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Chapter 7

CURRENTLY COHABITING: RELATIONSHIP ATTITUDES, EXPECTATIONS AND OUTCOMES

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Abstract: This study uses prospective data from the British Household Panel Survey to analyse individuals' relationship expectations and subsequent outcomes between 1998 and 2005. How do relationship expectations differ by age, sex, previous relationship history and parenthood? How do attitudes towards cohabitation differ by age, sex, previous relationship history and parenthood? Prospective data are particularly well suited to answering these questions as the relationship expectations are collected whilst the subjective state exists, allowing systematic empirical investigation of social change.

Keywords: cohabitation, British Household Panel Survey (BHPS), attitudes

7.1 INTRODUCTION

The rise in cohabitation – pre-marital, non-marital and post-marital – represents one of the most significant changes in union formation patterns in many developed economies. The importance of cohabitation, and the public debates it generates, are reflected in the media attention it has received (Stanley, 2000). In 2006, there were

2.3 million cohabiting couple families in the UK (ONS, 2007)¹. The increase in cohabitation has occurred alongside other, related, major demographic shifts, including: rising levels of divorce; delay in entry into marriage and childbearing; and a rise in the proportion of births taking place outside marriage. These are all characteristic of the second demographic transition (Van de Kaa, 1987; Lesthaeghe and Surkyn, 2004), although rising levels of cohabitation in the UK have only partially offset declining marriage rates (Berrington and Diamond, 2000). Even within Europe, divergent trends in the timing, duration, type and composition of cohabiting unions have been identified (Liefbroer and Dourleijn, 2006; Kiernan, 2001; 2004; Prinz, 1995). Theorising about cohabitation encompasses a broad range of perspectives, from notions of selfish individualism and breakdown of the family (Morgan, 2000) to those of the democratic, consensual and ‘pure’ relationship (Giddens, 1992; Beck-Gernsheim, 2000).

Cohabitation may be narrowly defined as “*an intimate sexual union between two unmarried partners who share the same living quarter for a sustained period of time*” (Bacharach *et al.*, 2000), assuming a defined duration (Mynarska and Bernardi, 2007). Typologies of cohabitation continue to evolve (Haskey, 2001; Martin and Thery, 2001; Casper and Bianchi, 2002), reflecting the changing nature of living arrangements in general and cohabitation in particular. As both a demographic process and event, cohabitation is fuzzy (Knab, 2005), elusive (Teitler and Reichman, 2001) and heterogeneous (Oppenheimer, 2003). Union formation in general, and cohabitation in particular, are characterised by increasing number and complexity, with the duration of cohabiting unions appearing to be lengthening (Haskey, 2001).

Theorists seeking to explain the rise in cohabitation incorporate a wide range of explanatory perspectives, including: increased secularization (Lesthaeghe, 1983; 1991; 1995; Thornton *et al.*, 1992; Lehrer, 2004); increased female labour force participation; shifts in the meaning of marriage (Allan and Crow, 2001), including a decline in its socio-cultural function (Alders and Manting, 2001); risk reduction (Mulder and Manting, 1994; Galland, 1997); a decline in the cultural importance of kin; and the separation of sex and reproduction.

Cohabitation may now be considered normative in the UK, evidenced by survey and opinion poll data. Such attitudinal data can contribute to the body of evidence about prevailing social norms (and stigma) and associated behaviour. Attitudinal data about cohabitation provide one strand of evidence about the acceptability of cohabitation as a social institution, and contribute to the substantive demographic evidence about the role of cohabitation in contemporary societies. Responses to questions about attitudes to cohabitation reveal the extent to which individuals have internalised norms about appropriate and ‘normal’ behaviour with respect to union formation (Oropesa, 1996). In 1981, a special edition of the journal *Alternative Lifestyles* dealt

¹ There are no annual official estimates of the cohabiting population of England and Wales, unlike legal marital status, and trends tend to be derived from surveys such as the Labour Force Survey and General Household Survey (GAD).

with cohabitation as a new form of living arrangement. Today, cohabitation has moved from being a ‘deviant’ or ‘alternative’ lifestyle choice to one that is normative (de Vaus, 2005), both before and after marriage (Bumpass *et al.*, 1995; Bumpass *et al.*, 1991).

7.2 CONTEXT

7.2.1 Normative attitudes

Attitudes are inherently subjective and virtually impossible to verify. When interpreting attitudinal data generated by surveys, it is important to note that respondents have to create judgements quickly in response to the question asked, often in relation to some implicit standard, even if the judgements are themselves rooted in a firmly held view (Tourangeau *et al.*, 2000). Whilst all survey questions are context-dependent, evidence shows that attitudinal questions are particularly at risk of this effect (Schuman and Presser, 1996). There are two broad types of attitudinal survey data: normative and individual. Normative attitudinal responses, such as those collected in opinion polls, allow an individual to distance themselves from their own circumstances. Individual attitudinal responses are, theoretically, grounded in reality. Norms and values relating to union formation are dynamic and respond to the interaction between individual experiences and social responses (Bachrach *et al.*, 2000) and both contribute to, and arise from, changes in society (Heuveline and Timberlake, 2004). Attitudinal surveys are used extensively in policy debates, for example, recent debates about the legal position of cohabiting relationship in Britain have incorporated attitudinal information as part of their corpus of evidence for legal change (Dey and Wasoff, 2007).

