

## **Marital Plans and Relationship Tempo among Cohabitors: Differences by Gender and Social Class**

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### **Abstract**

In an era of changing relationship norms, plans for marriage are less clear-cut than engagements of the past. Using data from the National Survey of Family Growth (2011-2015), this study leverages an intermediate category of “informal” marital plans among cohabitators to assess the timing of relationship transitions. Preliminary descriptive results show that men and women with plans for marriage experience slower transitions from first-sex to cohabitation than those with no plans at all. We find differences in the association between formal and informal plans and relationship tempo by gender and social class. Among engaged individuals there is a positive association between social class time to cohabitation, indicating that cohabitation and marital plans may serve different purposes for different social groups.

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## **Background**

With recent declines and delays in marriage, non-marital cohabitation has become an increasingly important and popular stage in the progression of romantic relationships (Cherlin, 2010; Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008; Manning & Cohen, 2012). In light of changing relationship norms, plans for marriage among cohabitators may be less clear-cut than engagements of the past, indicating a need to shift measurement of marital plans. Previous research on marital plans using the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) have relied on a binary measure of marital plans (Guzzo, 2009, 2014; Kuo & Raley, 2016; Manning & Cohen, 2012; Vespa, 2014). Since 2011, the NSFG has modified its response options to allow for an intermediate category of “informal” marital plans. Informal marital plans indicate that at the start of the cohabitation, respondents were “not engaged but had definite plans to get married.” Informal plans indicate a desire for marriage that has yet to be formalized through customs such as marriage proposals and engagement rings. Although most studies consider marital plans as dichotomous—engaged or not—some have shown the importance of considering an intermediate category (Thornton, Axinn, & Xie, 2007) because cohabitators do not view marital plans as binary (Huang, Smock, Manning, & Bergstrom-Lynch, 2011; Manning & Smock, 2005; Sassler, 2004). This paper builds on Parker (2018) who examines gender differences in marital plans by exploring how marital plans are related to relationship tempo and outcomes.

### *Gender Differences in Marital Plans*

Although progress toward women’s equality in the public realm laid the foundation for more equal bargaining power in intimate relationships, there has been asymmetric change in women’s position within the personal realm (England and Kilbourne 1990). Since the 1970s, women’s increased labor force participation has led to better economic prospects and more independence (Goldin 2006). This trend has been coupled with a rise in support – among both young men and women – for egalitarian intimate relationships (Bianchi, Robinson, and Milkie 2006; Gerson 2010). Yet, conventional courtship norms continue to dictate distinct gendered behaviors for important moments in relationships, particularly when it comes to the marriage proposal (Lamont 2014; Sassler and Miller 2011). While most young couples expect to share breadwinning, housework, and childcare, the decision to get married is usually not official until culminated with a symbolic male proposal, indicative of what has been referred to as a “stalled” gender revolution in heterosexual relationships (England 2010). Prior to a formal proposal, the decision to become engaged may be arrived at jointly through in-depth discussions and backstage preparations (Schweingruber et. al 2004). Though both partners may share an expressed desire to eventually marry, this practice leaves women “waiting to be asked” (Sassler and Miller 2011; Huang et al.

2011). Since courtship rituals may set the stage for gendered behavior during marriage (Humble, Zvonkovic, and Walker 2008; Laner and Ventrone 2000), it is important to understand how uneven power over relationship transitions may hinder partners' equal status in romantic relationships.

### *Social Class and Relationship Tempo*

Qualitative research has found that working-class couples are more likely than middle-class couples to transition into shared living out of financial necessity, and these transitions occur earlier (Sassler and Miller 2017). The transition from cohabitation to marriage must be negotiated between romantic partners, who frequently enter into shared living without explicitly discussing their motives or expectations for the future (Sassler 2004; Huang et al. 2011). Few couples explicitly enter into cohabitation as a "trial marriage" (Sassler and Miller 2001) and for those who do hope to marry, their ability to successfully formalize their relationship is heavily influenced by socioeconomic status. Progressions from cohabitation to marriage are especially unlikely among poor women, where living together is more likely to be a long-term substitute for marriage (Lichter et al. 2006). On the other hand, middle-class cohabiting relationships are less likely to dissolve and are more likely to become formalized through marriage (Sassler and Miller 2001; Smock et al. 2005).

To better understand the role that cohabitation plays in society, it is also helpful to examine how couples move from dating to cohabiting. The decision to enter into a coresidential relationship reveals important insights into the motivation behind cohabitation and whether this varies by socioeconomic status or parental status. It can also shine light on the relationship between dating, cohabitation, and marriage. Sassler and Miller (2011; 2017) find that, among the working class, transitions to cohabitation are much more rapid, and often the decision to cohabit is made for practical reasons such as financial need. For these working-class couples, many cannot "afford" to marry (Smock et al. 2005), but they cannot afford to be single either.

