Determinants and Characteristics of Unmarried Cohabitation and Its Impacts on Marriage: Western Experiences

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Introduction

One of the major changes in western societies has been the gradual acceptance of the cohabitation of unmarried couples. It is clear that there was a substantial increase in the prevalence of unmarried cohabitation during the 1970s. In Sweden, for example, unmarried cohabiting couples comprised about one percent of all couples in 1960. In 1970 the rate rose to 7 percent and became 15 percent in 1979 (Troost, 1979). It is predicted that there will be further increases in the incidence of cohabitation in the future. The increase in cohabitation has been considered an interesting phenomenon to study, resulting in many early studies of cohabitation. These studies focus on the purposes of cohabitation and characteristics of cohabitants. Recent studies have been interested in the relationship between unmarried cohabitation and marriage. Topics such as the effects of cohabitation on marriage satisfaction and dissolution are salient in the literature. These studies obviously compare unmarried cohabitation with married couples. On the other hand, Enders and Van de Ven (1990) compare cohabitants with singles, assuming that cohabitation grows because of the rise of individuality and sexual freedom among the younger generation. The development of studies of cohabitation also has been broadened into policy aspect, especially the legal aspects (Knox, 1988; New Law Reform Commission, 1985), since several legal problems have surfaced. Legal aspects of cohabitation are not discussed in this paper because the general aim of the paper is to discuss the social-psychological and demographic aspects of cohabitation in developed countries. More specifically, the paper assesses: why do people prefer to cohabit; who is cohabiting; and how does cohabitation influence marriage and fertility? To answer these questions, this paper will discuss three major topics related to cohabitation. In the next section personal and social backgrounds will be examined to understand the trend of increasing cohabitation. Psychological and history of cohabitation. Demographic and socio-economic views will be used to explain the nature of relationships in the other section. Finally, the relationship between cohabitation and marriage as well as fertility are emphasized in the end of the paper.

Motivation and Personal History

Despite the partners had known each other for several weeks or months before moving in together, they hardly ever managed to live together. They become emotionally involved with each other and spend increasing larger amounts of time together as the relationship develops. According to Knox (1988), the typical pattern is to spend as occasional night together, then weekend, a night before and after the weekend, and so on. The process of living together makes it difficult to identify motivations for cohabitation. In other words, some motivations exist during the process of living together. Newcomb's (1987) study identifies some psychological characteristic of cohabitants in Los Angeles County. The study found that cohabitants feel having fewer inner resources. On the other hand, needs for independence and autonomy are prominent among them. Thus, living together rather than marriage is to overcome the fear of being alone without disturbing their needs for independence and autonomy. This finding is in line with McDonald's (1988) speculation which hypothesizes that living together is an experiment in the pursuit of autonomy.

Sexuality of cohabitation is the least...
me of the basic motivations living together is sex. This argument is based on some findings which show that cohabitation is more sexually-involved than marriage (Newcomb, 1987). A greater percentage of male partners who do not live together or married couples (Newcomb, 1987) with household expenditures. Sharing of rent and the costs for the acquisition and maintenance of household appliances are examples of how living together helps rationalise the use of a household budget. Economic motivation of cohabitation minimises budget expenses but increases psychological costs. As the autonomy and independence are basic goals among them, participation may maintain certain economic privileges that are difficult to preserve in a relationship. Women who continue to live together experience the same benefits as their partners. Only a small proportion of cohabitation.

Cohabitation is not only preferred by younger age groups without marriage experience, but some cohabitants have been married to someone else before living together. Even though the painful experience of marriage is not as common as a reason for cohabitation, psychologically this traumatic experience can lead to avoidance of marriage. Consequently, to fulfill sexual needs and intimacy they should commence romantic relationships and cohabitation is a potential choice. To some extent this reason is the same as the rejection of marriage on ideological grounds (Sarantakos, 1984). The antimarriage ideology of cohabitants is not only because of traumatic experience of marriage, but also other factors. Essentially, marriage is an a partner to marry, marriage cannot occur. Cohabitation is an alternative if there is reluctance to marriage of one of the partners. However, this reason may be less common in western society (Sarantakos, 1984) because the incidence of marriage initiated by parents is much smaller than that in developing countries.

