living and housing. Over two-thirds of the working-class respondents who reported housing as a reason for cohabiting had moved in with their partners within 6 months. In contrast, only four of the middle-class respondents who mentioned housing as a reason moved in within a half-year of the start of their relationships. Instead, middle-class respondents who mentioned housing as a justification tended to be romantically involved for over a year before forming their shared households; a larger proportion had lived with a roommate (as opposed to with family) or alone before cohabiting. Because middle-class respondents had more resources, they appeared to have the luxury of waiting until they wanted to change residences (such as when a lease ended), rather than needed to move into shared living.

Reasons that might be considered "practical"—convenience, economic rationality, and financial necessity—accounted for nearly half of the reasons respondents gave for moving in together. The cause most often mentioned was convenience, proffered by nearly a quarter (22.9%) of the total sample. Such respondents talked about the bother of traveling between two residences and determining what clothes to bring, given the number of nights spent together. The word convenience itself was frequently used. Describing why he and Amy decided to move in with each other after dating for about a year, Kevin, a 27-year-old middle-class plant manager, said: "It got to the point where, like it was just wearing us out,

her driving all the way home to get her bag or get showered, then come to my place. It was just more of a strain on our relationship to not live together than it was to live together, because we were always driving back and forth. It was just a pain in the butt.” But travel distance or wardrobe challenges were not sufficient to result in shared living; one other aspect was central, as Josh, a 22-year-old part-time community college student and data entry clerk, made clear. Asked why he and Patty decided to share a home, he reported, “Well, just because, I mean by that point we were probably spending almost every night together.”

Unlike housing-related issues, general convenience was referred to far more frequently by the middle-class cohabitators (see Figure 2). Over a quarter of respondents in the more educationally advantaged group stated that they moved in because it made day-to-day life easier, and middle-class respondents who moved in together the most rapidly, within 6 months of the start of their relationships, were most likely to mention convenience as a motivator. Among the working class, convenience was frequently mentioned among both those who moved in within 6 months and those who deferred cohabitation beyond the first year of their relationships.

About one of every eight reasons given for cohabiting was the belief that living together just made good economic sense, which we term Economic Rationality. Although some respondents were reluctant to attribute their decisions to cohabit to economic considerations, most viewed it as being sensible or even responsible, although it was not financially necessary. Asked why she decided to live with her boyfriend, Carrie, a 24-year-old high school teacher, said “Obviously, just money-wise it just made so much more sense, because we’re spending two rents, two cables, two this, two that, and we’re obviously never using any of them at the same time, so it just made more sense.” Others viewed maintaining the façade of separate residences as wasteful. Karen, a 25-year-old Research Coordinator at a center for children with disabilities, said, “I was basically living with him anyway and basically throwing money away.” For these respondents, there was little point to maintaining separate apartments with the ensuing costs if they were spending their time in only one location. Middle-class cohabitators were nearly twice as likely as their working-class counterparts to justify moving in together because of economic rationality. Furthermore, as with housing reasons, middle-class respondents who indicated that it was more economically rational to cohabit were most likely to have dated for over a year before moving in together.

Financial necessity was mentioned very infrequently (8%) as a reason for moving in with a partner. The factors making up this reason were varied and included job loss and not earning enough to cover rent or other payments. Having a partner able to pick up the brunt of the expenses, even if temporarily, was for many of these respondents a necessity. Simon, a 25-year-old carpenter, recalled that when he and Laura moved in together, “Finances were very, very hard. I was laid off; I was actually in between jobs.” Eugene, a 22-year-old call center employee, also revealed how employment conditioned his rapid move in with Susan. “I needed help with the money and she was willing to help me,” he explained, “because there was a time, after I quit [the game store], that I didn’t have a job for about a month.” His partner, Susan, represented the financial need as mutual, saying “I actually didn’t have the money to pay the rent where I was currently living, so I was in a financial bind,” even though she had a job at that time. Financial need was not limited to working-class cohabitators. Taylor said it took him a while after getting his college degree to find a job and that he had moved in with Bree “mainly because I financially could not support myself and that’s pretty much what it came down to.”

