

# LIVING TOGETHER AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS

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## CHAPTER I

### *A guide to living together*

Christian theology is necessarily a human, intellectual endeavour which *listens*. It believes that God has spoken decisively in Christ, and that God's Word is yet able to be heard in every generation. Listening, therefore, is a primary virtue in theology. But Christian theology and ethics must also listen to the understanding diligently provided by other, more secular, intellectual endeavours. The word of revelation may be heard there too. Only when theology performs the double act of listening to the voices of its traditions, and the voices surrounding those traditions, is it able to make connections between Christian faith and ordinary life, and perhaps to indicate humbly how the gospel of Christ may be capable of touching and transforming it. Perhaps there is no ethical problem where this double act is as apt as in the case of cohabitation. People in many parts of the world now live together before marriage, after marriage, and instead of marriage, in numbers which have been increasing remarkably for the last thirty years. Sociologists, ethnologists and demographers have made valiant attempts to track, chart and perhaps explain this unprecedented shift in family formation. The results are available for theologians (and everyone else) to study and deploy. The whole of the present chapter is an attempt to listen to secular authors as they describe and explain cohabitation.

By 'a guide to living together' is meant an attempt to provide a detailed sketch of an increasingly common social and sexual practice, in order to bring it into a theological focus. It takes the form of 25 propositions or statements about living together which are intended to shape the theological treatment that the practice receives

in the rest of the book.<sup>1</sup> Readers eager to plunge straight into the theological analysis and to discover the core concepts presented by this study should at least skim these propositions before proceeding to chapter 2 (a summary of the argument of the rest of the book is found at pages 74–5). The propositions are offered as assertions which, given the state of current research, are probably true. ‘Probably’ registers the *caveat* that the pace of the social changes marked by the rise of cohabitation presently appears inexorable and data become redundant quickly. Hypotheses which were presently accepted when the bulk of the research for this part of the book was done (1999) may look inadequate when it is read. Nearly half of the statements (first section) attempt a description of some of the characteristics of cohabitation, followed (in the second section) by some unfortunate consequences and (in the third section) some attempts at explanation. Finally, after this depressing read, there is some good news about cohabitation (fourth section). Inevitably there is some overlap between sections.

#### COHABITATION: SOME FEATURES

### **1. In many countries more people enter marriage from cohabitation than from the single state.**

Most definitions of cohabitation assume the notion of a ‘heterosexual couple who are not formally married to one another living in a sexually intimate domestic relationship under the same roof’.<sup>2</sup> A British definition assumes a cohabiting couple is ‘a co-resident man and woman, living together within a sexual union, without that union having been formalised by a legal marriage’.<sup>3</sup> These definitions are insensitive to homosexual couples because the alternative of marriage is unavailable to them. Cohabitation before marriage is an incontrovertible trend. This represents an alarming change over the last 25–30 years. In many states in the USA, ‘until

<sup>1</sup> Since writing this ‘Guide’ I have come across Patricia Morgan’s *Marriage-Lite: The Rise of Cohabitation and its Consequences* (London: Institute for the Study of Civil Society, 2000), which reinforces several of the empirical claims advanced here.

<sup>2</sup> Gordon A. Carmichael, ‘Consensual Partnering in the More Developed Countries’, *Journal of the Australian Population Association* 12.1 (1995), 51.

<sup>3</sup> John Haskey, *Trends in Marriage and Cohabitation: Population Trends 80* (Office of Population Censuses and Surveys, 1995), p.6.

recently' (i.e., 1994) cohabitation for the unmarried was actually illegal.<sup>4</sup> Between 1970 and 1980 in the USA, Census Bureau data record a tripling in the number of cohabiting couples, to over 1.5 million, and a further increase of 80%, to 2.9 million couples, between 1980 and 1990. However, these are only the official statistics. So strong are the reasons for concealing cohabitation from the authorities (possible loss of social security, child custody, lack of social acceptability, among others) that the actual number of cohabiting couples in the USA in 1990 was between 3 and 8 million.<sup>5</sup> Clearly this is a broad guess. During that decade, the sharp decline in the numbers of people marrying (not just for the first time) did not lead (at least in the United States) to an increase in single-ness or single-households, because people who eventually marry were living together instead.<sup>6</sup> In this respect there has been little change. The numbers of people living together may be changing little: the change is found in the type of arrangements they choose.

The trend towards cohabitation before marriage has been registered in many countries.<sup>7</sup> France may be typical of countries to report, in the mid-eighties, that the 'tide of early marriages' which peaked in mid-century had receded, leaving 'a delayed marriage trend' in its wake. As a consequence, there was said to be 'an expanding life-space in early adulthood where informal premarital unions may flourish'. 'Informal cohabitation generally amounts to a form of "partial marriage" with reproduction actively delayed or avoided.'<sup>8</sup> This author was confident that

<sup>4</sup> Monica A. Seff, 'Cohabitation and the Law', *Marriage and Family Review* 21.3-4 (June 1995), 149.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 144, citing J. Duff and G.G. Truitt, *The Spousal Equivalent Handbook* (Houston: Sunny Beach Publications, 1990).

<sup>6</sup> Larry L. Bumpass, James A. Sweet and Andrew Cherlin, 'The Role of Cohabitation in Declining Rates of Marriage', *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 53 (November 1991), 913, 924. And see Arland Thornton, 'Cohabitation and Marriage in the 1980s', *Demography* 25.4 (November 1988), 497-508.