The Nature of Cohabitation

There are two common forms of cohabitation: The first is an alternative form of marriage and the other is the stage of cohabitation that is popular as a stage of courtship that is not the same as the rejection of marriage on ideological grounds (Sarantakos, 1984). This classification, to some extent, is oversimplified since cohabitants sometimes cannot decide what is important to their partnership. They prefer cohabitation because they do not have strong reasons to marry. More recently, they do not like to associate their relationship with marriage. Thus, it could moderate to classify cohabitation as a normal phenomenon in western countries (Bumpass and Sweet, 1989; Spamer, 1983).

Cohabitation can occur before, after, or during marriage which is especially among separated married couples. Ever married cohabitation can be divided into two categories, e.g., both or only one of the partners who have ever married. In the United States the percentage of divorced persons who cohabited increased accordingly from 1975 to 1980 (Spamer, 1983). The age of ever married cohabitants, especially females, are obviously older than that of never married cohabitants.
There are three ways to understand the characteristics of cohabitants. First, characteristic of each cohabitants is described separately. Second, joint characteristics of unmarried partners are drawn to explain the nature of couples as a whole. Finally, it could be more understandable studying cohabitation by comparing unmarried with married couples or single persons. The description of cohabitants comparing with married persons individually is common as well. The differences between the social demographic characteristics of cohabitants and married persons, as a couple or an individual, are mostly consistent over time in many countries such as Australia (i.e., Khoo, 1986; Arantakos, 1984), the United States (Bumpass and Sweet, 1989; Spanier, 1983; Tanser, 1987), Canada (i.e., Rao, 1990; Teachman and Polonsky, 1990) and Sweden (Benett, Blank and Bloom, 1986). The most prominent different characteristic is age. Many studies have found that unmarried couples are younger than married couples in general or within age groups.

There are more men who cohabited before marriage (Bumpass and Sweet, 1989; Thornton, 1988). The difference is used by the age at marriage in which men tend to marry earlier than women. In addition, there are many women who live together with previously married men than the reverse. The highest rates of cohabitation in the United States and Australia are seen among the lower education group (less than high school). In addition, unmarried cohabitants, tertiary education (Bumpass and Sweet 1989; Khoo, 1986; Tanser, 1987). The difference of education between married and cohabiting persons is possibly associate with economic characteristics, especially employment status and occupation. The proportion of unemployed males among cohabitants is higher than married men. Although cohabiting women have been found more likely to be employed than married women (Glick and Spanier, 1980; Spanier, 1983; Tanser, 1987), it does not mean that many unemployed men cohabit with employed women because the rate of cohabitation is higher among women.

The high proportion of cohabiting women who are employed is related to a familiar pattern that shows the continuing movement of young women into the labour force. Furthermore, the pattern associates with the increase of age at the first marriage with the number of cohabitation as well. This may reflect the nature of female cohabitants who are necessary to be more independent. In the United States (Bumpass and Sweet, 1989; Glick and Spanier, 1980; Macklin, 1983; Spanier, 1983; Tanser, 1987) and Australia (Khoo, 1986) unmarried couples were more likely to live in metropolitan areas. Social and economic factors seem to influence this trend such as high proportion of unemployed and expensive cost for renting flat. In addition, urbanization in western countries may be related to cohabitation.

Men and women with no religious preference are more likely to have cohabited than those who identified. Other studies (Khoo, 1986) show that cohabitants who affiliate with a particular religion are not practising religion. The effect of church or other religious institutions in which the leaders and community suggest to prefer marriage rather than cohabitation can influence the members to marry, while people who rarely attend to church is not subject to such influence.

There are other characteristics associated with the cohabitation rate such as parent’s education. A study (Bumpass and Sweet, 1989) found that persons who cohabit tend to have parents who had a higher education attainment. On the other hand, Tanser (1987) showed that individuals whose mothers had not completed high school are more likely to be cohabitants. The latter seems to be consistent with other proximate socioeconomic status in which generally is lower among cohabitants. However, Bumpass and Sweet argue that well educated parents are associated with liberal attitudes which also has been considered as an important factor affecting the motivation to cohabit. It is difficult to conclude how the relationship is. There should be other factors mediating the relationship that were not controlled in those studies. It is also possible that the relationship between parent’s education and cohabitation rates is U shape.