That resources feature so prominently in cohabitators' discussions of why they move in together is not unexpected (e.g., Sassler, 2004). The old adage that formerly encouraged marriage—that two can live as cheaply as one—is also applicable to cohabitation. But working-class cohabitators were more than twice as likely as their middle-class counterparts to report financial necessity as one of the reasons they entered into shared living. Although this difference is based on small numbers, several respondents revealed they would not be cohabiting were it not for their financial situations. Susan, for example, viewed moving in with Eugene as necessary but wrong, explaining, “We understand that this was not our first option, to move in with each other, but we knew it was financially what we needed to do.” Asked what they would have done if each had more money, Susan replied, “We wouldn’t have moved in with each other,” specifying that they would have waited until they got married. Tyrone also felt that cohabitation was not optimal given their religious convictions, explaining, “I mean, we ain’t livin’ right.” Half of the working-class respondents who mentioned financial necessity as a reason for cohabiting had moved in with their partners within 6 months of starting their romantic relationships; these respondents tended to be younger and none reported receiving monetary assistance from parents. Middle-class respondents also expressed reservations about moving in because of fiscal necessity, though none mentioned religious reservations about cohabiting.

Over one quarter of the reasons mentioned for moving in with a partner relate specifically to the intensification of the romantic relationship. We disaggregate these responses into two distinct categories: moving in with a partner as a means of spending more time together and because they enjoyed each other’s company (accounting for 15% of all reasons mentioned), versus as a “step” or sign of increased commitment (about 11% of all reasons offered). Those who mentioned moving in so that they could spend more time with their partners focused on enjoyment and togetherness. Lauren, for example, a 23-year-old lobbyist, said, “We have fun and we enjoy each other’s company, so why shouldn’t we just move in together?”

Of note is that working-class respondents mentioned a desire to be together as a justification for cohabitation nearly twice as often as middle-class cohabitators. But although wanting to spend time together may result in deepening intimacy, this reason does not encompass moving in as a sign that relationships were becoming more serious or to assess compatibility for marriage. The explanation given by Ray, a 31-year-old bookkeeper currently taking a few credits toward his degree from a community college, highlights this. Asked why they decided to move in, he responded that it was “just something that ended up happening. We were both attracted to one another and both wanted to be together and so I really don’t know, other than that.” Working-class respondents who mentioned wanting to be together as a reason for entering into shared living also were most likely to have been seeing their partner for intermediate amounts of time—over 6 months but less than a year; there was no particular time pattern evident among their middle-class counterparts.

Those who mentioned that living together was a “step” discussed it as a way to assess compatibility prior to marriage, to see if a wedding was in the cards, or to signify a higher level of commitment. Andrew, a 27-year-old college-educated tennis pro, indicated that for him, living together served as a mechanism for “testing” the strength of his relationship. Asked why he decided to live with his partner Rebecca he said:

We’re trying to see how it is going to work. So if our relationship’s going to continue to grow and prosper, this would be one way for us to kind of gauge, you know, maybe we will get married. And if we can’t live together, we’re not going to get married. So this will help us make future decisions and stuff like that.

Tracy, a high school graduate who managed a branch of a national coffee shop, also described moving in as step, though for her it seemed more a means to demonstrate and deepen commitment; even though she and her partner got engaged before moving in together, she said: “So it was naturally the progression to take, was to live together. ‘Cause I wasn’t ready to get married, and I don’t think he was either.” Still others commented that they knew they would marry their partners, and moving in together was just part of the natural sequence. Kevin, a 27-year-old manager of an industrial plant, said, “At that point I knew that I wanted to marry her, and she knew that she wanted to marry me. So we knew that we were going to become engaged and we wanted to spend the rest of our lives together.” Of note is the variability in how living together as a relationship stage is viewed, with some considering it a way to determine whether the relationship should go forward and others certain that marriage was in their future.

Middle-class respondents were twice as likely to mention cohabitation as a “step” than were their working-class counterparts. This is important in light of the body of research suggesting that living together is a precursor to marriage (Brown, 2000; Guzzo, 2009; Manning & Smock, 2002). Also of note is that duration to shared living seems to be associated with reporting that cohabitation indicates a deepening level of commitment to the relationship. Among middle-class respondents, the largest number who mentioned that living together was the next step had dated for over a year before moving in with their partners, and partner-level agreement that coresidence was the next step was quite high.

The final reason for moving in together, mentioned by nearly 9% of the sample, was related to family issues—such as the desire to move out of a parent’s (or sibling’s) home or as a result of pregnancy. Regardless of their social class, those who mentioned family reasons were often in their late teens or early twenties when they moved in with their partners. They frequently referenced concerns with the stigma associated with living with parents in contemporary society and also expressed desires for greater freedom than coresidence with parents allowed. Dawn, a 22-year-old community college student working on her Associate’s degree to be a physical trainer, explained why she moved in with Eric by saying, “I mean, I love my parents, I love to hang out with them, but you know, you just kind of want to have that separation, feeling like you’re kind of moving on with your life and doing what you want to do.” The challenge of establishing sexually intimate relationships while living with parents or older siblings was repeatedly mentioned as an impetus to cohabitation.