<sup>7</sup> For an analysis of European trends, see Duncan Dormor, 'Marriage and the Second Demographic Transition in Europe - A Review', in Adrian Thatcher (ed.), *Celebrating Christian Marriage* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> Elwood Carlson, 'Couples Without Children: Premarital Cohabitation in France', in Kingsley Davis (ed.), *Contemporary Marriage: Comparative Perspectives on a Changing Institution* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1985), p.113. For later confirmation of the trend see also H. Leridon, 'Cohabitation, Marriage, Separation: An Analysis of Life Histories of French Cohorts from 1968 to 1985', *Population Studies* 44 (1990), 127-44.

cohabitators would eventually marry. ‘These informal unions’, he wrongly opined, ‘will continue to be transformed into traditional marriages’.<sup>9</sup> By the mid-1970s, a majority of couples marrying in Geneva, Switzerland, had lived together before marriage and in Sweden and Denmark ‘informal cohabitation’ had become ‘all but normative’.<sup>10</sup> In the countries of Southern Europe (e.g., Italy, Spain) cohabitation has yet to become widespread. If informal cohabitation is extended to include individuals who identify as a couple, are sexually intimate, but retain separate residences, the numbers will be much greater. In France this practice has been named ‘semi-cohabitation’;<sup>11</sup> in Finland and the Netherlands (and doubtless elsewhere), it is ‘living apart together’ (LAT).<sup>12</sup> Similarly, the 1991 census in Britain showed that more people, especially young people, are ‘living alone’, yet many of these ‘may only do so for part of the time, or may indeed live separately but be in permanent relationships’.<sup>13</sup>

A recent study in Britain confirms more people enter marriage from cohabitation than from the single state. A comparison between first partnerships of two cohorts of women in Britain who were born in the two specific periods 1950–62 (the ‘pre-Thatcher cohort’) and after 1962 (the ‘Thatcher cohort’) confirms that ‘the primary difference between the two cohorts is that cohabitation is a much more important route into first partnership for the Thatcher cohort. By their 26th birthday, over half of the Thatcher cohort had entered cohabitation, compared with one-quarter of the earlier cohort.’<sup>14</sup> In Canada, cohabitation is said to have been

<sup>9</sup> Carlson, ‘Couples’, p.128.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp.114, 119. And see J. Trost, ‘A Renewed Social Institution: Non-Marital Cohabitation’, *Acta Sociologica* 21 (1978), 303–15.

<sup>11</sup> Catherine Villeneuve-Gokalp, ‘Vivre en Couple Chacun Chez Soi’, *Population* 5 (September–October 1997), 1059. Within this sub-group, there is to be found ‘une cohabitation *intermittente*’ and ‘une cohabitation *alternée*’ (1059–60).

<sup>12</sup> J. Hoffmann-Nowotny, ‘The Future of the Family’, in *European Population Conference 1987, Plenaries* (Helsinki: Central Statistical Office of Finland, 1987), pp.113–200.

<sup>13</sup> Economic and Social Research Council, *Population and Household Change, Research Results 1–13* (1997–8), no.7, ‘One Person Households in England and Wales and France’, p.1.

<sup>14</sup> John Ermisch, *Pre-Marital Cohabitation, Childbearing and the Creation of One Parent Families* (Colchester: Working Papers of the ESRC Research Centre on Micro-social Change, No.95–17, 1995), p.3. The conclusions are based on data drawn from the British Household Panel Study. See also Jonathan Gershuny and Richard Berthoud, *New Partnerships? Men and Women in the 1990s* (University of Essex: Extracts from the Research Programme of the ESRC Research Centre on Micro-social Change, June 1997), p.3.

‘an irrelevant phenomenon’ prior to the 1970s.<sup>15</sup> The 1981 census reported over 700,000 cohabiting couples: by the time of the 1991 census, that figure had risen to 1.4 million, or 10% of all couples.<sup>16</sup> Similar ‘spectacular trends’ have been recorded in Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland, Netherlands, France, Austria, West Germany, Australia, New Zealand<sup>17</sup> and Japan.<sup>18</sup> There has been a longer tradition of informal consensual unions in some countries in South America, especially in the Caribbean basin where they are more common than legal marriages.<sup>19</sup>

## **2. Cohabitors are as likely to return to singleness as to enter marriage.**

Whereas increasing numbers of people arrive at marriage via cohabitation, it is less often realized that increasing numbers of cohabitors *do not marry their partners at all*. By 1985 it had been noticed that in the USA more cohabitors aged 23 and under were returning to singleness than ‘upgrading’ (so to speak) to formal marriage. ‘For men, nearly two-thirds of all cohabiting relationships were terminated within two years of the initiation of the cohabitation; 40 percent were terminated by union dissolution within two years and another 23 percent were terminated because the partners married.’<sup>20</sup> For

<sup>15</sup> David R. Hall and John Z. Zhao, ‘Cohabitation and Divorce in Canada: Testing the Selectivity Hypothesis’, *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 57.2 (May 1995), 421.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.: based on D. Larrivee and P. Parent, ‘For More and More Canadians, Common-Law Unions Make Good Sense’ (Census of Canada article series: 1993). Zheng Wu puts the figure of cohabiting couples at 11%. See Zheng Wu, ‘Premarital Cohabitation and Postmarital Cohabiting Union Formation’, *Journal of Family Issues* 16 (March 1995), 212–33.