Cohabitation, Family Formation and Divorce

Several characteristics as mentioned above would influence the nature of the Many scholars agree that the most remarkable characteristic of living together is the instability of the relationship. This is not only because of the proportion of dissolution among unmarried couples but also supported by the background and characteristics of the relationship. The need for autonomy that motivates individuals to prefer cohabitation rather than marriage in corporation with economic independence among participants would contribute to the instability of the relationship.

The proportion of persons cohabitating as an alternative to marriage is small (Bolewin, 1982; Sarantakos, 1984), since most subjects obviously report that they want to marry in the future. Undoubtedly, Carmichael (1990), based on his analysis, refuses to accept the opinion that cohabitation is a substitution for formal partnering. To test cohabitation as a form of trial marriage there should be evidence showing the contribution of living together in marriage and divorce. If the assumption of cohabitation as a trial marriage is true, there should be evidence showing that cohabitation leads to better marriage in terms of, for instance, satisfaction and low rates of divorce among couples who cohabited prior to marriage.

Research in the United States (Teachman and Polonsky, 1990) shows that about 21-23 percent of a survey sample reported having cohabited before marriage. This figure seems to be lower than earlier research conducted in 1983 which shows nearly 30 percent (Tanser, 1987) and more than 40 percent.


different age at marriage of the nupes. Although in Sweden (Bennett, IC and Bloom, 1988) shows about 65
cent of females surveyed samples cohabit premaritally and in France in
two-thirds of first

When does cohabitation lead to marriage? The most common answer
to these question is that they woulds try their partners when they found
appropriate. This statement would be
difficult to prove because compatibility
in several dimensions such as value, e, life style, goals compatibility and
ers. Another possibility is that marrying
an unmarried couple is when they
achieve sufficient economic conditions.

Cohabitors may decide to marry
when they want to have children (Trost, 79), and Leridon (1990) found
due to that marrages occurred
cause of the first birth of a child. The
tial reason to marry may be to mend
the relationship. They believe that the
ded commitment of a marriage and
ving children will increase the
ability of a relationship. This reason,
course, is not the only need for
mony and independence.

External pressure from family
umbers, friends and community may
be a cohabiting couple to legitimate
relationship with marriage. A very
example of external pressure has
en described by a respondent of
Rantakos (1984: 144) who reported: I
didn’t hear all that stress put upon us all
ware. We didn’t seem to be able to
ke any friends or to be accepted by our
ighbour. ... We have to move away

According to Yelsna (1986) and
De-Matis and Leslie (1984), ever
cohabited couples were less
communicative than never cohabited
married couples. The lower quality of
communication between spouses leads to
lower marital satisfaction (Tucker
and O’Gody, 1991). Thus, it is not
surprising that marriage is less stable
among ever cohabited married couples.

There is evidence that shows a negative
relationship between premarital
cohabitation and marital stability. In
Sweden, for instance, Bennett, Blanc, and
Bloom (1988) found that women who
cohabit premaritally have nearly 80
percent higher marital dissolution rates
than those who do not do in addition;
the longer premarital cohabitation is,
the higher the dissolution rates
that occur. Finally, they conclude that
the negative effect is because this group fail
to have a strong commitment to the
instituting of marriage after having
relatively weak commitments to their
relationships before marriage.

Recent evidence in the United States
(Teachman and Polonko, 1990) also
shows that cohabitation prior to
marriage significantly increases the risk
of marital instability. Consistent with
the finding in Sweden, after 20 years
ever cohabited couples are more than
never cohabited to have dissolved their
marriage. The difference between the
United States and Sweden (Bennett, Blanc and Bloom,
1988) is the level of marital dissolution
for ever cohabited women that is

mostly twice as high in the United States (35 versus 18). The level of
marriage dissolution among ever
cohabited women in the US is also
higher than that in Canada, e.g., 32.
(Teachman and Polonko, 1990).

