

Unmarried Cohabitation as a “Socially Sanctioned” Replacement of Marriage?

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to analyze cohabitation phenomena, a new pattern of family relationship, as well as some reasons, which assisted the process of deinstitutionalization of marriage while deeply establishing cohabitation. The analysis of this paper is based on statistics, books, reports and academic articles.

Keywords: cohabitation, marriage, family, relationship types, society attitude

Introduction

From the very beginning, from Adam and Eve, human beings had a need and desire to find their second half, their life partner (originally in the opposite sex). Men and women entered into relationship from the very beginning, without which there would not be humanity at all, and this relationship later developed into marriage which in itself became an essential part of a family.

But what is family? Is marriage necessary for a couple to create a family? There is no single definition of a family. The Census Bureau of the United States defines family as “a group of two people or more related by birth, marriage, or adoption and residing together;” and married couple as “a husband and wife enumerated as members of the same household. The married couple may or may not have children living with them” (Bureau, 2013).

Throughout history, the family has been a central institution in human society involved in almost all activities of human life, like production, consumption, reproduction, parenting, social relationship, religion, leisure, etc. Family structured the lives, activities and relationship of women, men and children and consisted of wife, husband and children. Marriage, as an essential and integral part of family, defined womanhood, manhood and adult status. The status of wife or husband was seen as a central element of human identity and becoming a wife or husband was one of the most important transitions in people's lives. Moreover, marriage had a

religious significance for many, and Catholic Church, as well as many other faiths, made marriage a sacrament (Thorton, Axinn, & Xie, 2007).

However, attitude towards marriage and family in the US has dramatically changed during the last decades. Recently scientists, scholars and media representatives agree on the fact that marriage has become deinstitutionalized (Diana B. Elliott, 2012). If in the past marriage was a commonplace, even required stage of life for establishing oneself in the society, today it is less obligatory and essential. (Diana B. Elliott J. M., 2010) Furthermore, according to the study conducted in 2010, about 39 percent of Americans say that marriage is becoming obsolete while this figure was only 28 percent in 1978 (Diana B. Elliott K. K., 2012) Marriage, once an essential institution, has lost its great importance and instead, cohabitation, as a new trend, “socially sanctioned” option, (Cherlin, 2004) appeared, developed and took over a relationship pattern, especially after 1970s.

Cohabitation

As mentioned above, marriage has lost its importance and has given the way to other type of relationship, namely cohabitation. Though the scholars define cohabitation differently, the term in this paper is used as it is defined by U.S

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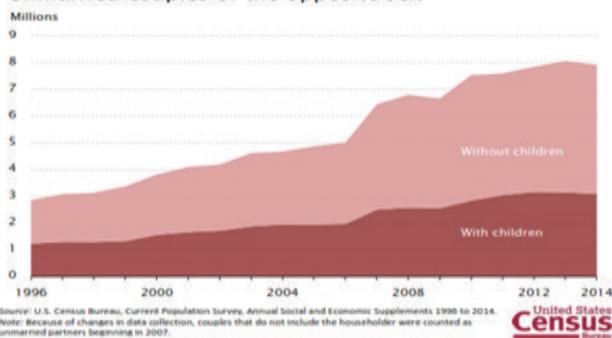
Department of Health and Human service: “a man and women leaving together in a sexual relationship without being married” (Sondic, Nadans, Rothwell, & J, 2010).

Cohabitation is not a completely new phenomenon; On the contrary, it existed in the past but it was not an accepted practice by the American society. People cohabited in the past as well, but typically they were hiding their untraditional relationships trying to avoid criticism from the society as the only accepted form of relationship between a man and a woman was considered to be marriage. Marriage was associated with the creation of a new household unit, the initiation of a sexual relationship, and the birth of children. (Trask & Koivunen, 2007).