<sup>17</sup> Summarized in detail by Carmichael, ‘Consensual Partnering’, 54–9. See also A.K. Blanc, ‘The Formation and Dissolution of Second Unions: Marriage and Cohabitation in Sweden and Norway’, *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 49 (1987), 391–400; and Gigi Santow and Michael Bracher, ‘Change and Continuity in the Formation of First Marital Unions in Australia’, *Population Studies* 48 (1994), 475–96.

<sup>18</sup> Joy Hendry analyses ‘the modern Japanese practice of living together’ in her ‘Japan: Culture versus Industrialization as Determinant of Marital Patterns’, in Davis, *Contemporary Marriage*, p.215. While it ‘reflects Western influence’ (p.214), it also reflects more liberal (but still patriarchal) attitudes to sex in Japan and it has premodern precedents.

<sup>19</sup> United Nations, *Patterns of First Marriage: Timing and Prevalence* (New York: United Nations, 1990).

<sup>20</sup> Thornton, ‘Cohabitation’, 504. These conclusions were based on a panel study drawn from records of White children born in the Detroit metropolitan area in July 1961. They were all aged 23 at the time of the research.



women, '60 percent were terminated within two years; 23 percent were terminated through union dissolution and 37 percent through marriage of the partners'.<sup>21</sup> As the age of cohabitation rises, so does the proportion of them marrying, to between 50 and 60%.<sup>22</sup> Only in the late 1980s did it become clear that both of the conventional ways of viewing cohabitation, as informal marriage or as 'the last stage in the courtship process', were seriously misleading.<sup>23</sup> Instead cohabitation was compared with the single life and found to be more like it in several respects.<sup>24</sup> In particular, about two thirds of a research sample (of nearly 13,000 cohabitators) did not have immediate marriage plans, exploding the conventional interpretation that cohabitation is equivalent to being engaged. Conversely, the authors of the study concluded that 'cohabitation for most is a convenient living arrangement for single individuals not ready to make long-term commitments'.<sup>25</sup> Slightly later, but large-scale, research in Britain confirms a similar trend. Results from the Economic and Social Research Council show 'evidence that the outcomes of cohabitation may be changing. Earlier cohorts seem to have been more likely to view cohabitation as a prelude to marriage ... Younger people, however, are more likely than older ones to end cohabitation through separation than through marriage.'<sup>26</sup>

### **3. Cohabitation has weakened the connection between marriage and parenthood since the 1970s.**

A startling discovery was made in the early 1990s which has enormous consequences for family formation well into the third millennium. Jane Lewis and Kathleen Kiernan postulated two major changes in Britain with regard to 'reproductive behaviour' in

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Linda J. Waite, 'Cohabitation: A Communitarian Perspective', unpublished paper, University of Chicago (January 1999), 5; Larry Bumpass and James Sweet, 'National Estimates of Cohabitation', *Demography* 24.4 (1989), 615–25.

<sup>23</sup> Ronald R. Rindfuss and Audrey VandenHeuvel, 'Cohabitation: A Precursor to Marriage or an Alternative to Being Single?', *Population and Development Review* 16.4 (December 1990), 705.

<sup>24</sup> The 'respects' studied were childbearing and marriage plans, employment and educational activities, and the cohabitators' own self-identification (ibid., 708–21).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 711.

<sup>26</sup> Economic and Social Research Council, *Population and Household Change*, no.1.

the previous 30 years.<sup>27</sup> The first was a widespread separation of sex and marriage which happened in the 1960s. The second was a widespread separation of marriage from parenthood, which happened in the 1980s, gathered pace in the 1990s, and 'has given rise to moral panic about lone motherhood'.<sup>28</sup> The key to both changes is the declining importance of marriage. According to this thesis when an unmarried couple conceived in the 1960s, they generally married. In the early 1970s, when an unmarried couple conceived they generally either married or had an abortion. Living together as a prelude to marriage (aptly named 'nubile cohabitation'), 'began in the 1970s'. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, an unmarried couple upon conception opted increasingly for an abortion or an illegitimate birth. The 1990s has seen a confirmation of this trend. But in the 1990s 70% of women marrying for the first time had cohabited before marriage compared with only 6% in the late 1960s. Cohabitation is therefore 'inextricably linked' both to the decline of marriage and the increase in childbearing outside it.<sup>29</sup>

The weakening connection between marriage and parenthood may be an international trend. Gordon Carmichael risked the generalization (in 1995) that in many of the 'more developed countries' the 'transition to parenthood is held to be a major catalyst to the conversion of cohabiting unions into marriages'.<sup>30</sup> But cohabiting unions are not always converted into marriages. Most of the data used to support the claim were collected in the 1980s, and the extent of the separation of marriage from parenthood may have been insufficiently appreciated then. The pattern just described within Britain clearly fits trends from the USA and other countries. The ingredients are simply stated. They are: an increase in sexual activity without reference to marriage which has been charted extensively; a rise in the age of first marriage (currently 29 for men and 27 for women in the UK); the increasing availability of reliable

<sup>27</sup> Jane Lewis and Kathleen Kiernan, 'The Boundaries Between Marriage, Nonmarriage, and Parenthood: Changes in Behavior and Policy in Postwar Britain', *Journal of Family History* 21 (July 1996), 372–88. And see Jane Lewis, *Marriage, Cohabitation and the Law: Individualism and Obligation* (Lord Chancellor's Department Research Secretariat, 1999), p.10.

