Serial Cohabitation: Baby Boomers to Millennials

DRAFT

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SERIAL COHABITATION: BABY BOOMERS to MILLENNIALS

The new relationship landscape for young adults shows that cohabitation has usurped marriage. The majority of young adult women, 65%, have cohabited while only a minority has married (Manning and Stykes, 2015). On average, women marry around age 27, yet they are forming cohabiting unions in their early twenties (age 22) (Manning, Brown, and Payne, 2014; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2015). Most young adults have experienced a cohabiting union, and these unions are increasingly likely to end in dissolution, as opposed to resulting in marriage (Guzzo, 2014; Lamidi, Manning, and Brown, 2015; Manning and Stykes, 2015). Delaying marriage and experiencing the increased risk of their first cohabiting union dissolving means that young adults have more opportunities to experience a second or third cohabiting union. However, most research has focused solely on first cohabiting unions, and there are only a handful of recent papers on serial cohabitation (e.g., Lichter, Sassler, and Turner, 2010; Cohen and Manning, 2010; Vespa, 2014).

Drawing on the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), we provide an update to prior studies and showcase the increase of serial cohabitation across birth cohorts. Using several cross-sectional surveys of the NSFG: Cycle 6 (2002), 2006-2010, and 2011-2013, we provide a snapshot of union experiences for women ages 16-28 during the early 1960s (the late Baby Boom cohort) and through the early 1980s (the early Millennial cohort). Theoretically, examining different generations is fruitful for comparing union experiences, as it allows for the comparison of cultural shifts over time to be situated within a framework of two distinct birth cohorts characterized by their own historical experiences and circumstances (Eyerman and Turner, 1998). We expect that the socio-demographic characteristics of serial cohabitors have shifted, such that the socio-demographic divide between who has serially cohabited and who has...
not has narrowed. This is consistent with the diffusion perspective (Liefbroer and Dourleijn, 2006), which suggests that with the growing prevalence of cohabitation, serial cohabiters will become increasingly similar to those who cohabit only once. This approach provides a new lens on the changes in cohabitation and marriage in the United States by examining the cohabitation experiences of women who have dissolved their first cohabiting union during young adulthood.

**CURRENT STUDY**

The relationship experiences of young adults have diversified with not only increases in cohabitation, but also increases in serial cohabitation. Drawing on a diffusion perspective, we examine the patterns and correlates of serial cohabitation for late Baby Boomers born between 1960 and 1964, Generation X born between 1965 and 1979, and early Millennials born between 1980 and 1984. We test two sets of hypotheses. First, we expect that the patterns of cohabitation have changed, resulting in greater levels of serial cohabitation among more recent birth cohorts.

**Hypothesis 1:** The proportion of women experiencing serial cohabitation will be significantly higher among Millennials (the youngest birth cohort) than late Baby Boomers (the oldest birth cohort). The odds of serially cohabiting during young adulthood, compared to cohabiting once, will continue to be higher for Millennial women, net of socio-demographic characteristics.

Second, we expect the socio-demographic profile of serial cohabiters has changed such that the socio-demographic divide between one-time cohabiters and serial cohabiters has narrowed.

**Hypothesis 2:** The socio-demographic characteristics of serial cohabiters, such as education, number of non-cohabiting sex partners, and parenthood status, will be significantly different from single-instance cohabiters in older birth cohorts of women, but will be increasingly similar among Millennials. We conceptualize serial cohabitation in our analysis as re-partnering following the dissolution of a first cohabitation. While a descriptive profile of the incidence of
serial cohabitation across birth cohorts will be provided for the whole sample and women who ever cohabited in the Appendix, we limit our multivariate analysis to women who have ended their first union, thus making them at-risk for cohabiting again.

We include correlates that are associated with serial cohabitation, such as educational attainment and coming from a non-intact family of origin because educational attainment, as well as coming from a divorced family, are associated with higher odds of serial cohabitation (Lichter et al., 2010). We measure the respondent’s sexual partnership history because women with more non-cohabiting sex partners have greater odds of experiencing serial cohabitation (Manning and Cohen, 2010). Becoming married limits the exposure to cohabitation, but may also provide another chance for cohabitation if the marriage dissolves, so we include this in our models. We include the respondent’s childbearing history because research indicates that women who have children before cohabiting have an increased risk of relationship dissolution (Lamidi et al., 2015). Serial cohabiters’ unions tend to be shorter, so we include an indicator of the duration of their first cohabiting union (Manning and Cohen, 2010). Age at first cohabitation is calculated using the date of first cohabitation, and we include this measure because serial cohabiters begin their cohabiting experiences at younger ages than single-instance cohabiters (Lichter et al., 2010). We include engagement status at their first cohabitation, because cohabiters’ marriage plans are positively associated with marriage entry (Brown, 2000), which can reduce their exposure to more cohabiting unions.

