

Social Class Differences in Relationship Negotiation among Cohabiting Couples

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Abstract

A growing body of evidence suggests that among the ways that social disparities are manifest across class groups is in the precursors to and outcomes resulting from cohabitation. Our paper explores the role played by gender and class in relationship progression, from dating, to cohabiting, to talk of more marriage and proposing. Data are from in-depth interviews with 122 cohabiting individuals (61 couples). Half of the couples are middle class, and half are working class. Results indicate that men initiate dating and proposals far more often than do women, though there is more gender equality in who raises the topic of cohabiting. Middle class women, are more likely to set a time frame for an expected proposal than are their working class counterparts. Educational status serves to provide middle class women with greater agency in negotiating important life course decisions than their working class female counterparts appear able to yield.

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Cohabitation is now common across the social spectrum (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008). According to the U.S. Census Bureau, between 1990 and 2000 the number of couples who chose to live together outside of marriage rose by 71%, and the increase is expected to persist in the first decade of the 21st century. While the proportion of young adults who have lived with a romantic partner without marriage has increased substantially over the past few decades, cohabitation rates have not increased at the same rate across all groups. The increase in living together outside of marriage has been greatest among those with a high school diploma or some college education (Chandra et al., 2005). In fact, between 1987 and 2002 the percentage of women with some post-secondary education who had ever cohabited rose 93%, compared to a rise of 45% for those with college degrees (Chandra et al., 2005).

Although these couples in the middle and higher end of the social class spectrum are cohabiting at higher rates, the outcomes of their unions differ. There is increasing evidence, for example, of growing social class disparities in transitions into marriage (Lichter, Qian, and Mellott, 2006), with the more economically advantaged far more likely to marry their cohabiting partner within a few years of moving in together than those who are less advantaged. Furthermore, college educated cohabiting women who become pregnant are also more likely to wed than are their less educated counterparts who get pregnant (Musick, 2002; Raley, 2001).

Our paper explores some of the reasons for differential progression into marriage, with a particular emphasis on the role played by gender and social class in relationship progression, from dating, to cohabiting, to talk of more formal unions. Data are from in-depth interviews with 122 cohabiting individuals (or 61 cohabiting couples), approximately half of whom are

middle class (having at least a college degree or holding a managerial job) and the remainder of whom are working-class (having less than a college degree or working in the service sector). The data provides a unique perspective on advancement of relationships prior to coresidence as well as during the period during which couples negotiate discussions of marriage that is not available in large-scale quantitative surveys. We utilize the couples' stories of how their relationships progressed to help illuminate the diverging destinies experienced by the highly educated and their counterparts in the middle tier of the educational spectrum. Our paper examines the following questions. (1) How do cohabiting relationships form and advance, is one partner credited with initiating these early relationship stages? (2) When does the topic of marriage arise during the course of the relationship? (3) Do the ways in which couples advance or negotiate their relationship progression differ by social class? Our results shed light on emerging social class differentiation in the processes that are increasingly precursors to marriage.

METHOD

This research is informed by grounded theory approaches and methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Our study allows participants to present their own perspectives of their relationships, particularly which partner initiated various stages of their unions and in what way they did so. Data are from in-depth interviews with 30 working-class and 31 middle-class heterosexual couples who were living in a large metropolitan area (Columbus, Ohio). Interviews were conducted with both members of the couple, who were interviewed simultaneously in different locations; this enables us to assess partner similarities (and differences) in reasons for moving in, future expectations, and aspects of relationships that involve couple negotiation. Interviews (n = 122) were conducted by the first author and a team of two graduate students.

Interviews took between one and two-and-a half hours, and were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Names of all respondents have been altered to protect confidentiality.

As with all couple-level data, there are variations on how much couples concur about events. Some couples have nearly identical narratives; it is obvious that, for them, the story of “how our relationship progressed” has become a part of their oral history, merging through the repeated joint telling of their tales. Others, however, describe the ways in which they began dating, decided to move in together, first discussed marriage, and/or got engaged in quite disparate ways. It is possible that these couples are recalling different aspects of the same events or that they date their relationship transitions to different events (for example, one partner may view the couple as “dating” the first time the couple went on a larger group outing with friends, while the other may view their first “date” as the first time the two went to dinner and a movie alone.) In these instances, we followed Hertz’s recommendations, and did not attempt to find one objective “truth,” but instead created “a space for both partners to tell different accounts” (Hertz, 1995, p. 434).