<sup>28</sup> Lewis and Kiernan, 'Boundaries', 372.      <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Carmichael, 'Consensual Partnering', 75.

contraception; increasing recourse to abortion when contraception fails or is unused; and the vanishing stigma attached to cohabitation. Couples *desiring* children may simply not see the advantages of marriage in either personal or economic terms.

#### **4. Some people choose cohabitation as an alternative to marriage, not as a preparation or ‘trial’ for it.**

A hint of this discovery was dropped earlier when it was noted (proposition 2) that people who leave a cohabiting relationship are as likely to return to singleness as to enter marriage. However, there are more disturbing trends to unearth about the endings of cohabitations. Many of these cannot be satisfactorily explained by couples who abandon plans to marry. They never had such plans. They chose cohabitation because it was an *alternative* to marriage.

Kingsley Davis offered a candid explanation for the extent of cohabitation in the USA (in the mid-1980s) which had little to do with marriage. He thought it was ‘an ephemeral pairing based on sexual attraction’. Cohabitation allowed ‘young people *considerable postponement* of marriage without loss of a convenient sexual partnership’.<sup>31</sup> He ruled out the likelihood that cohabitation was a ‘trial marriage’, since revised divorce laws allowed disillusioned marriage partners, discovering apparent incompatibility after the wedding, to extricate themselves from marriages without difficulty. Rather, cohabitation was characterized by a sexual freedom which might be more tellingly compared with that of adultery and the keeping of mistresses in earlier times. There was little thought of marriage in the intentions of most cohabitators.

Some researchers in the USA have shown that the very publicness of a wedding ceremony symbolizes a transition which many unmarried couples are, at least initially, reluctant to make. The ceremony is itself an expression ‘of the long-term commitment between partners’.<sup>32</sup> The reluctance to enter into the deeper commitment

<sup>31</sup> Kingsley Davis, ‘The Future of Marriage’, in Davis (ed.), *Contemporary Marriage*, p.38 (emphasis added).

<sup>32</sup> Robert J. Willis and Robert T. Michael, ‘Innovation in Family Formation: Evidence on Cohabitation in the United States’, in John Ermisch and Naohiro Ogawa (eds.), *The Family, the Market and the State in Ageing Societies* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p.10.

of marriage was for some respondents due to doubt about whether they wished to marry *at all*. Insofar as the cohabitation was a ‘trial’, it was not a trial which aimed at assessing partner compatibility for future marriage, but a trial for assessing whether the state of living together was to be preferred to the state of remaining single.<sup>33</sup> Others were thought to be combining the pleasurable aspects of living together with the shunning of ‘the commitment and permanence associated with marriage and the family’.<sup>34</sup> Others regarded cohabitation as a trial-marriage. They were conscious of the extent of divorce, anxious to avoid ending their marriages through divorce, and believed that living together first was an acceptable and effective way of testing compatibility.<sup>35</sup>

### **5. ‘Trial-marriages’ are unlikely to work.**

A clear majority of young people in the USA ‘agreed’ or ‘mostly agreed’ with the statement, put to them in 1991–5, that ‘[i]t is usually a good idea for a couple to live together before getting married in order to find out whether they really get along’.<sup>36</sup> This growing belief may be rooted in the near universal aspiration of people intending marriage that their unions be durable and happy. On an optimistic assessment of these arrangements, known as the ‘weeding hypothesis’, only ‘those cohabiting couples who find themselves to be well suited and more committed to marriage go on to marry’.<sup>37</sup> The rest weed themselves out or are weeded out by the experience. However, the extent of the support for living together as a ‘trial’ for marriage is not justified by its success in securing the goods sought. It seems rather to rest on a set of dubious cultural myths. Evidence

<sup>33</sup> David Popenoe and Barbara Dafeo Whitehead, *Should We Live Together? What Young Adults Need to Know about Cohabitation before Marriage: A Comprehensive Review of Recent Research* (The National Marriage Project, New Jersey: Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 1999), p.4.

<sup>34</sup> Rindfuss and VandenHeuvel, ‘Cohabitation’, 722.

<sup>35</sup> Willis and Michael, ‘Innovation’, pp.10–11. Research was carried out in 1986 when the link between cohabitation and marriage was considerably stronger (and cohabitation less normative) than it is today.

<sup>36</sup> Popenoe and Whitehead, *Should We Live Together?*, p.4.