Changes in normative attitudes towards cohabitation are poorly represented before the final quarter of the twentieth century, mirroring the paucity of substantive data on the prevalence of non-marital cohabitation (Gillis, 2004; Murphy, 2000a; 2000b; Kiernan, 2004). Globally, attitudes toward pre- and non-marital cohabitation have become more ambivalent and less unaccepting of non-traditional living arrangements in general, and cohabitation in particular (Thornton, 1989). For example, Thornton’s research identifies a clear trajectory of changing attitudes towards cohabitation in the US, with rapid changes in the 1960s and 1970s, slowing down in the 1980s. Normative differences in attitudes towards cohabitation have been studied in a variety of comparative settings, particularly in the US (Carter, 1993; Oropesa, 1996; Thornton, 1989; Sweet and Bumpass, 1992; Thornton and Young-DeMarco, 2001; Nock, 1998; Heuveline and Timberlake, 2004; Axinn and Thornton, 2000; Thornton, 1995), and elsewhere such as Sweden (Bernhardt, 2004; Trost, 1978), Europe (Kiernan 2004), the UK (Haskey, 2001; Barlow *et al.*, 2001), and Poland (Kwak, 1996; Mynarska and Bernardi, 2007). An increase in the acceptability of cohabitation can reasonably be interpreted as evidence for weakening of the social norms surrounding marriage, referred to

variously as the deinstitutionalisation of marriage (Cherlin, 1994), *démariage* (Théry, 1993) and the disestablishment of marriage (Coontz, 2004, quoting Cott).

Responses to normative questions are grounded in a specific time and context. Because cohabitation (and other forms of intimate relationship) are dynamic – a moving target, responses to questions about the acceptability of cohabitation posed in the 1980s potentially have different meanings than responses to questions posed in the twenty-first century, even if the question wording and response categories are exactly the same. In Britain, two key sources of population-level attitudinal data about cohabitation are the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) and British Social Attitudes Survey (BSA). The data reported here update and expand upon Haskey's (2001) review of population-level attitudes towards cohabitation in Britain.

The BHPS has asked a series of repeated self-completion questions about attitudes towards cohabitation using Likert-scale responses. It is important to note that the phrasing of the self-completion questions changed at Wave 8 (1998). Previous waves (1992, 1994, 1996) used the statement "*Living together outside of marriage is always wrong*". Subsequent waves (1998-2004) used the statement "*It is alright for people to live together even if they have no interest in considering marriage*". The BHPS also includes a separate youth questionnaire for all household members aged 11-15 years (inclusive), incorporating the repeated statement response "*Living together outside of marriage is always wrong*". Interestingly, whilst this phrasing was changed for adult BHPS respondents, it has remained constant for youth respondents.

The annual cross-sectional BSA survey has included a combination of repeat and *ad hoc*² questions about attitudes to cohabitation (Haskey, 2001; Barlow, 2004). This review focuses on repeat elements, namely attitude responses to statements³ in 1989, 1994, 2000 and 2002 (*Do you agree or disagree? It is a good idea for a couple who intend to get married to live together first*" "*Do you agree or disagree? It is all right for a couple to live together without intending to get married.*" "*Do you agree or disagree? People who want children ought to get married*"). Table 7.1 summarises normative data relating to cohabitation in the BHPS (1992-2004). More than two thirds of respondents have reported

² BSA ad hoc questions on attitudes towards cohabitation are as follows: 1986 "*Do you agree or disagree? As a society we ought to do more to safeguard the institution of marriage*". 1986 "*Do you agree or disagree? Most people nowadays take marriage too lightly*". 1989 "*Do you agree or disagree? Personal freedom is more important than the companionship of marriage*". 1989 "*If you were advising a young (wo)man, which if the following ways would you recommend? Live alone with no partner /Live with a partner and not marry / Live with a partner and then marry/ Marry first*". 1989 and 1994 "*Do you agree or disagree? The main advantage of marriage is that it gives financial security*". 1994 "*Imagine an unmarried couple who decide to have a child, but do not marry? What would your general opinion be?*". 2000 "*Many people who live together without getting married are just scared of commitment*". 2000 "*There is no point getting married - it's only a piece of paper*".

³ "

agreement with the statement *“It is alright for people to live together even if they have no interest in considering marriage”* in each of four successive waves.

Table 7.1: Percentage distribution of respondents’ attitudes to cohabitation in general, 1992-2004

	<i>“Living together outside of marriage is always wrong”</i>			<i>“It is alright for people to live together even if they have no interest in considering marriage”</i>			
	1992	1994	1996	1998	2000	2002	2004
Strongly agree/Agree	16.7	14.7	14.1	66.4	69.7	68.4	69.4
Neither agree nor disagree	30	28.9	28.5	21.4	19.5	20.3	20
Strong disagree/Disagree	53.3	56.4	57.4	12.2	10.8	11.3	10.6
n	9,284	8,940	9,027	10,427	14,799	15,215	14,341

Note the phrasing of the self-completion questions changed at Wave 8 (1998).