All respondents were between the ages of 18 and 36, the prime family formation years when young adults make key decisions about work, marriage, and fertility. Couples were eligible if they reported sharing a residence for at least three months. For this paper we focus on questions asked about how their relationship began and progressed, how couples decided to move in together, and the kinds of plans couples discussed regarding marriage and engagement upon moving in together and subsequently.

Educational attainment, occupational status, mobility opportunities, and earnings were used to distinguish our two class groups. We initially pursued our working-class sample by identifying a community college that offered a variety of two-year degree programs as well as preparing students to pursue a four-year degree at a senior college. Community college students

come from families with fewer economic resources, are less likely to have been on an academic track in high school, and have lower rates of attaining a four year degree than students who attend a four-year institution (Lee & Frank 1990).¹ Signs were posted on public message boards at the campus. Several non-students who saw the postings or were told of the study by an acquaintance also contacted us; we limited referrals to one per couple. The data collection period for the working class sample extended from July 2004 to April 2005.

The second stage of data collection targeted middle-class cohabitators, who were defined predominantly by educational attainment – having a college degree.² The 31 middle class couples were recruited primarily through fliers posted in grocery stores, coffee shops, and restaurants, as well as a posting on an online community bulletin board³. In five instances, couples were referred to the project by colleagues, friends or family members of the researchers. Participants in the middle-class sample were interviewed between April 2005 and June 2006.

Of course, defining social class is a thorny methodological issue. It is rarely captured by a single measure, and it is likely that our working-class respondents might not so identify themselves. Furthermore, some of the working-class respondents attending school may also obtain their degrees and obtain middle-class status as they age; nonetheless, a considerable number of the students in the working-class sample had been attending school sporadically and for years. While obtaining a bachelor's degree in one's late twenties or thirties may improve job prospects, obtaining a college degree “on time” (in one's early twenties) affects job trajectory, the kinds of people one meets, and readiness to support a family.

Additionally, because many of the respondents are fairly young, income – another criterion – is also not the optimal measure. Among the working class sample, couples had to be earning a combined income of greater than \$15,000 from a source other than public or familial assistance (though some did receive some form of assistance, most commonly through student

loans or “loans” from family); middle class couples were required to earn a minimum combined income of \$25,000 in order to be included in the sample.

Sample Information

Descriptive results of the sample are presented in Table 1. The mean age for the middle-class sample is somewhat greater than for our working-class one – 28.3 for men versus 26.4, respectively, and 25.2 for women compared with 24.4. The majority of the middle-class couples ($n = 24$) are white, but the working-class sample contains a larger number of couples from different racial backgrounds. Couples have lived together for an average of 20.4 months for the middle class and 25.3 months for the working class. Parenting is far more prevalent in the working-class sample ($n = 14$); only two of the middle-class couples report sharing a child, and two of the men have children from a previous marriage. Finally, income levels are quite a bit higher among the middle class sample, with an average couple-level income of \$67,672, compared to \$38,971 for the working-class couples.⁴ Occupations for those in the working class sample included such jobs as telemarketer, wait staff, and computer repairperson. Middle class occupations included architect, computer network/systems analyst, teacher, and respiratory therapist.

[Table 1 about Here]

Analytic Approach

Data were coded thematically, and common patterns of behavior, reasons, and expectations were identified through repeated readings of the transcripts. Open coding was initially used to generate topical themes (how the first date was initiated, which partner initially brought up moving in together, plans at move-in) and allowed sections of narratives to be classified into distinct categories for each code (Strauss and Corbin 1998). For both the

working-class and middle-class samples a team of two of the authors coded the data and reviewed the results for consistency across coders. The working-class transcripts have been entered into AtlasTi to facilitate coding; we are currently entering the middle-class transcripts. The second stage of analysis involves axial coding, or looking at variability and linkages within topics (i.e., various ways in which the first date was initiated). The third level of analysis involved selective coding, integrating and refining categories, and relating them to other concepts, for example, looking at class variation among those whose relationships were male- or female- initiated (e.g., finances) in terms of dating, moving in, discussing future plans for marriage or proposing marriage.

Preliminary Results

Although couples often varied in the timing of the progression of their unions, nearly all were able to note a moment during which they considered themselves to be “dating” and the point at which they decided to move in together. Further, 17 of the working class and 21 of the middle class couples have seriously discussed marriage with one another and/or have already become engaged. Table 2 provides information about which partner initiated movement into various relationship stages by both sex and social class. In general, couple-level concurrence is highest for designating who initiated dating and raised the topic of becoming engaged; couples agree less often on which partner initiated serious discussion of marriage.