<sup>37</sup> See Lynda Clarke and Ann Berrington, ‘Socio-Demographic Predictors of Divorce’, in John Simons (ed.), *High Divorce Rates: The State of the Evidence on Reasons and Remedies, Vols. 1–2* (Lord Chancellor’s Department Research Secretariat, 1999), vol.1, p.16. See the sources cited there.

from several countries shows that ‘couples who cohabit prior to marriage have a higher risk of marital dissolution’.<sup>38</sup> We have just had occasion to query, in a cohabitation arrangement, what is actually being ‘tried’. David Popenoe and Barbara Whitehead warn:

Cohabitation does not reduce the likelihood of eventual divorce; in fact, it may lead to a higher divorce risk. Although the association was stronger a decade or two ago and has diminished in the younger generations, virtually all research on the topic has determined that the chances of divorce ending a marriage preceded by cohabitation are significantly greater than for a marriage not preceded by cohabitation.<sup>39</sup>

However, while their warning remains salutary, there are good grounds for thinking, at least in western Europe, that the association between cohabitation and marital breakdown is becoming weaker (below, propositions 16 and 17).<sup>40</sup>

There is also a fairly obvious conceptual difficulty with ‘trial-marriage’. If compatibility for life is what is being tried or assessed, there must be opportunity for leaving the trial, in case it yields unsatisfactory results. But marriage itself does not allow such opportunity since it is for life. The unconditional love which in Christian marriage reflects Christ’s love for the Church (Eph. 5:25) cannot be nourished in a context where it can be terminated if ‘things don’t work out’. As Jack Dominian says, ‘Human relationships are built on the principles of availability, continuity, reliability and predictability and these are conditions found in the parent–child relationship and in marriage.’<sup>41</sup> But in a trial-marriage all these qualities are compromised. So a trial-marriage is not a marriage.

## **6. Cohabitation may be a union which is different in kind from marriage.**

We have already noted the finding that cohabitation may be more like singleness than marriage. Further research has produced a stronger version of the difference between the two institutions, and concluded that, in many cases, there is a difference *in kind* between them. It remains customary to regard cohabitation as a relationship similar to marriage, except with regard to the duration and

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.    <sup>39</sup> Popenoe and Whitehead, *Should We Live Together?*, p.4.

<sup>40</sup> Kathleen Kiernan, ‘Cohabitation in Western Europe’, *Population Trends* 96 (1999), 25.

<sup>41</sup> Jack Dominian, *The Church and the Sexual Revolution* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1971), p.32, and see p.34.

the degree of commitment involved.<sup>42</sup> But the assumed comparison between cohabitation and marriage may have seriously misled researchers who have persisted in seeing cohabitation as ‘short-duration marriage’,<sup>43</sup> ‘a stage of courtship’,<sup>44</sup> etc. There has been considerable disagreement over this point. ‘An alternative view’ of cohabitation, articulated by cohabitators themselves, is ‘that cohabitation is a distinct institutional form, a “looser bond”, with different goals, norms and behaviors’.<sup>45</sup> Robert Schoen and Robin Weinick believe that in the USA, the behaviour of cohabiting couples in respect of three key indicators (fertility expectations, non-familial activities and home ownership) firmly establishes that ‘cohabitators resemble single persons more than married persons’.

If living together more resembles singleness than marriage, there are clear implications for the understanding of partner selection. If someone is looking for a live-in partner with whom to share a life which *remains importantly a single life*, then he or she will not be looking for a potential bride or bridegroom. As the researchers say, ‘Because partner selection is influenced by the kind of relationship that is sought, the “informal marriage” and “looser bond” perspectives on cohabitation imply different patterns of partner choice.’<sup>46</sup> On this view, of course, marriage is a relationship different *in kind* from cohabitation. ‘While cohabitators anticipate time together, married persons anticipate a lifetime. A different kind of relationship calls for a different kind of partner.’<sup>47</sup> This research provides good support for the view that cohabitations and marriages need not be located on a single continuum, even if many cohabitators eventually marry their partners.

## **7. Men are less committed to their female partners and much less committed to children.**

By the mid-1990s Frances Goldscheider and Robin Kaufman had shown that ‘the substitution of cohabitation for marriage is a *story of lower commitment* of women to men and even more so of

<sup>42</sup> See Willis and Michael, ‘Innovation’, and the extensive literature they cite.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p.10.

<sup>44</sup> E. Thomson and U. Colella, ‘Cohabitation and Marital Stability: Quality or Commitment’, *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 54 (1992), 259.

<sup>45</sup> Robert Schoen and Robin M. Weinick, ‘Partner Choice in Marriages and Cohabitations’, *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 55 (May 1993), 409.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*      <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 413.

men to women and to their relationship as an enduring unit'.<sup>48</sup> While men wanted sex and female companionship, they did not want them within a family-making context, and they also valued the amassing of consumer items which took economic preference over household commitments. Men have 'greatly increased aspirations for expensive consumer goods such as new cars, stereophonic equipment, vacation homes, and recreational vehicles' and they prefer these to the responsibilities of settling into a new family. The authors find that 'although marriage is declining in centrality in both men's and women's lives, the centrality of parenthood is declining far more in men's lives'. There has been 'a retreat from children' and most of it has been on the part of men. There is evidence, they say, that 'men increasingly view children and fatherhood primarily as responsibility and obligation rather than as a source of marriage, happiness or stability'.<sup>49</sup> Since there is less commitment to a cohabiting than to a marital union, it would seem to follow that there is more unfaithfulness in the former. Although cohabitators *expect* their partners to be faithful, they are much less likely to be faithful than married partners.<sup>50</sup>

Recent research (1997) carried out in Norway (where 45% of children are born outside marriage) also identifies a lack of commitment of many cohabitators to their union. However, this lack of commitment is differently explained. A majority of unmarried couples with children had no plans to marry. Asked why, they explained this attitude 'partly by the less easy dissolution of a marriage'. They considered their union to be 'different from marriage in terms of *commitment and stability*'.<sup>51</sup> The lack of commitment involved in living together, which contrasts with the commitment expected by marriage, is explained by the belief (however mistaken it may turn out to be) that cohabitation actually delivers a higher

<sup>48</sup> Frances K. Goldscheider and Gayle Kaufman, 'Fertility and Commitment: Bringing Men Back In', *Population and Development Review* 22 (supp.) (1996), 89 (emphasis added).