Previous waves (2,4,6) used the statement *“Living together outside of marriage is always wrong”*. Subsequent waves (8,10,12,14) used the statement *“It is alright for people to live together even if they have no interest in considering marriage”*.

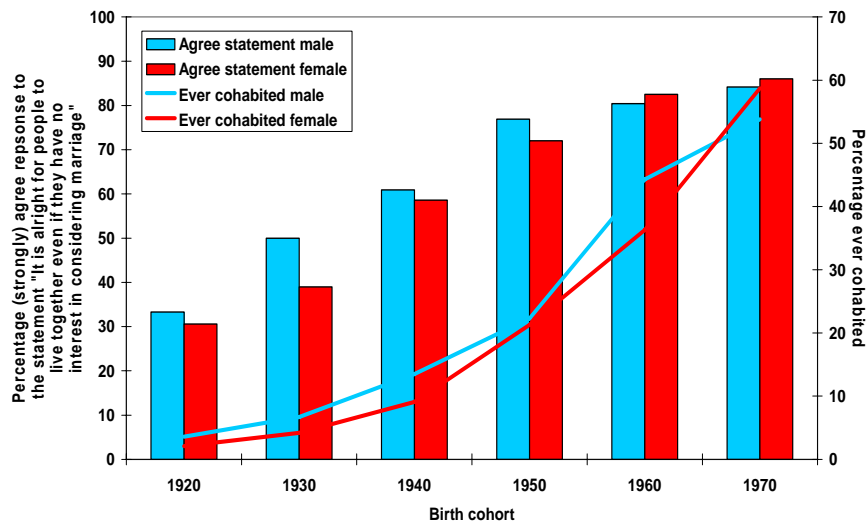
n = valid cases, excluding missing or don’t know responses.

Source: BHPS 1992-2004 documentation and questionnaires:

<http://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/ulsc/bhps/doc/volb/indexes/subjcat20.php#Values,%20Opinions%20and%20Attitudes>
 Accessed 30/06/08

Disaggregating responses to statements about cohabitation by birth cohort, a clear generational pattern emerges, with older cohorts much less likely to approve of non-marital cohabitation relative to younger cohorts. This is mirrored by trends in reported ever-cohabitation by birth cohort. Less than 3 per cent of respondents born in the 1920s reported ever having cohabited, compared with 57 per cent of respondents born in the 1970s. Men appear to have slightly more accepting attitudes towards cohabitation, although this differential is negligible for more recent birth cohorts (Figure 7.1).

Percentage distribution of attitudes towards, and experience of, cohabitation, by birth cohort and sex, BHPS, 2004



Source: BHPS, 2004

Figure 7.1: Distribution of attitudes towards, and experience of, cohabitation, by birth cohort and sex, 1920-1970

Individuals who have ever-cohabited are significantly ($p < 0.000$) more likely to report approving attitudes towards cohabitation, with just 1.7 per cent of ever-cohabiting respondents disagreeing with the statement “*It is alright for people to live together even if they have no interest in considering marriage*”. This significant relationship holds for all birth cohorts. It is possible to examine whether an individual’s attitude towards cohabitation in general changes over the six year interval between the first (1998) and most recent (2004) waves including attitudinal statements on non-marital cohabitation. Normative attitudes reported in the BHPS are relatively stable. Nearly three quarters (74 per cent) of respondents report the same broad response in both 1998 and 2004. Of those that change their broad response category over the period, the majority shift towards a more accepting attitude over time.

Successive generations tend to have less traditional attitudes when compared with preceding generations, a function of both generation succession and intra-generational change (Scott *et al.*, 1996). Adolescents’ attitudes provide insight into the probable trajectory of normative attitudes and behaviours in the near future. The attitudes of adolescents are important for determining future choices (Burt and Scott, 2002; Manning *et al.*, 2007), with young adults who approve of cohabitation more likely to enter into a cohabiting relationship (Axinn and Thornton, 1993). Successive BHPS waves (1994, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2005) asked young people aged 11-15 years their attitude toward the statement “*Living together outside of marriage is always wrong*”. Treating the data as cross-sectional for descriptive purposes, the broad pattern appears to be one of increasing ambivalence, with nearly one third of respondents neither agreeing nor disagreeing with the statement in 2005 (Table 7.2).

Table 7.2: Percentage distribution of youths aged 11-15 years (inclusive) response to the question statement “Living together outside of marriage is always wrong”

	Living together outside of marriage is always wrong				
	1994	1999	2000	2001	2005
Strongly agree/Agree	19.0	12.8	11.9	10.6	13.3
Neither agree nor disagree	21.2	27.9	26.7	23.5	30.8
Strong disagree/Disagree	59.8	59.3	61.4	65.9	55.9
n	759	929	1,409	1,404	1,401

n = valid cases, excluding missing or don't know responses.