DATA and METHODS

We rely on the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) interviews conducted in Cycle 6 (2002), and interviews conducted between 2006-2010 and 2011-2013 as a part of the continuous survey. The NSFG is a series of nationally representative cross-sectional data that
provides detailed information on family formation behaviors such as fertility, marriage, divorce, and cohabitation. Cohabitation episodes can be ascertained through retrospective reports on start and end dates of non-marital cohabitations, pre-marital cohabitations, and the current cohabiting relationship. Interviews are conducted with the civilian non-institutionalized population, and include an oversampling of Blacks, Hispanics, and teenagers. Respondents are between ages 15-44 when they are interviewed. The response rate for Cycle 6 (2002) was 79%, for interviews conducted between 2006-2010 it was 77%, and for interviews conducted between 2011-2013 it was 72.8% (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015, 2016).

Although each of these cycles included interviews with men and women, cohabitation histories collected from men are not directly comparable to those collected from women. For example, interviews conducted between 2006-2010 collected cohabitation dates for men’s current and former partners, but exclude dates for more than these two cohabitations. Therefore, only female respondents were included in the analysis. Applied weights make the analytic sample nationally representative of women ages 15-44 in the United States. Further, cluster and stratification variables were employed to take into consideration the complex sampling design of the NSFG (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015, 2016).

The merged data from the three groups of interviews results in 25,523 women. The sample is limited to respondents over the age of 28 at the time of the interview to ensure young adult cohabitation experiences apply to women interviewed in all collected years (n=13,854). Women who reported a negative duration for their cohabiting episodes, cohabiting before the age of 15, were missing on information about their childhood family structure, and those who did not report birth dates between 1960 and 1984 were removed, resulting in n=13,058 for the descriptive analytic sample. The analysis of serial cohabitation, re-partnering after the
dissolution of a first cohabiting union, was restricted to those who ended their first cohabiting union and who cohabited between the ages of 16 and 28 (n= 3,121).

**Dependent variable**

Serial cohabitation is based on the NSFG recoded variable identifying the dates of cohabitation. Respondents were coded 0 if they reported no cohabiting relationships and *single-instance cohabiters* and *serial cohabiters* based on the dates of cohabitation. Up to seven cohabitating relationships were reported, but the distribution was significantly right-skewed (skew = 1.19). The majority of women had experienced between 0-2 cohabiting relationships. Therefore, the indicator was collapsed into *none (never cohabited)*, *one (single-instance cohabitation)*, and *two or more (serial cohabitation)*.

**Independent variables**

The focal independent variable is *birth cohort*. We use birth cohorts in order to capture generational change in cohabitation. We constructed birth cohorts of five years: cohort 1(1960-1964), cohort 2 (1965-1969), cohort 3 (1970-1974), cohort 4 (1975-1979), and cohort 5 (1980-1984). These birth cohorts capture the last five years of the Baby Boom generation (1960-1964), all of Generation X (1965-1980), and the first four years of the Millennial generation (1981-1984). Each birth cohort contained sample sizes capable of producing reliable estimates (from \( n=1,368 \) to \( n=3,775 \)). Because of the age limitation, more cases were drawn from the earlier 2002 and 2006-2010 samples, with a majority of cases drawn from 2006-2010. We present our descriptive results by birth cohorts.

*Race and ethnicity* were categorized (a) Hispanic, (b) non-Hispanic White, (c) non-Hispanic Black, and (d) non-Hispanic Other. The race and ethnicity were ascertained by a direct question of whether the respondent identified as Hispanic, Latina, or of Spanish origin, as well as
if they identified as Black/African American, or White. Those who identified an ethnic origin were coded as Hispanic, and the rest of the sample was coded by their identification as Black, White, or Other race. *Education*, measured at the date of the interview, is coded into four categories: (a) less than a high school education, (b) high school diploma or GED, (c) some college with no degree or associate’s degree, and (d) bachelor’s degree or higher. We include a control for *family background*, which determined whether the respondent lived with two biological or adoptive parents until age 18 to gauge the respondent’s family structure of origin.

We include three indicators measuring the respondent’s relationship history. The *number of sexual partners* outside of cohabitation is collected from questions about sexual partnership histories and cohabitation histories. Whether the respondent *married before their first cohabitation* is indicated by whether the respondent reports any marriage dates prior to the date of their first cohabiting union. *Parenthood status* was based on indicators that ascertain the timing of parenthood relative to first cohabitation (no children prior to first cohabitation, had a child before first cohabitation, and had a child during first cohabitation).