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 90. They complain that men are generally not considered in fertility studies and that little is known about men's attitudes to fathering generally.

<sup>50</sup> Linda J. Waite and Kara Joyner, 'Emotional and Physical Satisfaction in Married, Cohabiting and Dating Sexual Unions: Do Men and Women Differ?', in E. Laumann and R. Michael (eds.), *Studies on Sex* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

<sup>51</sup> Øystein Kravdal, 'Wanting a Child without a Firm Commitment to the Partner: Interpretations and Implications of a Common Behaviour Pattern among Norwegian Cohabitants', *European Journal of Population* 13 (1997), 269 (emphasis added).

quality relationship than marriage. Marriage was thought to make it ‘more difficult to resume single life or form another relationship (and perhaps also reduce the probability that attractive alternatives actually appear, since a married person may tend to be considered “reserved”)’.<sup>52</sup> There was also evidence that those cohabiters who wanted to have children but did not want to marry ‘were less likely than others to consider a parental break-up to be very deleterious for the child’.<sup>53</sup>

### **8. Cohabiters with no plans to marry report poorer relationship quality than married people.**

A sample of over 13,000 individuals taken from the United States’ National Survey of Family and Households (1987–8) was used to compare relationship quality between married and cohabiting couples. Quality was measured across five dimensions – disagreement, fairness, happiness, conflict management and interaction.<sup>54</sup> The researchers found ‘a modest but significant difference’ in the first four of the five dimensions. ‘Those in cohabiting unions have poorer relationship quality than their counterparts in marriages. Cohabiters experience disagreement with greater frequency than their married counterparts. Cohabiters report more depression and less satisfaction with life than married people.’<sup>55</sup> As Linda Waite explains:

The key seems to lie in being in a relationship that one thinks will last. Marriage is, by design and agreement, for the long run. So married people see their relationship as much more stable than cohabiting people do. And for any couple, thinking that the relationship is likely to break up has a dampening effect on the spirits. The result – cohabiters show less psychological well-being than similar married people.<sup>56</sup>

But it is in the area of domestic violence that the poorer relationship quality of cohabitation when compared to marriage becomes most obvious. Domestic violence is an acute problem in

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 281. Other reasons given for resistance to marriage included dislike of its formal status, and the time and money costs of a wedding.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 269, and see 281–7.

<sup>54</sup> Susan L. Brown and Alan Booth, ‘Cohabitation Versus Marriage: A Comparison of Relationship Quality’, *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 58 (August 1996), 673.

<sup>55</sup> Waite, ‘Cohabitation’. <sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 25–6.



many societies, and the rigid gender stereotypes associated with it are, sadly, sometimes engendered by religions.<sup>57</sup> It would, however, be completely wrong to assume that, having avoided patriarchal marriage and settled for the less formal and potentially more egalitarian relationship of cohabitation, the chance of becoming a victim of violence was less. Waite's analysis shows that 'even after controlling for education, race, age and gender, people who live together are 1.8 times more likely to report violent arguments than married people', and that '[c]ohabitators with no plans to marry are *twice* as likely to report couple violence as either married or engaged couples'.<sup>58</sup>

### **9. Cohabitation after marriage is sometimes a substitute for remarriage and often precedes it.**

So far only premarital cohabitation has been considered. However, cohabitation after marriage is equally widespread and important. It explains the drop in remarriage rates in the USA and Canada, at least in the 1980s.<sup>59</sup> By the mid-1980s non-marital cohabitation was preferred to remarriage among divorced people in Sweden and Norway.<sup>60</sup> In the UK, around 30% of women marrying for the second time in the late 1960s had cohabited first: in the early 1990s, the number had increased to about 90%.<sup>61</sup> Post-marital informal unions last longer than premarital ones.<sup>62</sup> Religious affiliation was thought to be irrelevant to the decision to cohabit after marriage, presumably because if the disapproval of divorce within the churches did not prevent divorce, similar teachings would be unlikely to prevent the formation of a non-marital

<sup>57</sup> Margaret Bendroth, *Fundamentalism and Gender* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), p.116. And see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and M. Shawn Copeland (eds.), *Concilium: Violence Against Women* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1994).

<sup>58</sup> Waite, 'Cohabitation', 14–15. The figures are based on data from the US 1987/99 National Survey of Families and Households (author's emphasis). See also Brown and Booth, 'Cohabitation', 674–6.

<sup>59</sup> Zheng Wu and T.R. Balakrishnan, 'Cohabitation After Marital Disruption in Canada', *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 56 (August 1994), 723–4.

<sup>60</sup> Blanc, 'Formation and Dissolution of Second Unions'.

<sup>61</sup> John Haskey, 'Families: Their Historical Context, and Recent Trends in the Factors Influencing Their Formation and Dissolution', in Miriam E. David (ed.), *The Fragmenting Family: Does It Matter?* (London: IEA Health and Welfare Unit, 1998), p.23.