Source: BHPS 1994-2005 documentation and questionnaires:

<http://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/ulsc/bhps/doc/volb/indexes/subjcat20.php#Values,%20pinions%20and%20Attitudes>.

When using panel data to examine normative attitudes, it is useful to try to disentangle whether observed changes in attitudes develop because the observed individuals have adopted new attitudes or because new individuals with different attitudes have entered the population. For example, the five year gap between the 1994 and 1999 rounds of the youth questions on cohabitation meant that very few of those interviewed in 1994 would have still been eligible for interview in 1999. By contrast, repeat of the questions in successive years (1999, 2000, 2001) would have repeatedly captured a proportion of the population who remained within the 11-15 age group. The BSA has asked a set of questions about attitudes towards cohabitation in subsequent survey years (1994, 1998, 2000, 2002). The proportion of individuals expressing negative views about cohabitation, and its relation to marriage, has declined across all age groups.



Source: BSA

Figure 7.2: Percentage distribution, by age group⁴, of respondents who disagree, or strongly disagree, with statements about cohabitation and marriage, 1994 and 2002

⁴ Age at time of interview.

Questions about attitudes towards cohabitation are just one element of the battery of attitudinal questions contained in surveys such as the BSA. For example, the BSA has asked questions annually about non-marital (pre- and extra-) sexual relationships since 1983. It is important to note that attitudes of increased acceptance of cohabitation have changed more rapidly than attitudes towards other aspects of intimate relationships such as extra-marital sex and same-sex relationships. As such, cohabitation has emerged as an aspect of intimate relationships that has come to be regarded differently (perhaps separately?) from other indicators of sexual freedom (Murphy, 2000; Reynolds and Mansfield, 1999). Acceptance of cohabitation is likely to increase in the future, a function of the social processes of cohort replacement, socialisation and social diffusion (Seltzer, 2004).

7.2.2 Individual attitudes, expectations and outcomes

In the USA, a limited number of studies have examined the effects of cohabitators' own assessments of their relationship on union outcomes. Brown (2000) combines both relationship assessments (positive versus negative) and expectations. Research elsewhere has considered the relationship between relationship expectations and outcomes. For example, Manning and Smock (1995) found that cohabiting couples that express an intention to marry are four times more likely to marry compared with couples with no reported plans to marry. Reports of plans or expectations to marry by cohabiters can be interpreted as indicative of cohabiting unions representing a transitional state leading to marriage. Relationship expectations cannot be used as proxy indicators of relationship 'quality'. For example, an expectation of relationship transition to marriage might be an expression of a perceived absence of alternatives to the current cohabiting relationship. Similarly, an expectation of splitting up may be an expectation based on externalities such as forthcoming university attendance in another part of the country.

Much research compares cohabitation to marriage, and compared to married couples, cohabiting couples differ in several distinct ways (Bachrach *et al.*, 2000) including higher rates of union instability (Waite and Gallagher, 2000; Ermisch and Francesconi, 1996; Bouchard, 2006). It is important to note, however, that much of the earlier research into the dissolution of cohabiting versus married partnerships used data on unions from the 1970s and early 1980s when cohabitation was much rarer (de Vaus *et al.*, 2005). The influence of cohabitation has been examined on a wide range of outcomes, and is associated with: relationship dissatisfaction (DeMaris and Leslie, 1984); higher levels of conflict and violence (Thomson and Colella, 1992; Forste 2002, Kenney and McLanahan 2006); lower quality of partner communication (Cohan and Kleinbaum, 2002); lower levels of sexual exclusivity (Forste and Tanfer, 1996), greater dependency on family of origin (Rindfuss and VanDen Heuvel, 1990); and lower relationship quality (Brown and Booth, 1996).

Relationship expectation reports are cross-sectional, and it might be that an individual entered into a cohabiting relationship with no expectations of marriage, but that these expectations changed over time. The absence of expectations to marry can represent one of three positions: firstly, an ideological position that opposes marriage; secondly, an assessment that their current partner is not marriage material, but an absence of an ideological opposition to marriage *per se*; thirdly, they have yet to transition to thinking about marriage. The purpose of looking at relationship expectations is to throw some light on whether cohabitation represents an alternative to marriage, or an integral component of the transition to marriage. For example, older cohabitators tend to be more likely to report their relationship as an alternative to marriage, whereas younger cohabitators are more likely to report cohabitation as a precursor to marriage (King, 2005). It is important to analyse gendered relationship expectations and attitudes. Considerable research into the gendered aspects of marriage has revealed ‘his’ and ‘her’ marriages, first identified by Bernard and Bernard (1982) and subsequently Fowers (1991), and it is reasonable to hypothesise that there are ‘his’ and ‘her’ cohabitations.

7.3 ANALYSES

7.3.1 Data

This research uses data from the BHPS to analyse individuals’ relationship expectations and subsequent reported relationship behaviour (University of Essex, 2006). It deals with the relationship intentions of those individuals who report a non-marital cohabiting partner. How do cohabiting relationship expectations differ by age, sex, previous relationship history and parenthood? For people in cohabiting relationships, how do attitudes towards cohabitation differ by age, sex, previous relationship history and parenthood? Do individuals achieve their relationship expectations? How are cohabiting couples’ relationship expectations associated with relationship outcomes (marriage, separation, continued cohabitation)?