Another four respondents detailed how pregnancy served as the motivator for moving in together. All four were in their teens when the conception occurred. Terrell described how this event propelled him into living with Aliyah, though neither had a full-time job and she was attempting to complete her Bachelor’s degree. “I wasn’t trying to move in,” he said, “but after we found out she was pregnant it wasn’t no ands, ifs, or buts about it.” Family reasons were reported far more frequently by working-class respondents. The progression into shared living tended to occur more gradually for those who moved from their parents’ homes or whose shared living was precipitated by pregnancy. Over half of the working-class respondents who reported family reasons for moving in with their partners were involved for over a year prior to cohabiting.

Plans for Marriage: At Move-in and Subsequently

Only two couples—one working class and one middle class—mentioned being engaged prior to moving in together. In fact, relatively few couples said that they had discussed marriage with any degree of seriousness prior to cohabiting. Seven working-class and five middle-class couples agreed that marriage had been discussed before they began living together; in another five working-class and three middle-class couples one partner said marriage had been raised, but their partners stated they had not discussed it or not seriously.

For the majority of couples in our sample, marriage was not a front-burner topic when they initially moved in together.

In fact, marriage rejecters—those who have determined that they do not ever want to wed anyone—appear to be among the most likely to have talked about marriage before moving in, if only to clarify their disinterest in marriage and make sure prospective partners were on the same page. Three of the working-class couples who had discussed marriage prior to moving in together indicated that such a conversation had been held, generally early on. Beth, a 23-year-old nanny and part-time student recalled how she informed her partner of her intentions for the future, saying “I needed to establish that with him first because I didn’t want to break his heart if he did want to have millions of kids, which wasn’t my thing, or even get married.” Mitch, her partner, concurred, saying, “I think we discussed marriage like probably the first date we had or something just because I wanted to get it out in the open that I didn’t want to get married ever.”

Among the middle class, no couples discussed their opposition to marriage prior to moving in together, though for two couples a disinclination for marriage evolved as they got older.

Most couples were not eager to discuss permanent futures together before cohabiting. Of the 17 working-class and 22 middle-class couples who had not discussed marriage plans prior to moving in, a number of reasons emerged that explained their avoidance of the subject. Some felt that the length of time they had been together was not significant enough to justify discussing marriage. Twenty-three-year-old Chad, for example, who moved in with his partner Jackie within 4 months of the start of their relationship, explained they had not discussed marriage before moving in because, “it seemed way too damn soon (laughs).... It just made sense for us to move in together under the circumstances, but it just didn’t make sense to do all the marriage stuff at that point.” Others said that while it was too soon to raise the topic of marriage at the time they moved in, they assumed they would marry eventually. Asked if they had talked about future plans before moving in with his partner, Drew, 35, who worked in Internet securities, responded: “We didn’t have the big wedding talk or anything. We still haven’t. But like I said, I think we both knew.” Others noted that they were not future-oriented people. Finally, some individuals and couples avoided discussing marriage either because they had no (immediate) interest in getting married or because they viewed their current relationships as time limited.

Even though the majority of couples did not discuss marriage prior to cohabiting, over time the prospect of marriage began to loom larger on the horizon for some. In addition to the one couple already engaged upon moving in together, another three working-class couples subsequently became engaged. These engagements were generally long. Two of these couples had cohabited for about 2 years prior to their engagement and despite having lived together for over 5 years following the proposal, neither had concrete wedding plans (such as a date). Both couples mentioned the need to get financially established prior to marriage as a justification for their long engagements. Another three working-class couples were about to get engaged (according to the male partner); two couples mentioned looking at engagement rings together, whereas the third man indicated he had the ring, but his partner did not know about it. Several others suggested that they will marry their partners in the future or have begun talking about marriage, but their unions still remained less formalized. Furthermore, partners were not always in concurrence regarding whether and when marriage would occur; male partners frequently mentioned that although their partners wanted to talk about marriage, they were not yet ready to do so (Sassler and Miller, 2010).