### **Research Question**

Our study explores how the tempo of relationship progression is associated with marital plans among cohabitators, and how this varies by gender and social class. We expect individuals who are engaged at the time of cohabitation to experience slower transitions to shared living. In contrast, we expect individuals with no marital plans to experience faster transitions to cohabitation. Predictions are less clear for the intermediate category of individuals with "informal plans". We also anticipate differences in relationship tempo by gender and social class, with women and higher-class individuals experiencing slower relationship tempos overall.

### **Data and Methods**

We use data from the 2011-13 and 2013-15 waves of the NSFG. The NSFG is a nationally-representative household-based survey containing information on marriage, divorce, and fertility for respondents ages 15-44. This data is cross-sectional but contains a detailed retrospective relationship history. In our study, we use both the male and female respondent files, but the NSFG is not collected at the couple-level; reports come from distinct households of men and women. The total sample consists of 9,320 men and 11,300 women.

We base our analysis on respondents' current or most recent cohabiting relationships and restrict our sample to sexual relationships that began 10 years prior to the interview date. We exclude respondents who have never had a sexual relationship, have never cohabited, or are missing on key covariates: marital plans, date of first sex, date of cohabitation. We further restrict the sample to those who first had sex after the beginning of their cohabitation. For these cases, we make a minor correction if the date of first-sex is listed as one month after move-in and, as suggested by the NSFG, we consider these errors in reporting and correct to zero months between first-sex and move-in. Finally, we eliminate a small number of respondents who list multiple sexual partners outside of their current cohabitation. With these restrictions, the final analytic sample consists of 1,635 men and 2,460 women across the two survey waves. These respondents are all either in current cohabitations or marriages (70.4% of men; 78.5% of women) or have been in recent cohabitations that dissolved in the prior 12 months (29.6% of men; 21.5% of women).

To address our research aims, we will use multinomial logistic regression models to predict the three categories of marital plans: no plans, informal plans, and engaged. Marital plans are ascertained in the following way: *At the time you first started living together, were you and [partner] engaged to be married or did you have definite plans to get married?* Our key predictor is the continuous, monthly duration from first-sex to move-in with current or most recent cohabitation partner. We will examine the functional form and determine if the inclusion of grouped monthly durations produces better model fit than the continuous measure (see Sassler et al. 2018).

The other key predictors are gender and social class. Gender is coded as 1=Female and 0=Male. As a proxy for social class, we use maternal education. The NSFG data on the respondent's own educational attainment is limited and we are unable to determine precise dates of attendance and completion as it corresponds with relationship start dates. Since a number of the respondents began sexual relationships while enrolled in school, we use maternal education as an indicator of social class. Maternal educational attainment is categorized as less than high school, high school degree or GED, some college, and college degree or more. We also include whether a respondent had a high school degree or GED by the time their sexual relationship began.

Other background measures include the respondent's age at the start of the most recent sexual relationship. We also include race and ethnicity as reported by the NSFG:

Hispanic, Non-Hispanic White, Non-Hispanic Black, and Non-Hispanic Other Race. Measures of family structure in adolescence are also included and correspond to whether the respondent lived with both biological parents, lived with a single parent, lived with a step-parent and biological parent, or lived with no biological parents at age 14.

Our analytic strategy is largely descriptive in nature. At this point, we detail descriptive statistics detailing group differences in relationship tempo. Future analyses will include discrete-time event history analysis with multinomial logistic regression models to predict union transitions.

### Preliminary Results

Weighted descriptive statistics of men and women’s characteristics are presented in Table 1. Our descriptive results suggest important gender social class disparities in the tempo of cohabiting relationships. Most notably, there is a clear positive association between social class time to cohabitation among the engaged group (Figure 2).

### Next Steps

In future analyses, we plan to explore the relationship between marital plans and cohabitation outcomes. This will allow us to discover how marital plans are associated with long-term relationship trajectories, and whether this varies by gender and social class. We also will determine whether gender and class interact in their association with relationship tempo.

Table 1. Characteristics of Men and Women in Current or Recent Cohabitations, Weighted Means

	<u>Women</u> (N=2,460)		<u>Men (N=1,635)</u>	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Marital Status				
Married	34.7%		17.7%	
Cohabiting	43.8%		52.7%	
Currently Dating	11.3%		17.0%	
Single	10.2%		12.6%	
Marital Plans at Start of Current or Recent Cohabitation				
No Plans	10.4%		12.2%	
Informal Plans	13.7%		13.3%	
Engaged	15.2%		15.1%	