Begun in 1991, the BHPS surveys approximately 5,000 households annually. In the eighth wave, in 1998, and again in the thirteenth wave, in 2003, individuals aged 16 and above who were in cohabiting relationships were asked about their expectations of this cohabiting relationship. They were shown a card with a range of responses and asked to “*read out the number of the statement which you feel applies most closely to your current relationship*”. The responses included: “*Planning to marry*”, “*Probably get married*”, “*Just live together*”, “*No thought to the future*”, “*Don’t know*” and “*Other*”. A supplementary question was asked of those respondents who replied “*Don’t know*” or “*Just live together*”. The supplementary question also used a showcard, and asked for a response to the statement “*how likely it is that you will ever get married (or remarried) to anyone in*

the future?". The responses included: "Very likely", "Likely", "Unlikely", "Very unlikely" and "Don't know".

Cohabiting respondents were asked a series of questions about their perceptions about cohabitation in general. It is important to note that this series of questions did not explicitly ask respondents to reflect upon their own current cohabiting relationship, but the questions did explicitly compare cohabiting relationships to marriage, rather than to any other form of union. The questions were: "Do you think there are any advantages in living as a couple, rather than being married?" and "Do you think there are any disadvantages in living as a couple, rather than being married?". If a respondent answered yes to either of these questions, they were prompted for open ended responses (up to two mentions) with the question "What do you think are the (dis)advantages of living as a couple?"

Also in the eighth wave, in 1998, and again in the thirteenth wave, in 2003, individuals aged 16 and above were asked "Do you have a steady relationship with a male or female friend whom you think of as your 'partner', even though you are not living together?". Respondents that reported such a partner were then asked their intentions about this relationship, based on showcard responses to the question "Please look at this card and read out the number of the statement you feel applies most closely to this relationship?", with responses of "Expect to marry", "Expect to cohabit", "No plans to marry or cohabit" and "Don't know". For those individuals who reported a partner, but did not report an expectation of marriage or cohabitation with this partner, a supplementary showcard response question was asked "Can you please look at this card and tell me how likely it is that you will ever get married or remarried to anyone in the future?", with responses of "Very likely", "Likely", "Unlikely", "Very unlikely" and "Don't know". Because the BHPS only collects data from coresidential members of a household, data and analyses on non-co-residential partners are restricted to those individuals who are members of the BHPS sample, and not their partners. Analyses presented here use the combined fertility and relationship histories (Ermisch, 2006).

7.3.2 Descriptive overview

Cohabitation is heterogeneous, involving pre-, intra- and post-marital cohabiting relationships. For women and men born in the 1970s, 72 and 75 per cent, respectively, of first unions were cohabiting. The normative status of cohabitation as a first type of union is underlined by examining the relatively small numbers of individuals born in the 1980s and aged 16 and over included in the BHPS. Of those members of this most recent cohort who have entered live-in unions (n = 470), 91 per cent report cohabitation as the first type of union, underlining the primacy of cohabitation as first union (Berthoud 2000).

Table 7.3: Percentage distribution of respondents reporting a cohabiting relationship, by sex, 1998 and 2003

	1998 n = 1,187		2003 n = 1,511	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Current legal marital status				
- Married	1.2	1.9	1.1	0.5
- Separated	3.2	3.2	3.7	1.9
- Divorced	24.0	25.6	22.9	25.8
- Widowed	1.4	2.3	1.2	2.3
- Never married	70.1	67.0	71.0	69.5
Parent	32.0	40.8	40.5	50.8
Length of cohabiting relationship at interview				
- < 6 months	15.6	16.4	6.9	8.8
- 6-12 months	13.1	13.8	10.7	9.5
- 1-2 years	18.2	16.4	17.2	17.9
- 2-5 years	31.3	29.4	29.8	30.4
- > 5 years	21.8	23.9	35.4	33.6

Source: BHPS, 1998 and 2003, author's analysis

In terms of the characteristics of individual cohabiting couples, more than half (55.1 per cent) of all cohabiting relationships in 2003 where neither partner had been previously married, involved both partners born in the 1970s.

7.3.3 Cohabiting relationship: attitudes

Cohabiting relationship attitudes and expectations were collected in both 1998 and 2003. When examining whether relationship expectations are achieved, data are used from the 1998 wave forwards to the most recent interview for each individual. The short time span between the 2003 wave of relationship expectation data and the most recent published wave of the BHPS (2005) precludes detailed analysis of relationship outcomes from the 2003 wave forwards.