Middle-class couples became engaged and formed concrete wedding plans more rapidly than their working-class counterparts. Ten middle-class couples became engaged after

moving in together and one additional couple reported having the trappings (date, hall, wedding dress), but did not consider themselves officially engaged because the man had not yet proposed (though both noted that a proposal was imminent). Six of these couples became engaged within 6 months of entering into shared living, whereas another three had lived together for about a year. Although the majority formed their engagements expeditiously, they generally had dated their partners for a considerable amount of time before entering into shared living; half had been romantically involved for over a year prior to moving in together. Another feature distinguishing the middle-class couples from their working-class counterparts was that their marriage plans were far more concrete. Most mentioned actual wedding dates and locations and described arrangements. As a result, barring one partner's getting cold feet, these relationships seem more likely to be heading for matrimony than those of engaged working-class couples.

Is there an association between reasons for cohabiting and relationship outcomes? Not surprisingly, we found that those who indicated that they moved in as a "step" or a sign of intensifying commitment were more likely to become engaged than those who report wanting to be together as their prime reason for cohabiting. This holds for both working- and middle-class respondents. Fourteen of the 17 middle-class respondents and four of the six working-class ones who mentioned "step" as their first or second reason had gotten engaged, with another middle-class couple reporting that they were shopping for an engagement ring. Furthermore, the association between seeing cohabitation as a "step" and discussions of marriage appeared to be far stronger than was the relationship between the pace at which couples moved in together and discussions of marriage. Even though a number of couples who viewed cohabitation as a "step" moved in together rapidly (within 6 months), most had discussed marriage beforehand and the majority subsequently got engaged. There may be some retrospective recall bias in the discussions of why cohabiting couples moved in with each other among those who go on to get engaged or marry—something that surveys relying on retrospective questions regarding engagement plans should acknowledge. Those who "decide" that a relationship has a future may be more likely to proceed to marriage after moving in together, however, regardless of how long they dated prior to cohabiting; in such a scenario, intent rather than tempo is the important factor. We cannot rule out this possibility with our data.

Respondents who mentioned that moving in together was a step were substantially more likely to have discussed marriage or gotten engaged than their counterparts who gave other reasons for cohabiting. The desire to be together was the most frequently mentioned reason for entering into shared living among working-class respondents. Yet our findings suggest only a weak association between cohabiting so as to be able to spend more time with a partner and progression into engagement for both middle- and working-class couples. The data also indicate that respondents who talked about marriage prior to moving in together, or who went on to become engaged, are underrepresented among those moving in for convenience.

Our findings also enable us to conjecture about the extent to which couples "slide" into shared living and beyond—into engagement and, eventually, marriage. Even though a large number of working- and middle-class respondents attributed their move-ins primarily to structural factors (e.g., a lack of housing or financial difficulties), those whose shared living was driven by such events were much less likely to become engaged than those who moved in together for reasons specific to their interpersonal relationships, such as wanting to be together or feeling that cohabitation was the "next step." Relationship-driven reasons, then, appear to be better predictors of subsequent progression (into engagement) than do event-driven cohabitations. Although cohabitators may "slide" into their shared living arrangements

expeditiously and without much discussion of the future, our respondents did not seem to want to follow suit with a rapid entrance into engagement and marriage.

Discussion

In recent decades, bifurcation in family building behaviors across social classes has become evident. Specifically, the college educated are now more likely than those with less education to marry and bear children in marital unions and less likely to divorce (Martin, 2006; McLanahan, 2004). Whether the function of cohabitation has also diverged, even as living together has become normative across all education levels, has received less scholarly attention. Our study provides a glimpse into how young adults from working- and middle-class backgrounds utilize cohabitation and the possible ramifications for subsequent relationship outcomes and social stratification.

We found considerable differences between working- and middle-class young adults in the tempo to shared living, as well as important variation in reasons for moving in together. Working-class respondents in our sample moved in with their romantic partners more rapidly than did their middle-class counterparts. Although many did so because it is easier to spend time together in one abode rather than two, we also found evidence that others enter into shared living because they felt they had few other options. The decline of jobs that pay adequate wages for those without a college diploma (Levy, 1998), difficulties saving money to cover rent or security deposits, and the lack of parental financial support contribute to the relationship processes of our working-class respondents. Rapidly formed coresidential relationships, particularly those that couples feel “pushed” into, are more likely to be poorly matched (Surra & Hughes, 1997) and elevate women’s risk of unplanned pregnancy—rates that are already quite high among young cohabiting women with less than a college degree (Fu, Darroch, Haas, & Ranjit, 1999; Sassler et al., 2009). The confluence of these features highlights the challenges facing young working-class adults seeking to build strong, healthy relationships.

