The Social Worlds of Cohabiters and Married Individuals

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The growth of cohabitation has prompted family researchers to draw comparisons between cohabitation and the institution of marriage. Because cohabitation, like marriage, involves sharing residence and personal resources, enjoying the gratification of an intimate relationship, and, in some cases, bearing and rearing children (Waite and Gallagher 2000), researchers have sought to understand what really distinguishes the two union types. For example, one question on the nature of the unions is whether cohabitation serves as a "trial marriage" (that is, part of the spouse selection process) or as an alternative to marriage itself (Manning and Smock 2002). Admittedly, there are notable differences between those who cohabit and those who marry (see Kroeger and Smock 2014), but cohabitation's growing prevalence and acceptance has led some to argue that cohabitation maybe less selective of particular types of couples than in the past (Kamp Dush, Cohan, and Amata 2004; Reinhold 2010). Increasingly, studies suggest that the two unions arrange themselves similarly in terms of day-to-day lives, only differing in their legal rights and future plans (Manning and Smock 2005; Goodwin, Mosher, and Chandra 2012).

Research on cohabitation focuses on the characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors of cohabiters. Less attention is given to their social world –that is, the people that surround cohabiting couples. Social relationships are especially important to explore given their influence on well-being (Aboim and Vasconcelos 2009; Widmer and Jallinjoja 2008). This paper examines co-presence (time spent with others), as a measure of everyday social environment and interactions. When compared to the patterns for married persons, co-presence can help to position cohabiters on the relationship spectrum between single and married. Because time is a scarce resource and a constraint on human activity, how much time is spent with others in a social network, and who these others are, is a telling indicator of the differences and similarities for married and unmarried unions. Drawing on nationally representative data from the American Time Use Survey, this study asks the following questions: 1) As captured by co-presence of other persons, how do the social worlds of cohabiters and marrieds differ? 2) To what extent do differences reflect differences in the circumstances of –and perhaps selection into –the two union types? 3) How do the differences shed light on differences in the nature and function of the two union statuses?

This study contributes to the field in three ways. First, moving beyond time-use research emphasizing co-presence in leisure (e.g., Kalmijn and Bernasco 2001; Becker and Lois 2010; Jenkins and Osberg 2003), this study examines time shared across all activities. This approach acknowledges that the strength and value of social ties extend beyond discretionary activities and are reinforced through everyday interaction. Second, utilizing a nuanced typology of co-presence –one recognizing time with a partner, family, and non-kin –it compares the social worlds of cohabiting and married individuals. Lastly, by relying on time-use data, this study minimizes the bias and recall error to which other studies on social relationships are often subject (e.g., Willets 2006; Brown and Booth 1996; Hogerbrugge and Dystra 2009; Barg and Beblo 2010).

Hypotheses

Prior research on cohabitation suggests a number of hypotheses regarding the time they allocate to others. Given their informal union arrangement, the "looser bonds" of cohabitation suggests

that cohabiting partners are less tied to and invested in each other than married couples are. This suggests alternative hypotheses.

H1a: Cohabiting individuals will spend *less* time alone with their *partner* than married individuals do.

Alternatively, if cohabitation functions as a "trial marriage," this would imply that cohabiters invest time in their relationship in order to learn more about their partner. Presumably, marital partners make these getting-to-know-you investments before entering their union and derive less informational utility from spending time together than cohabiters. Following this line of reasoning, I hypothesize that:

H1b: Cohabiting individuals will spend *more* time alone with their *partner* than married individuals do.

The second set of hypotheses addresses time spent with others without the partner. Cohabiters may be more likely to keep up outside relationship ties than married individuals because they are uncertain about the future of their partnership. Continual contact with the other people in their lives allows cohabiters to mitigate the dissolution risks of cohabitation as well as maintain sources of outside support. The "greedy institution" of marriage argument suggests that marital relationships are private unions where couples largely rely on each other for their emotional and material needs. Family households tend to manage daily tasks and challenges without the assistance of outsiders. Spouses can serve as primary sources of support since marital unions are more stable than cohabiting relationships. Following this line of reasoning, I hypothesize that:

H2: Cohabiting individuals will spend *more* time alone with *family members* than married individuals do.

H3: Cohabiting individuals will spend *more* time alone with *non-family persons* than married individuals do.

The last set of hypotheses addresses time spent with a partner in the company of others. Couples benefit from sharing social ties because this time contributes to their sense of "being a couple". A mutual network facilitates collective support, because partners can call on each other's social connections in times of need. However, spending time with a partner and others may have more utility for cohabiters than married individuals. Others may offer useful input on how good the partner-match is. Sharing a social network also increases informal control over each other through indirect monitoring. An overlapping network also increases union stability, because this relationship-specific investment increases the social costs of ending a union. Likely, spending time with partner and family members is a larger relationship investment than time with a partner and non-family members. Furthermore, since ties with non-family members are voluntary (people cannot choose their family), cohabiting couples may be better able to form a shared and congenial non-family network. Following this line of reasoning, I hypothesize that:

H4: Cohabiting individuals will spend *less* time with their *partner and family members* than married individuals do.

H5: Cohabiting individuals will spend *more* time with their *partner and non-family persons* than married individuals do.

Data and Methods

The data for my study come from the 2003-2013 American Time Use Survey (ATUS). As the only large, representative U.S. time-use survey on a full range of nonmarket activities, the ATUS measures the types of activities respondents do on a diary day, the amount of time spent on these activities, and who was present during them. The final analytic sample is a subset of heterosexual ATUS respondents between the ages of 15 and 85 years old who are married or living with an unmarried partner (N=76,335).