Table 7.4: Percentage distribution of attitudes about cohabitation, currently cohabiting respondents, 1998 and 2003

	1998 n=1,115	2003 n=1,514
Advantages in living as a couple	40.0	32.0
First mentioned advantage ¹		
- trial marriage	30.7	23.6
- no legal ties	29.8	24.5
- improves relationship	5.2	3.6
- previous bad marriage	1.6	2.7
- personal independence	10.0	10.9
- financial advantage	16.1	22.2
- companionship	2.0	3.1
- prefer cohabitation	1.4	1.3
- other	3.2	8.2
Disadvantages in living as couple	26.7	23.6
First mentioned disadvantage ²		
- financial insecurity	39.0	30.4
- no legal status	16.6	32.1
- effects on children	5.4	6.2
- lack of commitment	15.6	9.6
- social stigma	16.3	11.3
- other	7.1	10.4

¹ Second mentioned advantages were collected in both 1998 and 2003, but have not been included in analyses here due to the relatively small numbers (n = 44, n = 33, respectively) reporting a second advantage.

² Second mentioned disadvantages were collected in both 1998 and 2003, but have not been included in analyses here due to the relatively small numbers (n = 16, n = 44, respectively) reporting a second disadvantage.

Source: BHPS, 1998 and 2003, author's analysis.

An individual can report both advantages and disadvantages of cohabitation when compared to marriage, and the two are not mutually exclusive. In 1998 and 2003 the majority of cohabiting respondents reported neither an advantage nor a disadvantage (47 and 55 per cent respectively) (Table 7.4). In 2003 less than one third of individuals in cohabiting relationships reported that there was an advantage to living in a cohabiting relationship when compared to marriage. Responses from never-married individuals are based on perceptions about marriage, rather than direct experience of it. Overall, there is no significant relationship between sex and whether an individual reports an advantage to cohabitation compared to marriage. However, respondents who are parents are significantly (1998 $p < 0.005$, 2003 $p < 0.000$) less likely to report advantages of cohabitation compared to non-parents. Examining in detail the four most commonly reported advantages of cohabitation (trial marriage, no legal ties, personal independence and financial advantage), there are no significant differences by sex. Parenthood status is significantly related (1998 $p < 0.001$; 2003 $p < 0.005$), with non-parents more likely to report trial marriage, and parents more likely to report personal independence and the absence of legal ties as advantages of cohabitation.

Approximately one quarter of respondents report disadvantages in living as couple in both 1998 and 2003, with women significantly more likely to report disadvantages compared to men if they had a previous live-in relationship ($p<0.000$) or were a parent ($p<0.05$). For the subset of individuals whose cohabiting relationships extended across the 1998 and 2003 interviews ($n=144$), it is possible to examine the consistency of responses over time. Of those individuals reporting attitudes on the same cohabiting union in 1998 and 2003 ($n=132$), overall attitudes are fairly consistent, reporting the same response to whether there are and advantages or disadvantages (62.1 and 68.9 per cent) to cohabitation. This suggests that those individuals in long duration cohabiting relationships have well- established attitudes towards their union. Substantial proportions of never-married, currently cohabiting respondents with no expectation of marriage for the current cohabiting relationship, report that they are unlikely or very unlikely to ever marry, with 67.8 and 65.8 per cent of men and women, respectively, reporting this expectation (Table 7.5).

Table 7.5: Percentage distribution of responses to the statement “How likely it is that you will ever get married to anyone in the future?”, by currently cohabiting, never married respondents with no plans to marry their current partner, by sex, 1998 and 2003

	1998 n = 268		2003 n = 401	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Don't know	11.6	8.6	10.2	6.8
Very likely	4.7	5.8	3.1	3.4
Likely	24.0	28.8	18.9	23.9
Unlikely	25.6	38.8	40.8	42.9
Very unlikely	34.1	18.0	27.0	22.9

Source: BHPS, 1998 and 2003, author's analysis

The percentage of those respondents who reported no plans to marry in 1998, and thought it was (very) unlikely they would ever marry, did actually go on to marry (18.5 per cent split up and 71.4 per cent% were still cohabiting at their most recent interview).

7.3.4 Cohabiting relationships: expectations

If cohabitation is part of the marriage process, then one might reasonably expect individuals to respond that they have plans to marry the longer they have cohabited. For cohabiting individuals interviewed in 2003, the relationship between the duration of the cohabiting relationship is significantly ($p<0.000$) associated with relationship intentions (Table 7.6).

Table 7.6: Percentage distribution of future relationship expectations, by duration of current cohabiting relationship, 2003

		Future of current cohabiting relationship		
		Plan to marry	Probably marry	Live together
Duration of current cohabiting relationship	< 1 year	30.5	38.0	31.6
	1-2 years	29.9	44.4	25.7
	2-5 years	19.8	48.5	31.7
	> 5 years	9.2	33.4	57.4

n = 1,1015 respondents

Source: BHPS, 2003, author's analysis

The majority of individuals in what might be described as long-term cohabiting relationships do not report an expectation of marriage, but of continued cohabitation. The BHPS does not collect information on whether a couple has become engaged – in and of itself not a formal or binding event – but it is reasonable to infer that individuals with relatively short-lived cohabiting relationships have moved in because a marriage is already planned. Individuals who had a prior live-in relationship (whether married or cohabiting) are significantly ($p < 0.000$ for both 1998 and 2003) more likely to report an intention to continue cohabiting compared with individuals who have not had a prior live-in relationship.