The literature on the function(s) served by cohabitation often suggests that living together serves as a precursor to marriage. We found some support for this premise, but more so for middle-class respondents than for those who are less educated. Middle-class respondents, who on average had good job opportunities and access to resources or were working on graduate degrees to improve their employment prospects, were better able to move gradually into shared living. They were also more likely to articulate a desired relationship template, where couples date for a delimited period—a year to a year and a half, in the views of several middle-class respondents, before seriously considering marriage—that differs from the working class. Working-class respondents, in contrast, expressed a desire to date for longer periods of time before advancing their unions or expressed their uncertainty about the future with their current partners. For them, cohabitation may serve as more of an alternative to singlehood. Those working-class couples who became engaged experienced long engagements, with amorphous wedding plans. In fact, several couples who had been engaged for two or more years suggested that for them, living together had become a perfectly fine alternative to marriage. Additional research, with nationally representative data, is needed to ascertain if the metabolism of middle- and working-class relationships differs in terms of the tempo to shared living and to subsequent transitions, such as engagement, marriage, parenthood, and/or union dissolution. In addition, further work should determine if social class differences in long-term “alternative to marriage” cohabitations have emerged.

We also found class differentials in the factors shaping the decision to move in with partners, highlighting the need to disentangle reasons that, on the surface, appear similar.

Some recent studies, for example, group financial necessity and economic rationality together under the aegis of “convenience” (e.g., Rhoades et al., 2009). We found, however, that working-class couples are far more likely to enter into cohabitation because financial circumstances warranted living together, even if doing so was less than ideal. Middle-class respondents, in contrast, often referenced economic rationality as a reason to live together. But even when similar reasons were proffered—such as a need for housing—the tempo of entrance into shared living often differed. College-educated respondents, who were generally better able to afford independent living, whether on their own or with roommates, seemed to maintain separate apartments longer, even if they spent as many nights with partners as their working-class counterparts did. This suggests that for those who could afford to do so, there was some value in keeping their own residence—whether to have more time to “test” the relationship, because their work lives required more attention that subsequently slowed down their relationship progressions, or because of concerns that family members would not approve of cohabitation. In fact, earlier research on cohabitation (Rindfuss & VandenHeuval, 1990) suggested that parental control may have been one reason why college students in the 1970s and 1980s were less likely to cohabit than other single adults. Although parents should have had less fiscal control over our sample of middle-class adults, as they had already completed their college degrees, there is some evidence that middle-class parents retain some influence, particularly relating to providing financial assistance for the rather elaborate weddings many middle-class children expected. Because working-class respondents did not expect much assistance from parents, there may have also been less pressure to delay cohabiting, as well as fewer means to avoid doing so.

Our findings must be viewed with caution, drawn as they are from a relatively small, nonrepresentative sample of cohabiting couples located in one metropolitan area. The sample may not adequately reflect high-conflict couples; we also omitted those whose cohabiting unions were recently formed or whose relationships had ended. As with many quantitative studies, the relationship history approach utilized in our study still relies on retrospective recall and is also subject to social acceptability bias, for example, in reporting duration to shared living. Our results may also differ from empirical studies in that we utilized reports from both members of a couple, which better reflects the dyadic decision-making process required to get engaged and married. The findings are nonetheless consistent with recent quantitative studies documenting growing social class disparities in the likelihood of transitioning from cohabitation to marriage (cf. Lichter et al., 2006).

Implications for Research and Practice

The findings from this study have implications for practitioners and researchers. Even though the common perception is that those who live together are at least considering marriage, our results reveal that many had not discussed future plans at the time they entered into shared living. Furthermore, the reasons individuals gave for moving in together—particularly those relating to financial necessity or convenience—may be indicators that the relationship’s future is uncertain. Relationship counselors should be aware of these findings and use caution in encouraging greater formalization of such unions, given research suggesting that such relationships are more volatile, with one partner often expressing low levels of commitment (Rhoades et al., 2009; Stanley, Rhoades, et al., 2006; Surra & Hughes, 1997). Moreover, ongoing counseling regarding fiscal management, family planning, and relationship skills courses may be necessary to provide such couples with the skills necessary to maintain healthy relationships (Stanley, Amato, Johnson, & Markman, 2006).

