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## Marriage and Cohabitation

**Authors:** Arland Thornton, William G. Axinn and Yu Xie

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Although most Americans (around 90%) eventually marry, more and more are delaying marriage and cohabiting before marrying. A lot is known about the differences between these two kinds of relationships, for example, cohabitation tends to be unstable, have lower levels of commitment, and end sooner than marriage. However, little is known about how young couples decide between cohabiting and marrying. Moreover, we have many questions about how parental characteristics of the couples and how the young couple's own beliefs and values influence the decision to make the transition from dating to living together. These are the topics of discussion in and the main contribution of the book "Marriage and Cohabitation" by Arland Thornton, William G. Axinn, and Yu Xie.

The authors discuss individual and familial forces that influence the formation of marital and cohabiting unions in young adulthood – the factors that shape the entrance into unions, the selection between cohabitation and marriage, and the transformation of cohabiting unions into marriage. These factors include family characteristics, such as family organization, family immigration and farm background, parental socio-economic status, religion, maternal marital and childbearing experiences, as well as the young adult's own characteristics, such as sexual experience before age 18, religious attitudes at age 18, and education and expected earnings after age 18.

The authors take two different approaches. First, they consider union formation as an intergenerational process that involves, in direct and indirect ways, a range of influences from parents and even grandparents (e.g. grandmother's religion in chapter 8). Second, they consider union formation as a life-cycle process and an important part of the transition to adulthood. Although many researchers suggest that young adulthood is a time of relatively unstable attitudes, the authors argue that attitudes held during this time are particularly likely to have a substantial influence on family formation behavior and are durable because it is a period of relatively abundant opportunities. Therefore, individuals are likely to form their attitudes and intentions about one particular activity in comparison to alternatives to that activity, for example, delaying

marriage in order to invest in more education. In addition, decisions made during the transition to adulthood have a particularly long-lasting influence on the remainder of the life course because they set individuals on paths that are sometimes difficult to change (p.13).

The use of both approaches enriches the debate in a unique way. It brings to the discussion parental characteristics at different moments of the young adult's lives, so not only are events during adolescence important for making decisions about whether to cohabit or marry, but also events that happened even before they were born, such as mother's premarital pregnancy (chapter 5) and whether the parents had a religious wedding ceremony (chapter 8 ). The life course perspective enriches the debate in the analysis of competing activities, such as education and marriage. Further, the authors make an important methodological contribution by using path analysis to explore how the two perspectives are linked via the connection between the characteristics of parents and the values and beliefs of their children (or young adults).

The data are from the Intergenerational Panel Study Children (IPS), a long-term panel study of 1,000 white parents and children in the Detroit Metropolitan area. The sample was drawn from births in the summer of 1961. The study extends over a 31 year period from 1962 to 1993. The data were gathered in eight interviews with the mothers (1962(2), 1963, 1966, 1977, 1980, 1985, 1993) and three interviews with the children born in 1961 (1980, 1985, and 1993). Some of the limitations of the data, and consequently of the study, are the fact that the data are only for white people and are limited to only one cohort , which precludes the analysis of racial differences, trends, and changes over time. The data are not nationally representative. In addition, only mothers were interviewed, so the authors infer that the mother's values and beliefs correspond to the family's value set, without any information about the father. In order to address the racial issues the authors discuss their results in the context of the current literature and make some considerations about racial differences. The big advantage of the study is the fact that cohabitation emerged as a significant phenomenon among people born around 1950 and reached a kind of equilibrium of acceptance and occurrence for this 1961 birth cohort (as seen in the book and in Cherlin, 2009).

The main statistical method they used is path analysis, in which the authors estimate the total, direct, and indirect effects of 45 variables on cohabitation and marriage outcomes. The authors carefully present the results for different sets of variables in separate chapters, which are organized to echo the sequence of events in the life course. In Appendix A, they present a model that includes all variables, in order to show that when controlling for more variables the key results are statistically significant. In the empirical chapters of the book (parts II and III) an introduction and theoretical background is followed by an empirical analysis and then a summary of results (along with some considerations about racial differences and historical perspective).

The main messages from the book can be summarized as follows. First, the intergenerational processes, widely studied in educational and occupational attainment processes, are important for union formation and decision between marriage and cohabitation. Parental background influences young adult decisions in a variety of ways (direct and indirect), and events that happened before birth, during childhood, and during adolescence are all important. The second lesson refers to the life-cycle approach and states that young adult's characteristics, such as values, beliefs, courtship experiences during adolescence and expectations about education and earnings are important to be considered when analyzing decisions about whether to marry or cohabit

Finally, it is worth mentioning that, even though the analysis centers on a specific place, time and cohort, the results are important to theoretical explanations that attempt to explain how and why individuals enter into co-residential unions and the choice between cohabitation and marriage.

Therefore, the book is a must read for family researchers. The authors left many open questions for curious and creative social researchers to address, especially how present and future generations are and will respond to the many changes that we are experiencing, and whether parental characteristics will continue being important. One consideration that is important to highlight is the fact that cohorts that came after 1961 are experiencing greater marital disruption. Marital disruption leads to more children living in one adult household and/or with stepparents (because of remarriage). This family arrangement makes intergenerational processes more difficult to analyze (see Beller, 2009 and Biblarz and Raftery, 1993).

## **References**

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