The analyses of the effect of
premarital cohabitation on marriage
stability using a control variable such as
age at marriage and education. These
studies (Bennett, Blanc and Bloom, 1988;
Teachman and Polonko, 1990) show
that ever cohabited couples have
generally a higher age at marriage and
education. These factors have reduced
the risk of marital instability for ever
cohabited couples, however, the level
is still higher than never cohabited
couples. These results have motivated
Teachman and Polonko to try another
method of analysis, by incorporating
the total amount of time spent in union
into the model. The finding shows that
there is no difference in the rate of
marital dissolution by cohabitation
status. In other words, the main cause
of different marital dissolution rates
between ever and never cohabited
couples is the total amount of time
spent in union. The finding stresses that
having cohabited does not necessarily
contribute to marital stability.

Fertility

Most couples who live together do not
have children living with them. In
Australia, according to Szantakos
(1984), 38 percent of cohabitants
reported having children. In the other
study (Kho, 1986) the finding is not
so different, thirty percent for men and
35 percent for women. In the earlier
study only 29 percent of all children were
born in the cohabiting union as children
of both partners. However, the children
from the current cohabitation in Kho’s

...
Children. The low proportion of cohabitators having children is in line with their intention to delay until marriage or to not have a child at all.

The other indication of fertility among unmarried couples can be detected from ex-nuptial birth data. Khoo and McDonald (1988) found that forty percent of women aged 20-29 were living together at time of birth.

Among the older age group, 30 and over, the percentage is nearly 5%. The higher proportion is found in France (Ledion, 1990) in which three-quarters of births outside marriage were born by women who were cohabiting. While ex-nuptial births where paternity was acknowledged in Australia (Khoo and McDonald, 1988) was 64 percent in 1985 and acknowledgement of paternity mostly means that the couples are living together without being married, the contribution of defacto relationship on ex-nuptial birth is significant enough. However, these results should be interpreted carefully because there are no data that show when the conception occurs. In other words, it is possible that they are not both partner’s children or the occurrence of conception can be before living together.

Premarital birth can lead to a stronger commitment of partners or bring them to marry. Some findings (Morgan and Rindfuss, 1985; Teachman, 1982) show that having a premarital birth increases the chance of marital dissolution but not a legitimate birth. It means that if unmarried couples have their own child(ren) and the marriage is less likely to be ended by divorce. The distribution of legitimate births reducing marital dissolution among ever cohabited couples have been found by Teachman and Polonko (1990) as well. Thus, not only does premarital birth while living together motivates cohabitators to marry but also preserves marriage.

Concluding Remarks

Bumpass (1990) argues that cohabitation has changed the uniqueness of marriage. However, he believes that the meaning of marriage has not been changed by cohabitation. Unfortunately, Bumpass does clarify his reason for stating this.

The recent papers have discussed the differences of living together and marriage. Generally speaking, cohabitation differs to marriage on background and characteristics. These differences lead to different outcomes. Marital disatisfaction and dissolution, for instance, are higher among ever cohabited couples than never cohabited marriage couples. The finding did not support the hypothesis stated the objective of cohabitation was preparation to marriage. The differences between married and unmarried couples, especially in commitment, also shows the failure of the assumption that cohabitation alters marriage.

The high proportion of cohabitation among younger aged group and the prediction of the increase in the future has several implications. First, some policies which used to be based on marriage and family considerations into account this trend. Secondly, analysis of marital status in demography, especially meaning of single, should consider the existence of cohabitation. The position of cohabitant is between single and marriage. By neglecting this phenomenon the result of demographic analysis may be inaccurate. Finally, the recent trends of marriage, marital dissolution and fertility have been affected by the rise of cohabitation rates, however, the contribution of cohabitation on those aspects has not been studied thoroughly.

The study of cohabitation has focused on the demographic, sociological and psychological aspects separately. However, there should be interactions amongst these factors. For instance, it is predicted that the psychological determinant of high dissolution rates among ever married couples have been predicted as an effect of need for autonomy and independence. Unfortunately, there is not enough evidence to demonstrate this relationship, and methodological problems have also arise. Future research needs to take into account more complicated factors and the interaction between demographic, sociological and psychological variables.

Reference