Although family scholars frequently examine married couples’ decision making on sensitive issues such as money, sex, and children (cf. Cummings, Goeke-Morey, & Papp, 2003; Dew, 2008), less is known about the early stages of relationships. Our results suggest that relationship clinicians must become familiar with how their clients form and advance their

intimate unions, beginning with dating and sexual intimacy. Although research frequently acknowledges that financial problems stress marriages (cf. Dew), less acknowledged is the important role that economic exigency can play in the establishment of coresidential unions. Cohabitation, furthermore, is often popularly portrayed as a precursor to marriage. Yet practitioners should be aware that the role cohabitation serves varies among couples. Although some couples view shared living as a means to assess compatibility for marriage, others cohabit because it is expedient. Furthermore, many couples have not discussed their desires or plans regarding marriage, children, or life goals upon entering into shared living. Relationship skills classes may be able to address the importance of regularly engaging in discussions on such important topics (Stanley, Amato, et al., 2006). Practitioners involved in premarital education programs should also familiarize themselves with the availability of services, including family planning and housing assistance programs, for childless young adults who often have limited access to existing programs.

In summary, cohabitation has become a normative stage in young adults' lives over the past decades. Our findings challenge researchers and clinicians to pay closer attention to the factors preceding entrance into shared living. Because sexual intimacy is also normative in romantic relationships, justifications for not cohabiting are growing ever weaker, despite the research suggesting that the effect of living together on subsequent unions, particularly marriage, may be adverse (though see Lichter & Qian, 2008; Teachman, 2003). Our results highlight the existence of social class disparities in the processes leading up to cohabitation, with potentially important consequences for subsequent relationship transitions (into marriage, parenthood without marriage, or ending the relationship altogether). Cohabitation appears to be evolving to serve different functions for working- and middle-class young adults.

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Figure 1.
Duration to cohabitation, From Relationship Start.

Figure 2.
Class Differences in Reasons for Entering Into Shared Living.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Cohabiting Couples

Variables	Measures	Working Class M/n/\$	Middle Class M/n/\$
Age	Mean age: men	26.4 years	28.3 years
	Mean age: women	24.4 years	25.2 years
Relative age	Man >4 years old	4	11
	Both within 4 years	24	19
Educational attainment	Both high school or less	1	—
	1 HS, 1 some college	6	—
	Both some college/associate's	19	—
	One HS, one BA	1	—
	One some college, one BA	3	4
	Both BA	—	14
	One BA, one MA	—	10
	Both MA+	—	3
Race	Both White, non-Hispanic	13	24
	Both Hispanic	1	1
	Both Black, non-Hispanic	4	2
	Mixed-race couple	12	4
Couple-level income ^a	Mean couple income	\$38,971	\$67,672
	\$18,000–\$24,999	8	—
	\$25,000–\$34,999	7	5
	\$35,000–\$49,999	8	6
	\$50,000–\$74,999	6	10
	\$75,000–\$99,999	1	5
	\$100,000 or more	—	5
Relative earnings	Man earns more	13	14
	Woman earns more	6	3
	Each partner earns 40–60% of the income	11	14
Marital status	Both never married	24	26
	One NM, one previously married	6	5
Parental status	Both no children	16	27
	Both share children ^b	5	2
	Man has children (not woman)	6	2
	Woman has children (not man)	2	0
	Each has a child from a previous relationship	1	0
Duration of cohabitation	3–6 months	8	12
	7–11 months	2	1
	12–23 months	5	12
	24–35 months	7	4
	3 years or more	8	2
<i>N</i>		30	31

^a Couple level income is determined by summing each partner's reported individual income. One man in the working class and one man and one woman in the middle class refused to report their income. Their partners' reports were used to determine their couple-level income. In another instance, neither partner reported a middle-class man's income. It was set to the mean of men's income for his social class.

^b In two working-class couples the partners share a child and the male partner also has a child from a previous relationship.

Table 2

Reasons for Moving in With Romantic Partner, by Social Class

Reasons	Working Class		Middle Class		Combined Sample	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Housing	26	19.40	26	17.80	52	18.60
Convenience	26	19.40	38	26.00	64	22.90
Economic rationality	12	9.00	25	17.10	37	13.20
Financial necessity	14	10.40	7	5.50	21	7.90
Step/commitment	10	7.50	22	15.10	32	11.40
To be together	27	20.10	15	10.30	42	15.00
Family	17	12.70	7	4.80	24	8.60
Security	0	0.00	4	2.70	4	1.40
Other	2	1.50	1	0.70	3	1.10
Number of reasons	134		146		280	
Number of respondents	60		62		122	

Note. Respondents could, and often did, mention several reasons for why they decided to cohabit.