Table 7.7: Distribution of expectations by prior relationship history, 1993 and 2003

Future of current cohabiting relationship	1998 (n = 1,007)		2003 (n = 1,343)	
	No previous live-in relationship	Prior live-in relationship	No previous live-in relationship	Prior live-in relationship
Planning to marry	24.7	13.3	22.7	16.9
Probably marry	46.8	37.6	47.2	33.7
Live together	28.5	49.0	30.1	49.4

Source: BHPS, 1998 and 2003, author's analysis

7.3.4 Cohabiting relationships: outcomes and expectations

Table 7.8 shows the distribution of outcomes of cohabiting relationships identified in 1998. For never-married, childless respondents interviewed in 1998, the subsequent birth of a child within the relationship is significantly ($p < 0.05$) associated with the relationship outcome, with subsequent parents more likely to continue to cohabit and less likely to marry compared to non-parents.

Table 7.8: Percentage distribution of relationship outcomes, for cohabiting unions identified in 1998.

	Subsequent outcome		
	Split up	Marry	Continue to cohabit
All	16.6	30.3	53.1
Never married	17.3	31.2	51.5
Ever-married	15.1	28.4	56.5

Source: BHPS, 1998 and 2003, author's analysis

What proportions of individuals achieve their relationship expectations? Based on responses to questions about cohabiting relationships in 1998, it is possible to examine the outcome of those relationship to the most recent interview (Table 7.9).

Table 7.9: Percentage distribution of outcome of cohabiting relationships by relationship expectations expressed in 1998

Outcome to date	Future of current relationship				
	Plan to marry	Probably marry	Live together	No thought to future	Do not know
Split up	0.9	7.0	6.6	1.3	0.1
Marry	10.7	13.6	4.8	0.6	0.1
Continue to cohabit	4.2	20.9	23.9	3.7	1.5

Source: BHPS, 1998 and 2003, author's analysis

For those respondents that reported a 'definite' expectation (plan to marry/probably marry/continue to cohabit), there is a highly

significant ($p < 0.000$) relationship between expectation and outcome, for both men and women and for both parents and non-parents at the time of interview. More than two thirds (67.9 per cent) of those individuals who reported that they planned to marry their cohabiting partner then went on to marry that partner.

In order to examine concordance and discordance of relationship expectations between men and women, we select couples where both partners provided full responses to questions about the advantages and disadvantages of cohabitation, and their expectations of the current cohabiting relationship (Table 7.10). Analyses here are restricted to those individuals reporting on cohabiting unions which represented their first ever live-in relationship. Because analyses are based on fully responding couples, the responses may be biased for homogeneity of response (Berrington, 2004). It is possible to identify whether anyone else was present during the BHPS interview, but interviewers report very low levels of influence of third parties when they are present during interview⁵.

Table 7.10: Percentage distribution of couple concordance on attitudes towards cohabitation

	1998 n=168 couples	2003 n=231 couples
	Couple concordant %	Couple concordant %
Advantages	65.4	64.9
Disadvantages	63.9	74.0

Source: BHPS, 1998 and 2003, author's analysis

Levels of concordance (either both report “Yes” or both report “No”) within couples are high, with most concordance for “No” responses to questions about disadvantages and advantages of cohabitation when compared with marriage. Where both partners report an advantage of cohabitation over marriage, the most common concordant response is as a trial marriage, in both 1998 and 2003 (32.4 and 26.5 per cent of couples). Levels of agreement within couples about specific disadvantages of cohabitation are much lower, although financial insecurity is the most commonly mentioned where both partners report a disadvantage.

In terms of future expectations about their current cohabiting union, there are high levels of concordance within couples. Of course, concordance does not equal achievement of these desires, concordant couples may still be disappointed in the future.

Table 7.11: Couple relationship expectations, currently cohabiting couples, 1998 and 2003

⁵ For example, in 1998, of 187 interviews of currently cohabiting couples, 108 (58 per cent) record a third party as being present. 96 of these 108 interviews (89 per cent) are coded as no influence exerted by the third party.

Men		1998 n = 137 couples			2003 n = 196 couples		
		Women			Women		
		Planning to marry	Probably get married	Just live together	Planning to marry	Probably get married	Just live together
Planning to marry	20.4	8.0	0.7	19.9	5.1	1.0	
Probably get married	3.6	43.8	5.8	3.6	37.8	10.7	
Just live together	0	5.8	11.7	0	4.6	17.3	

Source: BHPS, 1998 and 2003, author's analysis

For those cohabiting couples interviewed in 1998, it is possible to examine their relationship outcomes by the date of their last interview (Table 7.11). 81.5 per cent of those couples who agreed in 1998 that they planned to marry did go on to marry, whereas only 39.5 per cent of those couples who agreed they would probably get married went on to convert their relationship to a marriage. Three fifths of couples who agreed in 1998 that they would continue to cohabit were still cohabiting at their most recent interview wave in the BHPS.