A series of indicators that focus on the characteristics of the first cohabitation include the *duration of first cohabitation*, which is based on the start and end date of the first cohabiting union and provided as a recoded variable in the NSFG data. *Age at first cohabitation*, which is calculated using the date of first cohabitation, is coded as a continuous variable. *Plans for marriage at the start of first cohabitation* are asked retrospectively and are based on the question “At the time you began living together, were you and he engaged to be married or have definite plans to get married?”
**Analytic plan**

First, we provide a general snapshot of the incidence of serial cohabitation by birth cohort for all women and women who have ever cohabited, and we test for significant group differences. Next, we display descriptive results for women who have dissolved their first cohabiting union. Following, we conduct multivariate analyses to estimate the odds of serially cohabiting among women who have ended their first cohabiting union in order to test Hypothesis 1. The key independent variable is birth cohort, with the earliest cohort (1960-1964), Baby Boomers, as the reference group. We focus on cohort differences with the inclusion of socioeconomic indicators (Model 1) and relationship measures (Model 2).

**Preliminary Results**

Table 1 presents the descriptive analysis of women who have dissolved their first cohabiting union (N=3,463) and are at risk of serial cohabitation. Across generations, there is a distinct increase in the share of women serially cohabiting from roughly 49% among late Baby Boomers to 53% among Generation X and 62% among Millennials. While the majority of women are non-Hispanic White, the share of Hispanic women at risk of serially cohabiting increased from 11% to 15% between the oldest birth cohort and youngest. More women born between 1980 and 1984 report having some education or an associate’s degree than do older cohorts of women, but fewer have a bachelor’s degree or higher. The share of women growing up with both parents decreased across generations. On average, Millennials had nearly two more sex partners than Baby Boomers. Over time, fewer women report a marriage before their first cohabiting union, and the share of women having a child during their first cohabitation is highest among Millennials born between 1980 and 1984. There is a downward trend in the duration of first cohabiting unions, and the youngest cohort of women at risk for serial cohabitation has an
average duration that is seven months shorter than Baby Boomers. Finally, whether the respondent had plans to marry their first cohabiting partner varies little over time.

Figures 1 and 2 indicate that the share of women cohabiting once during young adulthood continues to increase. It has more than doubled among all women, from 10% among women born between 1960 and 1964 to 25% among women born after 1980, and is a significant experience for one third of cohabiters born between 1980 and 1984. The results of our multivariate analysis (Table 2) indicate that birth cohort is not a significant predictor of serial cohabitation among women who have dissolved their first cohabitation, but race/ethnicity, childbearing history, and first cohabitation characteristics are influential. Racial/ethnic minorities are far less likely than non-Hispanic White women to serially cohabit during young adulthood. Women who have a child before their first cohabiting union are 1.35 times as likely as women who did not have any children to cohabit more than once. Women who are older when they begin to cohabit, whose first cohabitation lasted longer, and women who had plans to marry their first cohabiting partner all have reduced odds of serial cohabitation relative to cohabiting once during young adulthood.

SUMMARY

The final paper will consider inter-cohort variation in predicting serial cohabitation, focusing on the oldest birth cohort (late Baby Boomers) and the youngest cohort (Millennials). We will evaluate changes in the associations between socioeconomic characteristics and serial cohabitation by testing interactions between each birth cohort and key covariates in order to test Hypothesis 2. As supplemental analyses, we will generate a general portrait of cohabitation trends from the late Baby Boom to the early Millennial cohort to predict the likelihood of
entering a single cohabiting union versus more than one cohabiting union by age 28 separately for all women and women who ever cohabited.

Preliminary results indicate that serial cohabitation has become a significant relationship experience for one-third of young adult women who have ever cohabited, confirming prior research on the upward trend of serial cohabitation. Our multivariate results indicate, however, that Millennials do not have significantly higher odds of serially cohabiting during young adulthood compared to late Baby Boomers. Instead, we see that race, childbearing experience, and the characteristics related to the first cohabiting union are significantly associated with the odds of cohabiting more than once.