<sup>62</sup> Bumpass, Sweet and Cherlin, 'The Role of Cohabitation'.

union.<sup>63</sup> Alternatively, divorced people may feel that in the eyes of the churches, their lives have already shown signs of irregularity and failure, so religious affiliation weakens or vanishes.

### **10. In some developing nations a new form of cohabitation has appeared alongside traditional informal unions.**

Work done in 1991 on the Longitudinal Fertility Survey in Caracas, Venezuela, indicated 'the emergence of a different type of consensual union' more typical of developed societies.<sup>64</sup> The 'traditional' type of consensual union is 'associated with rural origins, low levels of education, low female independence, low male responsibilities, high fertility, and high instability'. It does not replace marriage but remains a version of marriage for people who remain beyond the touch of state bureaucracies, the influence of churches, or the wealth required for starting a family. By contrast the modern type is similar to cohabitation practised in North America and elsewhere. It is 'prevalent among more educated women'; it is 'an alternative to marriage among couples who enter into a consensual union as a trial phase before legal marriage, or those who choose cohabitation as an alternative to being single'.<sup>65</sup> For the cohort of women (aged 25–29 at the time of the survey), the number in consensual unions outnumbered the number in legal marriages by nearly half.<sup>66</sup> The Venezuelan study indicates the extent of the spread of modern cohabitational practice to developing countries together with the attendant upheavals and problems.

### **11. There are ethnic variations in the willingness to cohabit, and in the outcomes of cohabitation.**

There are two points to be emphasized, one about the extent, the other about the meaning, of cohabitation, considered as a part of a broader picture of informal kinship arrangements. In the USA in the early 1980s it was found that among Puerto Ricans 59% of

<sup>63</sup> Wu and Balakrishnan, 'Cohabitation', 731.

<sup>64</sup> Emilio A. Parrado and Martin Tienda, 'Women's Roles and Family Formation in Venezuela: New Forms of Consensual Unions?', *Social Biology* 44.1–2 (September 1997), 6.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

non-marital births occurred within informal unions.<sup>67</sup> In the late 1980s, a growing body of research confirmed that African Americans are more likely to cohabit than Whites, and both African American and Puerto Rican women are more likely to bear children within such unions than are non-Hispanic Whites.<sup>68</sup> In short, 'both the prevalence and the meaning of cohabitation differ by race and ethnicity'.<sup>69</sup> Between 1960 and 1996 the proportion of Black babies born to unmarried mothers (whether single or cohabiting) rose from 22% to 70% of the total.<sup>70</sup>

Reference to poverty and high rates of unemployment is thought to provide only a partial, albeit important explanation. '[F]or a complete explanation one must look beyond economics to history and culture.'<sup>71</sup> These may include 'long-standing group differences in the organization of family life', 'extended family ties' and 'well developed extended kin networks, often involving coresidence' which 'have served as important mechanisms for coping with economic hardship'.<sup>72</sup> Non-Hispanic Whites are more accustomed to living in nuclear families than other groups. When they experience cohabitation it still tends to be for relatively brief periods. However, informal unions have long played a more central role in other groups, leading to the argument that 'black families are not necessarily centered around conjugal unions, which are the *sine qua non* of the nuclear family. Among Blacks, households centered around consanguineal relatives have as much legitimacy (and for most people, as much respectability) as family units as do households

<sup>67</sup> N. Landale and S. Hauan, 'The Family Life Course of Puerto Rican Children', *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 54 (1992), 912-24.

<sup>68</sup> Wendy D. Manning and Nancy S. Landale, 'Racial and Ethnic Differences in the Role of Cohabitation in Premarital Childbearing', *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 58 (February 1996). And see Wendy D. Manning, 'Marriage and Cohabitation Following Premarital Conception', *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 55 (November 1993), 839-50.

<sup>69</sup> Manning and Landale, 'Racial and Ethnic Differences', 63, 75. See further references there.

<sup>70</sup> Morehouse Research Institute and Institute for American Values, *Turning the Corner on Father Absence in Black America* (Atlanta and New York: 1999), p.10.

<sup>71</sup> Andrew Cherlin, *Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1992), p.107.

<sup>72</sup> Manning and Landale, 'Racial and Ethnic Differences', 65.

centered around conjugal unions.<sup>73</sup> Among some Whites even in the modern period, e.g., convicts deported to Australia from Britain and Ireland,<sup>74</sup> families in frontier territories in the USA,<sup>75</sup> and rural communities in many countries, access to bureaucracies which would formalize irregular unions has been unavailable. In New Zealand and Australia the indigenous Maori and Aboriginal populations 'are culturally more attuned to consensual partnering than the European majorities'.<sup>76</sup>

It may therefore be fairly claimed that the nuclear family for a variety of reasons is less historically rooted in some ethnic traditions than in others. That much may be said in advance of any consideration of slavery. The influence of the dominant economic system was at its most brutal in the institution of slavery, where conditions for marriage were difficult or impossible. A recent analysis of the causes of father absence in Black America is applicable equally to the less formal kinship arrangements within that community. Drawing attention to the legacy of slavery and the racism and economic discrimination that followed it, the authors say:

The legacy of slavery is tragically relevant to the issue of Black fatherhood, for the conditions of slavery in the United States provided exactly the opposite of what is required in order to preserve the fragile bond between father and child. By law, the male slave could fulfill none of the duties of husband and father. The institution of slavery created a sub-culture where all the societal norms, mores, expectations, and laws, instead of helping to connect men to their offspring, forcibly severed the bonds between fathers and their children.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>73</sup> N. Sudharkasa, 'African and Afro-American Family Structure: A Comparison', *Black Scholar* 11 (1980), 54–5.