[Table 2 about here]

Dating

Both partners noted that men most frequently initiated (or were credited with initiating) first dates. This is particularly true among the middle class, which may be a result of differences in the ways couples define “dating.” Middle class couples with greater financial means may be

more likely to note that the first “date” was the couples’ first formal outing (e.g., dinner and a movie), which was typically paid for by the man, rather than spending time together more informally by “hanging out.”

Moving-In

Among the working class, men and women were equally likely to have initiated moving in together. Middle class men ceded that their female partners proposed shared living slightly more frequently. However, middle class women much more frequently felt that they, themselves had been the one to suggest cohabiting. Middle class couples also noted more often than did their working class counterparts that moving in together was the result of a series of mutual conversations.

Marriage Talk

Seventeen working class and twenty-one middle class couples who had been seriously discussing marriage or who were already engaged were asked about which partner had first initiated serious discussions of marriage (i.e., that marriage to one’s partner is a desired future step, with most laying out approximate timetables for tying the knot.) A clear sex difference was observed in this step. Both working class and middle class men asserted that women were generally the ones to first bring up talk of marriage. Their female partners agreed that they were generally the ones leading these conversations. However, women (particularly working class women) also noted that a fair number of men had been the first to broach the subject of marriage, something men seemed more reluctant to reveal or felt were more mutual discussions.

Engagement

Five working class couples were engaged at the time of their interviews. Of the five, three men and two women had proposed to their partners. However, one woman who had done

so was unhappy with her decision and both she and her partner planned on him “redoing” the proposal in the future. The other man who had been proposed to had agreed to marriage, but refused to wear the ring his partner had purchased for him. More than twice the amount of middle class couples (n = 11, although one man’s partner did not mention the proposal she talked about) were engaged at the time of their interviews. The men had done the asking in all 11 couples. For those who have not yet become engaged, most couples agreed that the male partner will be the one to propose, though a few individuals (mostly among the working class) agreed that either partner could propose to the other. However, all of them plan on a traditional proposal because of their partners’ preferences.

Next Steps

Following a closer investigation of which partner initiated various stages of their relationships, we plan to investigate sex and social class differences in the ways in which couples do so. For example, we will examine whether those who initiate various stages do so in a direct or indirect manner, what types of resistance they encounter (if any) from their partners, and how receptive individuals are to advancing their relationships in the future. All transcripts have been coded, and we are working on creating narratives that represent the overall pattern that emerges, as well as highlight responses that serve as outliers. Results will be interpreted in light of theoretical discussions of gendered power and possible explanations for the bifurcation in working class and middle class cohabitators’ relationship outcomes.

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Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Cohabiting Couples

Variables	Measures	Working Class means/n/\$	Middle Class means/n/\$
Age	Mean Age: Men	26.4 years	28.3 years
	Mean Age: Women	24.4 years	25.2 years
Relative Age	Man > 4 years older	4	11
	Both within 4 years	24	19
Educational Attainment	Both high school or less	1	-
	1 ≤ HS, 1 some college	6	-
	Both some college/associate's	19	-
	1HS, 1 BA	1	-
	One Some college, one BA	3	4
	Both BA	-	14
	One BA, one MA	-	10
	Both MA+	-	3
Race	Both White, non Hispanic	13	24
	Both Hispanic	1	1
	Both Black, non-Hispanic	4	2
	Mixed-race couple	12	4
Couple-Level Income ^a	Mean couple income	\$38,971	\$67,672
	\$18,000-\$24,999	8	-
	\$25,000-\$34,999	7	5
	\$35,000-\$49,999	8	6
	\$50,000 - \$74,999	6	10
	\$75,000 - \$99,999	1	5
	\$100,000 or more	-	5
	Relative Earnings	Man earns more	13
Woman earns more	6	3	
	Each partner earns 40-60% of the income	11	14
Marital Status	Both never married	24	26
	One NM, one previously married	6	5
Parental Status	Both no children	16	27
	Both share children ^b	5	2
	Man has children (not woman)	6	2
	Woman has children (not man)	2	0
	Each has a child from a previous relationship	1	0
Duration of Cohabitation	3 – 6 months	8	12
	7 – 11 months	2	1
	12 – 23 months	5	12
	24 – 35 months	7	4
	3 years or more	8	2
N		30	31

^a Couple level income is determined by summing each partner's reported individual income. One man in the working class and one man and one woman in the middle class refused to report their income. Their partners' reports were used to determine their couple-level income. In another instance, neither partner reported a middle class man's income. It was set to the mean of men's income for his social class.