The dependent variables are the absolute number of minutes cohabiting and married respondents spent during the diary day by six types of co-presence arrangements –alone (i.e., no one co-present), with only a partner, family alone without partner, non-family alone without partner, partner and family, and partner and non-family. These measures exclude the presence of respondents' children since they may limit the amount of interaction with the others present. Family members include grandchildren, parents, siblings, and relatives who may or may not be living in the household. Non-family others include housemates, roomers, and other non-relatives that may or may not be living in the household. The key independent variable for union status measures whether the respondent lives with a cohabiting partner (=1) or is married (=0).

Consistent with previous research on the appropriate method for analyzing time-use data (see Stewart 2009), OLS regression models are preferred. Beginning with a baseline OLS model only controlling for diary day characteristics, the hypotheses relating union status and time spent co-present are tested in separate analyses for each of the six types of co-presence. Four subsequent models add time demands, household composition, homogamy, and socio-demographic controls.

Findings

Because cohabiting and married respondents differ on a number of variables which are apt to influence how they allocate their time with others, OLS regressions evaluate the implications of union status for time use while controlling for various covariates. In the interest of parsimony, the models in Table 2 summarize the cohabitation coefficients for six categories of co-presence, including a time alone baseline. Model 1, which includes only controls for diary day, produces results that parallel the union status differences reported for the descriptive statistics (not shown).

Table 2: OLS Coefficients for Cohabitation (in Minutes) by Co-Presence Type

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
	Diary Day	+ Time Demands	+ Household Composition	+ Homogamy	+ Controls
Partner	ns.	14.81***	-7.31*	-6.52*	22.48***
Family	ns.	2.98*	ns.	ns.	ns.
Non-Family Others	38.64***	32.31***	25.28***	25.43***	26.63***
Partner and Family	-6.63***	-4.97***	-8.03***	-7.37***	-3.86*
Partner and Non-Family Others	17.57***	18.19***	8.00***	8.30***	9.12***
Alone	-9.84**	ns.	-14.85***	-16.56***	17.35***

Diary day = weekend, holiday, and season.
Time demands = work (minutes), school (minutes), partner employment.
Household composition = #adult family in household, #non-family others in household, #children, youngest child's age.
Homogamy = age, race, education.
Controls = sex, age, race, foreign born, education, household income.
ns.=not significant, *=p<.05, **=p<.01, ***=p<.001; Two-tailed test.

There were reasons to believe that cohabiters might spend more (H2) or less (H1) time with their partner than married individuals, but the results are mixed. As with the bivariate relationship (Table 1), the result for cohabitation in Model 1 is non-significant, and the relationship is sensitive to the variables that are controlled. Controlling for time availability, cohabiting respondents spend significantly more time with their partner than married respondents. Further investigation (results not shown) reveals cohabiters' time together is sensitive to their longer work hours and partner's employed status. This finding is consistent with research that finds employment, especially the employment of both partners, creates difficulties in finding time together (van der Lippe and Peters 2007).

Adding controls for household composition leads to the conclusion that cohabiters spend significantly less, not more, time alone with their partner. Controlling for the number of children in the household, the cohabitation coefficient becomes negatively associated with time together. Although the addition of homogamy variables (Model 4) does not change the conclusion regarding cohabitations' small negative relation to partner time, Model 5, which also includes socio-demographic control variables, shows a large, positive association between cohabitation and time alone with partner. In particular, controlling for age indicates that cohabiters would spend more time "alone together" if they were as old as their married counterparts.

As for time respondents spend with family members apart from partner, there is, on whole, little evidence that cohabiting individuals spend more time alone with family members than married individuals do (H2). Only Model 2, which controls only for diary day and time demands, shows a significant coefficient for cohabitation and the difference for cohabiters and marrieds is less than three minutes ($p<.05$). By contrast, there is consistent support for the hypothesis that cohabiters spend more time alone with non-family members than married individuals do (H3). All things equal (Model 5), cohabiters spend 27 more minutes alone in the company of non-family members ($p<.001$). Of course, cohabiters spend a half-hour more during the day employed than marrieds, and the unrelated persons they spend time with may be co-workers; adding controls for time availability reduces the cohabiter-married difference by about six minutes.

In comparing social time combing partners and others, I find limited support for the hypothesis that cohabiting individuals spend less time in the joint presence of partner and family members than married individuals do (H4). All things considered, cohabiters spend four fewer minutes with a partner and family members than their married counterparts ($p<.05$), but the modest difference holds across models. I also find support across models for the hypothesis that cohabiters spend more time with their partner and non-family members than married individuals do (H5). Compared to married individuals, the final model shows that cohabiters spend nine more minutes during the diary day with a partner and non-family members ($p<.001$).

Conclusion

The social world of cohabiters seems to involve their partner and non-family members more so than the social world of married individuals. This finding is consistent with the assertion made in previous studies that informal unions are not brought into the same family network as marital unions (Waite 2000; Smock 2000). Cohabitation may serve as a "trial marriage", and the inclusion of a partner and development of a common social network, may be an expression of commitment or another means of evaluating the partner. Cohabiters spend more time working, have fewer children, and are younger, which influence the time they allocate towards their partner. Furthermore, these findings suggest that relationships, in general, may take individuals away from their kin networks, and that cohabitation may be no less greedy than marriage towards family relationships.