7.4 DISCUSSION

The data reported here underline the heterogeneity of cohabitation, a heterogeneity that raises challenges for researchers to make generalisations about the processes that underlie it, the forms it takes, and the intentions that people report.

In this study the majority of cohabitators assert that they will marry their partner (including both “*Plan to marry*” and “*Probably marry*”), in keeping with US analyses (Bumpass and Sweet, 1989; Carlson *et al.*, 2004; Manning and Smock, 2002). Such responses would imply that cohabitation is one element of the process of marriage, and that cohabitation represents a considered step on the pathway to marriage. However, what we cannot tell is whether these intentions to marry preceded becoming a co-residential couple, or whether they emerged as a result of having co-resided. Recent work suggests that many (if not most) cohabiting couples ‘slide’ rather than ‘decide’ into a co-residential cohabiting relationship (Stanley *et al.*, 2006), echoing findings from Lindsay’s (2000) work in Australia.

Current cohabitators who have a previous live-in relationship and are already parents are more likely to report an expectation of cohabitation rather than marriage, echoing work in the US (Bumpass, Sweet, and Cherlin 1991). Smart and Stevens’ (2000) study of cohabiting families in Britain reports that some cohabiting mothers prefer to continue cohabiting rather than marry a man whom they were uncertain they could rely on for support or to enter into single parenthood. The reported advantages and disadvantages of

cohabitation *relative to marriage* among current cohabiters in the BHPS suggest that, at least for never-married respondents, assessing compatibility through a 'trial marriage', is important. King and Scott's (2005) work in the US using the National Survey of Families and Households, reports that compatibility assessment by younger cohabiters was a key reason for cohabitation.

The wording of survey questions such as those included in the BHPS tend to pose statements about cohabitation *relative to marriage*. This standpoint reflects much of the broader academic endeavour surrounding cohabitation, which has debated whether cohabitation is a prelude to marriage, or whether it is an alternative to marriage. A body of work has suggested, however, that a more productive line of enquiry might be to view cohabitation as an alternative to being single (Rindfuss and VandenHeuvel, 1990) and/or a progression of an intimate non-co-residential relationship (Casper and Bianchi 2002; McGinnis, 2003). It is also quite possible that each rationale may operate at different points over time for an individual.

Datasets, including the BHPS, rarely collect information on engagements, which affect the entering into, and dissolution of, cohabiting unions. If couples are cohabiting as a result of engagement with an intention to marry, then engagement-driven cohabitation explains in part both the rise in cohabitation and delays in marriage. Such compositional shifts (Oppenheimer, 2003) in cohabitation, further complicate its study. One possible reason, rarely explored, for reported intentions not to convert a cohabiting union into a marital union, is that of the costs of a wedding (Kravdal, 1999). Whilst a marriage in England and Wales costs approximately £100 in England, the cost of a wedding can run to tens of thousands of pounds, and for many people, the marriage and the wedding are indivisible as processes (Otnes and Pleck, 2003). Such cost-related concerns can become more sharply focused if one or both of the cohabiting partners is a parent, notwithstanding other economic needs identified as prerequisite to marriage (Gibson-Davis *et al.*, 2005).

Future research need to widen the pool of potential couples available to enter into a co-residential union, whether cohabiting or married, and their relationship intentions. 'Living-apart-together' (LAT) relationships, in which two partners regard themselves as a couple but do not cohabit, have recently been recognised in the social science literature (Levin and Trost, 1999; Bawin-Legros and Gauthier, 2001; Karlsson and Borell, 2002; Borell and Karlsson, 2003; Milan and Peters, 2003; Levin, 2004; de Jong Gierveld, 2004; Haskey, 2005; Lewis and Haskey, 2006) as an emergent form of living arrangement. It is estimated that there are some two million men and women in Great Britain who report having a partner who lives in another household (Haskey, 2005). The BHPS has collected information from sample members on non-co-residential partners, but does not collect detailed information from or about these non-co-residential partners. As people's living arrangements and households become smaller and more complex, their commitments and networks outside of the traditional 'household' tend to become greater, mean that social

science research needs to better understand and reflect non-household-based definitions and sources of information (ESRC, 2006).

There is a need for more finely grained qualitative research into the processes underlying cohabiting unions, including their formation and dissolution. The vast majority of research on cohabitation is based in the U.S. and is quantitative (Lewis, 2001). Large-scale, representative, quantitative datasets such as the BHPS give us some clues as to potential avenues for further investigation. However, they cannot fully account for the rapidly changing role of cohabitation in contemporary society. There is an emergent body of qualitative research into cohabitation, including its processes and meaning (Manning and Smock, 2005; Sassler, 2004; Lindsay, 2000). There is a need to better understand what trends in cohabitation in particular, and living arrangements in general, actually signify (Oppenheimer, 2003). Cohabitation has emerged relatively recently and rapidly as a normative behaviour in many settings, and is therefore in a situation of flux and change (Seltzer, 2000). The reasons underlying decisions (whether articulated explicitly or otherwise) to cohabit may, therefore, also be subject to rapid change, making cohabitation very much a moving target to study.

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