

CHILDBEARING AFTER MARRIAGE DISSOLUTION:
DOES UNION STATUS MATTER?

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INTRODUCTION

Rates of marital disruption in the United States remain relatively high with one in two first marriages ending in divorce (Raley and Bumpass 2003). As a result, there is a substantial pool of Americans who may potentially enter cohabiting unions or remarry once their first marriage has dissolved (i.e. postmarital union formation). Indeed, prior research strongly suggests that this is the case. Over half of divorced individuals cohabit (Bumpass et al. 1991) and the increase in postmarital cohabitation has fully offset the decline in the rate of remarriage (Bumpass et al. 1991; Cherlin 1992). In addition, childbearing has also extended into the postmarital stage of the life course. One-fifth of previously married cohabiting women give birth and approximately half of all remarrieds bear children in their second marriage (Wineberg 1990). Despite these trends, only two prior studies have compared fertility levels of cohabiting women to their remarried counterparts (Loomis and Landale 1994; Jefferies et al. 2000). This current study aims to further the extant literature by comparing fertility levels of postmarital cohabitators to remarried women in the hopes of providing scholars with a broader understanding of family formation later in the life course.

BACKGROUND

Few studies have investigated childbearing after marriage dissolution. Early work focuses solely on remarriage (Thornton 1978; Wineberg 1990; Griffith and Suchindran 1985). Contemporary research exclusively examines postmarital cohabitation (Brown 2000a) or is simply unable to distinguish between cohabitation and remarriage due to data constraints (Kalmijn and Gelissen 2006). While research on postmarital fertility is sparse, a number of studies have examined childbearing among prior to first marriage (Loomis and Landale 1994; Manning 1993; Manning 1995). Manning (1995) examined the rate of first birth within premarital

cohabitation and first marriage. The author found that cohabiting women were less likely to give birth than first marrieds and cohabiting women also tended to give birth later in their union.

These results indicate that premarital cohabitation may not be the preferred context for motherhood, leading scholars to conclude that premarital cohabitation is a precursor to marriage. Cohabiting women may be waiting to start their families until they transition into marriage.

Although results concerning childbearing among premarital cohabitators inform this current study, they beg several questions: What is the meaning of cohabitation after divorce and do postmarital cohabitators consider their co-residential unions an appropriate context for childbearing? Similar to the comparison of premarital cohabitators and first marrieds, do postmarital cohabitators have lower fertility rates than their remarried counterparts? This finding would suggest that postmarital cohabitators may be waiting to get remarried to start a family with their partner, or they are less interested in childbearing altogether. On the other hand, postmarital cohabitators may have similar rates of fertility as remarried women, indicating that cohabitation after first marriage dissolution may be an alternative to marriage and viewed as an apt forum for childbearing.

Just two prior studies have examined the relationship between postmarital union status and fertility. In Great Britain, postmaritally cohabiting women had lower odds of giving birth than remarrieds (Jefferies et al. 2000). Loomis and Landale (1994) used American data and found that the fertility rate was higher and more closely resembled that of legal marriage for cohabitators, but only among Blacks and economically disadvantaged White women.

Economically advantaged White cohabitators had similar fertility rates as their remarried counterparts. Using recently collected, nationally representative data, this study examines how postmarital cohabitation and remarriage influences childbearing. Based on prior research, I

propose two competing hypotheses. First, postmarital cohabitators may have similar fertility levels as remarried women, suggesting that among previously married women, cohabitation is an alternative to remarriage. Second, cohabiting women may be less likely to give birth than remarried women, suggesting that postmarital cohabitation may be more aptly described as a precursor to remarriage.

DATA AND METHODS

Sample

The National Survey of Family and Growth was conducted in 2006 through 2008 and is based on a national probability sample, representing the household population of the United States, ages 15-44 years. This data set is appropriate for the purpose of this study because it is the most recent nationally representative data available on marriage dissolution and includes rich retrospective childbearing, marriage and cohabitation histories. The sample is restricted to 734 women, who cohabited or married after first marriage dissolution and provided valid information for their union start dates. The sample consists of previously married women who remarried (n= 126), cohabited (n= 292), or cohabited with second husband then remarried (n= 325).

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable in this study is dichotomous. It measures whether a woman experienced a birth after first marriage dissolution. This dependent variable is constructed by linking women's retrospective childbirth histories with their cohabitation and marriage information. Thirty-seven percent of women gave birth after their first marriage, and 63% of the sample did not give birth.

Independent Variable

The main independent variable is first union status following the first marriage dissolution. This measure consists of three response categories: remarriage (17%), cohabitation (34%), and cohabitation with second husband prior to remarriage (48%).

Control Variables

Also included in the models are three groups of covariates: life course variables, respondent's social background variables, and partner characteristics. The life course variables include three measures: How the respondent's first marriage ended, respondent's age at first postmarital union, and the respondent and partner's fertility history. How a respondent's first marriage dissolved includes three response categories (1 = divorce, 2 = separation, and 3 = widowhood). Age at first postmarital union is measured in years, left as a continuous variable, and squared to test for a non-linear relationship with the postmarital fertility. For women who only cohabited or cohabited then married, I include their age at the start of cohabitation. For remarried women, who did not cohabit, age is measured at the start of their second marriage. I account for the birth parity of the respondent and her partner categorizing them into three groups: (1) couple has no children, (2) respondent has children from a prior relationship, (3) partner has children from prior relationship, and (4) both respondent and partner have children from prior relationship.

Three covariates measuring the respondent's social background characteristics are included in the analyses: race/ethnicity and nativity status, mother's education, and childhood family structure. Women's race/ethnicity is recoded into five response categories: White, African-American, native-born Hispanic, foreign-born Hispanic, and other. Respondent's mother's education is measured by three categories: less than H.S degree, earned H.S degree, and

college degree or higher. Family type during childhood is measured as a binary response variable, with respondents falling into one of two categories: grew up in an two-parent biological/adoptive parent household and did not grow up in biological/adoptive parent household.

Two variables measuring partner characteristics are included in the study. These variables include partner's age at start of union and partners race/ethnicity. These covariates are coded similarly to respondent's age and race/ethnicity.

Analytic Statetgy

I plan to use binomial logistic regression cox modeling to predict the likelihood of postmarital childbearing among cohabiting and remarried women. Cox modeling is appropriate in examining this particular research question because it is meant to assess when an event occurred, in this case, the birth of first child within a postmarital union. It is also frequently used to analyze retrospective reports of dates and events relating to cohabitation, marriage and fertility (Allison 2008). I will test how each covariate is related to the timing of in-union birth by conducting zero-order discrete-time binary logistic regression analysis for each independent variable. Multivariate analysis will also be conducted. The full model will include postmarital union status and all covariates.

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