However, the society’s attitude toward marriage and cohabitation has dramatically changed and the percentage of the families who prefer cohabitation to traditional marriage has dramatically increased for the last twenty years. If in the 1960s and earlier periods unmarried relationship were not accepted, in the following decade cohabitation began to spread widely. Marriage as an institution started to weaken while cohabitation started to establish itself deeply in society and became an integral part of “relationship culture.” According to Andrew Cherlin, sociologist and demographer, marriage has undergone a process of deinstitutionalization, while unmarried cohabitation in the contrary is becoming more and more institutionalized (Cherlin, 2004).

As seen in the figure 1, the number of unmarried cohabiting couples has dramatically increased from 2.5 million in 1994 to 7.9 million in 2014. (Bureau, Unmarried Couples of the Opposite Sex¹, by Presence of Children²: 1960 to present, 2015). Regrettably, Census Bureau does not have statistics regarding cohabiting couples in 1960-1980s. No explanations are given for that absence, but it can be assumed that few people cohabited during that period and they did not want to reveal their unmarried relationship. More than that, it is also possible that people were not even asked about unmarried relationship as it was a blocked, closed, awkward topic.

Figure UC-1
 Unmarried couples of the opposite sex



It is also interesting to mention the fact that cohabitation does not only comprise intimate relationship between man and woman, in many cases cohabitation also includes children. Figure 1 also shows that number of children born to unmarried, cohabiting partners has doubled for 18 years.

As Ross Parke writes in her book “Future families: Diverse Forms, Rich Possibilities”, according to some estimates, about 40% of children by age of 12 will spend their time in cohabiting households (Parke, 2013).

How is Cohabitation perceived by American society?

As mentioned above, the number of married families has decreased during the last decades. Importance of marriage has weakened and marriage is not seen as an obligatory step in peoples’ life any more. Neither is it perceived as the only accepted way of starting sexual relationship and/or having children. More than that, marriage is not seen as the only integral way to build a family, consequently, definition of the family has also undergone some changes taking into account other types of intimate relationship between individuals.

As many scholars argue, marriage has been deinstitutionalized and other type of “families” started to emerge, such as cohabiting families, single parent families, same sex families, etc. but the present paper deals only with the analysis of cohabitation.

Cohabitation was not only disapproved by American society several decades ago, it was not seriously taken by scholars and researchers and maybe by society itself. In his article “The Deinstitutionalization of American Marriage”, Andrew Cherlin affirms that neither he nor most other American researchers foresaw the greatly increased role of cohabitation in the adult life course back in 1970s. “We thought that, except among the poor, cohabitation would remain a short term arrangement among childless young adults who would quickly break up or marry. But it has become more prevalent and complex phenomenon.” (Cherlin, 2004). Cohabitation turned out to be a steady phenomenon taking over an intimate relationship type, deeply establishing itself in the society and becoming integral part of American culture.

But how is cohabitation perceived by American society or scholars? Is it a step to marriage or alternative to marriage? Some scholars, such as, Wendy D. Manning and Jessica A. Cohen make a strong case, cohabitation has become an integral part of the marriage process. As they assert in their article “Premarital Cohabitation and Marital Dissolution: An Examination of Recent Marriages”, young adults view cohabitation as a way to test the relationship, helping to select a good spouse who will ensure stable marriage. (Manning & Cohen, 2012)

Moreover, according to Trask and Kovunen, three-quarters of cohabiting women, after beginning to live together, expect to marry their partner, however only one-third of cohabiting partners marry within three year period. (Trask & Koivunen, 2007) According to Manning and Cohen approximately 61% of women and men who have married since 1996, cohabited with their spouse prior to marriage and about one third of recently married women and men were cohabiting with a commitment to marry at the start of cohabitation (Manning & Cohen, 2012).

However, it is difficult not to take into account the work of Andrew Cherlin, who argues that cohabitation represents a less of a trial marriage and more as an alternative to it. In his article “The Deinstitutionalization of American Marriage”, Cherlin cites British demographer Kathleen Kierman, who writes that acceptance of cohabitation in European nations, appears in stages. In stage one, cohabitation is seen as fringe or avant garde phenomenon; in stage two, it is accepted as a testing ground for marriage; in stage three, it becomes acceptable as an alternative to marriage, and in stage four, it becomes indistinguishable from marriage. According to the author, Sweden and Denmark have made

the transition to stage four. In Mediterranean countries it remains in stage one, and in the early 2000s, the United States appeared to be in transition from stage two to stage three. (Cherlin, 2004) In the same article, Cherlin provides figures obtained by Smock and Gupta, suggesting that the connection between cohabitation and marriage was weakening. If in 1970s about 60 % of cohabitation unions ended in marriage, this figure has dropped to 33% in 1990s (Cherlin, 2004).