^b In two working class couples the partners share a child and the male partner also has a child from a previous relationship

Table 2: Relationship Progression by Sex and Social Class

WORKING CLASS

	Men	Male Percent	Women	Female Percent	Couple Level	Couple Percent
Who Initiated Dating						
Her	5	16.7%	4	13.3%	4	13.3%
Him	16	53.3%	17	56.7%	16	53.3%
Internet	6	20.0%	6	20.0%	6	20.0%
Other (Don't know/Don't Agree/Both)	3	10.0%	3	10.0%	4	13.3%
Move In						
Her	13	43.3%	12	40.0%	11	36.7%
Him	12	40.0%	13	43.3%	11	36.7%
Mutual	3	10.0%	3	10.0%	3	10.0%
Other (Don't Agree)	2	6.7%	2	6.7%	5	16.7%
Marriage Talk^a						
Her	8	47.1%	8	47.1%	7	41.2%
Him	2	11.8%	6	35.3%	1	5.9%
Both	7	41.2%	2	11.8%	2	11.8%
Other (Don't know/Don't Agree)	0	0.0%	1	5.9%	7	41.2%
Proposal^{a,b}						
Him	10	58.8%	10	58.8%	8	47.1%
Either	2	11.8%	2	11.8%	0	0.0%
There won't be a formal proposal	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Other (Don't know/Don't Agree)	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	4	23.5%
Already Engaged	5	29.4%	5	29.4%	5	29.4%

MIDDLE CLASS

	Men	Male Percent	Women	Female Percent	Couple Level	Couple Percent
	9	29.0%	9	29.0%	7	22.6%
	20	64.5%	20	64.5%	17	54.8%
	1	3.2%	1	3.2%	1	3.2%
	1	3.2%	1	3.2%	6	19.4%
	13	41.9%	16	51.6%	11	35.5%
	11	35.5%	9	29.0%	7	22.6%
	7	22.6%	6	19.4%	5	16.1%
	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	8	25.8%
	10	47.6%	12	57.1%	9	42.9%
	1	4.8%	4	19.0%	1	4.8%
	5	23.8%	3	14.3%	3	14.3%
	5	23.8%	2	9.5%	8	38.1%
	9	42.9%	8	38.1%	7	33.3%
	1	4.8%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
	1	4.8%	1	4.8%	1	4.8%
	0	0.0%	1	4.8%	3	14.3%
	10	47.6%	11	52.4%	10	47.6%

^aOnly asked of the 17 working class and 21 middle class couples who see marriage on the horizon or who are engaged

^bOf the 5 engaged working class couples, 2 proposals were female-initiated and 3 were male-initiated;

All 11 of the middle class proposals were male-initiated, although one woman's partner did not bring up the fact that he had proposed

¹ In four of these couples, one partner had a Bachelor's degree while their partner had some college or less. We grouped these four couples with the working class because none of their jobs required a college degree, and their partners also did not hold positions that had mobility prospects.

² In four couples, one partner had a Bachelor's degree or higher while their partner did not have a college degree. In three of these couples, the female partner had the college degree and the man had some college. The men in all three couples were financially established at the time the couple began dating, and owned or managed businesses; we therefore classify them as middle class couples. In one couple, the man had a Bachelor's degree, while his partner had only some college; because she was from a middle class family (with a father who was a physician) and bore the trappings of the middle class (driving her parents' old Mercedes, living in a wealthy suburb prior to cohabiting) we also group this couple with the middle class.

³ Internet recruitment was done on Craig's List, an online community-specific forum where everything from employment opportunities to furniture for sale is advertised. Although online recruitment in general may result in a higher income, more educated sample (Hamilton and Bowers 2006), in this instance (where middle class participants were the desired respondents) it was an effective way of reaching the target sample.

⁴ Couple-level incomes for the working class range from \$18,000 to \$86,800 and \$25,000 per year to \$175,000 per year among the middle class. The couple with the lowest income in the middle-class is one where the female partner recently gave birth and is currently at home with their two children; prior to the birth of their baby, the couple reported earning approximately \$50,000 per year.