While this study aims to provide new insights into serial cohabitation there are a few limitations. First, the NSFG is a cross-sectional survey, which does not allow assessments of temporal ordering. Second, this study is limited to the cohabitation behavior of women. This was necessary because the earlier surveys were limited to women. If we could access men's perspectives, we could ask new questions about the male and female differentials in serial cohabitation. Third, this work explores union formation between the ages of 16 and 28—roughly the late years of adolescence and early adulthood. While this is an important time of union formation for many women and we are capturing a significant picture of serial cohabitation, remarriage and divorce at later ages may indicate a growing proportion of women having cohabited more than once after age 28. Finally, the data do not include indicators of relationship quality. While demographic indicators of instability are available in the NSFG, the measures of relationship quality that predict instability would contribute to our understanding of cohabitation. If serial cohabitation continues to be a form of “intensive dating”, then we could expect their relationship quality to vary even further from single-instance cohabiters and married individuals.
Crafting a better understanding of multiple cohabiting partnerships during young adulthood is crucial for several reasons. The relationship experiences of young adults are more likely to eventuate in cohabitation than ever before, and growing shares of women are serially cohabiting before age 28. Evidence indicates that, over time, more women are having children during their first cohabiting union, and our results indicate that women who have a child before their first cohabiting union have higher odds of experiencing more than one cohabiting union before the age of 28. Serial cohabiters may be increasingly forming stepfamilies, meaning they or their partners are bringing children from prior relationships (Guzzo, 2016). Prior research indicates that serial cohabiters are at a higher risk of marital dissolution (Lichter and Qian, 2008). Future research should consider whether this association remains as serial cohabitation becomes more common. Cohabiters are increasingly divided, in terms of relationship quality, by whether they have plans to marry or not, and serial cohabiters are less likely to have marital intentions (Brown, Manning, and Payne, 2015; Vespa, 2014). For a growing minority of young adult women, then, it may become increasingly important to consider the multiple co-residential partnerships experienced during young adulthood and their association with relationship dynamics.
REFERENCES


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*Note: All values are weighted.*

**Characteristics of Co-resident**

- **Birth Order and Cohort:**
  - Birth order: 1st child in household
  - Birth cohort: 1800-1984

- **Race and Hispanic Origin:**
  - White: 20%
  - Black: 12%
  - Hispanic: 1%

- **Education:**
  - Less than high school: 42%
  - High school diploma or GED: 35%
  - Some college, associate's degree: 23%
  - Bachelor's degree or higher: 11%

- **Income:**
  - Below poverty line: 12%
  - 121-200% of poverty: 12%
  - 201-400% of poverty: 15%
  - Above 400% of poverty: 10%

- **Employment:**
  - Full-time employment: 48%
  - Part-time employment: 36%
  - Unemployed: 15%

- **Health Status:**
  - Excellent: 13%
  - Very good: 23%
  - Good: 42%
  - Fair: 17%
  - Poor: 5%

- **Marital Status:**
  - Married: 53%
  - Never married: 29%
  - Separated or divorced: 14%
  - Widowed: 4%

- **Childhood Experience:**
  - Childhood poverty: 57%

- **Relationship History:**
  --lived with both biological parents until age 18: 66%

- **Family Background:**
  - Both parents graduated high school: 46%

- **Demographics:**
  - Non-Hispanic Other: 35%
  - Hispanic: 48%
  - Non-Hispanic Black: 16%

- **Birth-Age Group:**
  - 2011-2015: 12%
  - 2016-2020: 36%

- **Marital Status:**
  - Never married: 48%
  - Married: 44%
  - Separated or divorced: 4%
  - Widowed: 4%

**Number of Co-residents between age 16-28**

- Average: 3.46

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*Source: 2000-2019 National Survey of Family Growth*
Figure 1. Number of Cohabitations for Women Between Ages 16-28, by Birth Cohort (%)

- None
- One
- Two or more

† p < 0.10 * p < 0.05 ** p < 0.01 *** p < 0.001 ; Source: NSFG 2002-2013; Asterisks denote significant difference from 1980-1984
Figure 2. Number of Cohabitations for Women Between Ages 16-28 (Ever Cohabited), by Birth Cohort (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>One (95% CI)</th>
<th>Two or More (95% CI)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1960-1964</td>
<td>77***</td>
<td>23***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965-1969</td>
<td>74**</td>
<td>26**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970-1974</td>
<td>72*</td>
<td>28*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975-1979</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980-1984</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

† p < 0.10 * p < 0.05 ** p < 0.01 *** p < 0.001 ; Source: NSFG 2002-2013; Asterisks denote significant difference from 1980-1984
### Table 2: Multinomial Logistic Regression Odds Ratios of Social Cohabitation (N = 3,121)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Odds Ratio</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>Odds Ratio</th>
<th>SE</th>
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<tr>
<td>Zero-Order</td>
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<tr>
<td>Current Relationship History</td>
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<tr>
<td>Married (Reference = No marriage)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Educational attainment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bachelor's degree or higher</td>
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<tr>
<td>Some college or associate's degree</td>
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<td>Less than high school</td>
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<td>Educational attainment</td>
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<td>Hispanic</td>
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<td>Non-Hispanic Other</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-Hispanic Black</td>
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<tr>
<td>White</td>
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<tr>
<td>Birth cohort (Reference = 1960-1964)</td>
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Note: All values are weighted.