More than that, Cherlin argues that cohabitation is becoming more and more institutionalized. In the United States, states and municipalities are moving towards granting cohabiting couples some of the rights as well as responsibilities that married couples have (Cherlin, 2004). However, in the same article Cherlin asks an interesting and logical question "Why, then, are so many people still marrying?" and answers to his own question very interestingly to me. According to him, although practical importance of marriage has declined, the symbolic importance of being married has remained high. Marriage has evolved, according to him, from a maker of conformity to a maker of prestige. It is a status one builds up, it is the capstone to be achieved through one's own efforts (Cherlin, 2004).

Notwithstanding similarities between cohabitation and marriage, such as living under one roof, having an intimate, sexual relationship, and in many cases having children, cohabitation is not marriage. Trask and Koivnen argue in their article "Trends in Marriage and Cohabitation", that although cohabitation and marriage are similar on the surface, they are not the same phenomenon. Cohabitation is a shared union between two individuals based on private feelings while marriage is a public institution governed by rules and laws about the rights as well as responsibilities of its members (Trask & Koivunen, 2007).

Why do people opt for cohabitation?

After reading and analyzing material about cohabitation and marriage, the most important question has to be raised: why do people choose cohabitation? What are the reasons for rejecting marriage and opting for cohabitation instead? One of the main reasons why the majority of couples avoid marriage may be that they are afraid to lose "personal freedom" after they got married. They are afraid that their ordinary life will be altered and they will have to face crucial changes. Though cohabitation also changes the "old routine", but still does not make it a must.

Another very important reason that speaks in favor of cohabitation and against marriage is its legal aspect. According to the study conducted by researchers of Denver University, couples reasons for cohabitation derives from a desire for spending more time together and greater intimacy as well as convenience (Rhoades, Staleny, & Markman, 2009) without any legal responsibilities. Couples just desire to enjoy their time together not being bound by the law. Many people find it uncomfortable to unite their life legally with their partners, as marriage is inevitably followed by some duties and responsibilities. Of course cohabitation in its turn also comprises some responsibilities, but in case of marriage, the responsibility the couple faces is wider and far more serious.

Financial consideration may also play a role. Nowadays, the number of divorces has been increasing dramatically. In

case of cohabitation, if the couple decides to end a relationship, they face mostly psychological and emotional problems. But if a married person decides to end a relationship and divorce, it is followed by many problems connected not only with social or psychological problems, but also with finances. Divorce, as well as marriage, is an official act which should be confirmed by the government, and it costs to the couple huge expenses, which includes hiring a lawyer, paying for lawsuit, perhaps alimony, etc. According to Divorce Statistics, divorce is becoming a big business in the USA, a \$28 million industry, with an average cost of about \$20 000 (Divorce Statistics, 2012). So, it is not surprising that people try to avoid legal side of relationship, which in case of separation may entail significant financial costs, preferring informal ways to manage intimate relationships.

Conclusion

Marriage, once an essential institution, the only accepted way of starting intimate relationship, having children and creating households, has lost its practical importance and as many academics argue, and became deinstitutionalized. Instead, cohabitation, which was not an accepted form of intimate relationship in the past, as a new trend, appeared, developed and took over the traditional relationship pattern, especially after 1960s. According to U.S Census Bureau, number of unmarried, cohabiting couples has dramatically increased from 2.8 million in 1994 to 7.9 million in 2014.

Cohabitation, perceived by some people as a step to marriage, and by others as an alternative to marriage, has become more and more institutionalized, and is trying to establish itself as an integral part of American culture and society.

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