Age at First Sex with Most Recent Partner				
Mean	25.41	0.19	26.41	0.24
<20	23.3%		21.7%	
21-24	28.3%		23.6%	
25-29	24.8%		24.2%	
30+	23.6%		30.4%	
Race/Ethnicity				
Hispanic	17.6%		17.8%	
White	63.1%		61.1%	
Black	13.9%		15.8%	
Other	5.4%		5.4%	
Foreign-Born	9.4%		11.5%	
Respondent's Education (at interview)				
<HS	13.9%		24.9%	
HS	25.1%		26.9%	
Some College	30.9%		32.2%	
College+	30.1%		16.0%	
Finished HS by 1st-sex with partner	80.5%		73.1%	
Maternal Education				
<HS	18.8%		18.6%	
HS	32.3%		39.1%	
Some College	25.7%		23.4%	
College+	22.1%		18.2%	
Family Structure at Age 14				
Lived with both parents	55.9%		57.5%	
Lived with single parent	16.9%		16.6%	
Lived with step- & biological parent	20.4%		20.0%	
Lived with no biological parents	6.6%		6.0%	
Parental Status				
Biological Parent	62.9%		50.5%	
Had Bio Child Before 1st-Sex w/ Partner	28.7%		13.5%	
Cohabitation Characteristics				
Year Cohabitation Began (2002-15)	2009	0.08	2010	0.09

Duration from 1st Sex to Cohabitation	11.91	0.49	12.82	0.60
Duration of Cohabitation	40.55	0.91	31.74	1.03

Source: 2011-13 and 2013-15 NSFG Male and Female Respondent Files, Ages 18-44. Restricted to relationships that started between 1-10 years prior to the interview date.

Figure 1. Weighted Mean Monthly Tempos from First-Sex to Cohabitation with Most Recent Partner, by Gender

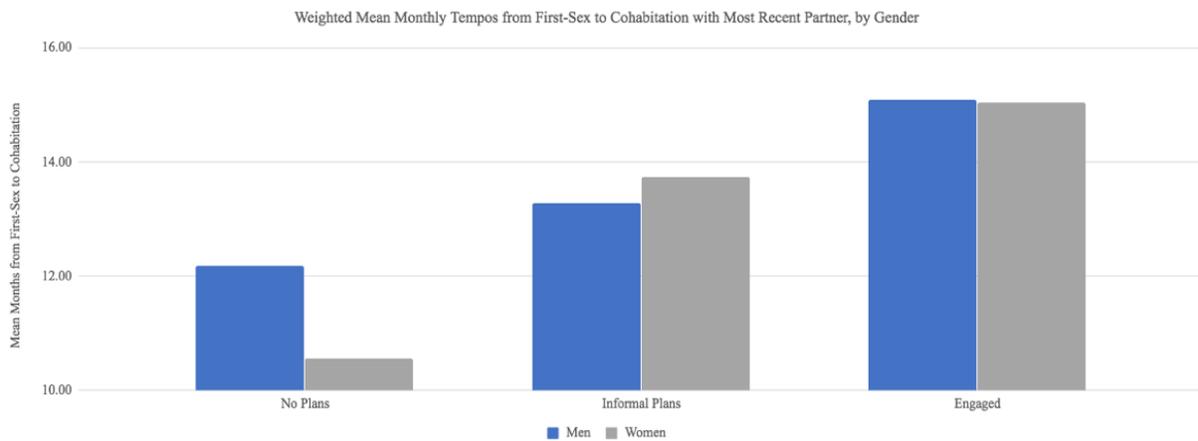


Figure 2. Weighted Mean Monthly Tempos from First-Sex to Cohabitation with Most Recent Partner, by Maternal Education

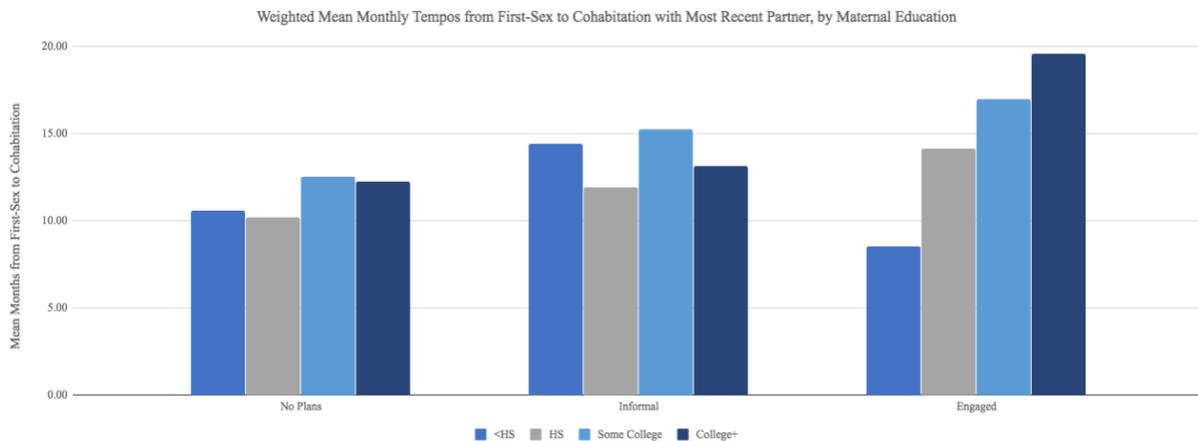


Figure 3. Weighted Mean Monthly Tempos from First-Sex to Cohabitation with Most Recent Partner, by Gender and Maternal Education