<sup>74</sup> Gordon A. Carmichael, 'From Floating Brothels to Suburban Semirespectability: Two Centuries of Nonmarital Pregnancy in Australia', *Journal of Family History* 21 (July 1996), 281–316. And see M. Sturma, 'Eye of the Beholder: The Stereotype of Women Convicts, 1788–1852', *Labour History* 34 (1978), 3–10.

<sup>75</sup> Seff, 'Cohabitation', 142.

<sup>76</sup> Carmichael, 'Consensual Partnering', 64, citing Gordon A. Carmichael, 'Living Together in New Zealand: Data on Coresidence at Marriage and on *de facto* Unions', *New Zealand Population Review* 10.3 (1984), 41–54; and A. Gray, 'Aboriginal Marriage and Survival', *Journal of the Australian Population Association* 1 (1984), 18–30.

<sup>77</sup> Morehouse Research Institute and Institute For American Values, *Turning the Corner*, p.10.

The authors were divided on the causes of father absence, some identifying contemporary economic conditions as the principal cause, others the continuing influence of slavery on attitudes and behaviour. Both are doubtless to some extent responsible. In these circumstances any understanding of cohabitation has to explore how it has become locked into traditions of marital informality, together with the continuing and horrendous influence of slavery and the disproportionate burden of unemployment born by ethnic minorities.

#### COHABITATION: SOME CONSEQUENCES

In the previous section some properties of cohabitation were described. In this section some consequences of cohabitation are described, principally for children, but also for their parents and society.

### **12. The increase in cohabitation has contributed directly to the increase in the number of children of single parents.**

Little has so far been said about children or about how they fare in cohabitation arrangements. They fare worse than their parents. First, there is a strong connection between the increase in cohabitation and the increase in single-parent families. This has been noticed only recently. That is because researchers have typically treated non-marital pregnancies as pregnancies of *single* mothers, whereas many so-called single mothers are in fact in cohabiting relationships when they become pregnant. The connection between pregnancy and cohabitation at conception began to be made during the 1980s.<sup>78</sup> But does the rise in number of cohabiting couples really lead to more children being born, not merely outside marriage, but outside the cohabiting relationships in which they were conceived? Yes. Recent research in the UK (1997) proves the connection dramatically. It indicates that ‘about two-fifths of one parent families headed by never-married mothers are created through childbearing within cohabitation followed by dissolution of the cohabitational union’.<sup>79</sup> In Britain there are now more single

<sup>78</sup> Lewis and Kiernan, ‘Boundaries’. <sup>79</sup> Ermisch, *Pre-Marital Cohabitation*, abstract.

pre-married, than single post-married mothers.<sup>80</sup> One in five of all children are children of one-parent families.

Cohabitation then, is a *source* of single-parent families. In the UK, for every twenty cohabiting couples, eleven marry each other, eight split up without marrying, while one remains together and unmarried after ten years.<sup>81</sup> Of cohabiting couples who are pregnant, half get married. It is the other half that cause concern. Gershuny and Berthoud comment: 'The other half of the cohabiting couples split up before their child has left primary school. Four out of ten separate before the child even starts school. The women become "single" mothers, though they might be considered "separated"'. In fact two out of five women who become "single" mothers do so via a cohabitation that does not survive.'<sup>82</sup> The position is similar in the USA. Over a third of all cohabiting couples have at least one child, and 'fully three quarters of children born to cohabiting parents will see their parents split up before they reach age sixteen, whereas only about a third of children born to married parents face a similar fate'.<sup>83</sup>

### **13. Cohabitators with children are very likely to split up.**

Unmarried couples with children are much less likely to proceed to marry than couples without children. Work done on the Canadian Family and Friends Survey in 1990 showed that the 'presence and number of children within cohabitation have a strong negative influence on separation for both sexes' and 'a strong negative effect on the transition to marriage'.<sup>84</sup> Work done in Britain for the Research Centre on Micro-social Change (1997) concluded that

[D]irect comparison between first children born in a cohabitation and those born in a marriage shows that the former are much more likely to end up with only one parent. Starting from the birth of the first child, half of the cohabiting parents have separated within ten years, compared

<sup>80</sup> 'Single lone mothers eclipsed divorced lone mothers in relative numbers from the beginning of the 1990s.' See John Haskey, 'One-Parent Families and their Dependent Children in Great Britain', in Reuben Ford and Jane Millar (eds.), *Private Lives and Public Responses* (London: Policy Studies Institute, 1998), p.28.

<sup>81</sup> Gershuny and Berthoud, *New Partnerships?*, p.4.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p.5. <sup>83</sup> Popenoe and Whitehead, *Should We Live Together?*, p.7.

<sup>84</sup> Zheng Wu and T. R. Balakrishnan, 'Dissolution of Premarital Cohabitation in Canada', *Demography* 32.4 (November 1995), 528.

with only an eighth of parents who were married before the baby was born.<sup>85</sup>

#### **14. Children raised by cohabiting couples are likely to be poorer than children raised by married parents.**

The difference is very marked. In fact, 'cohabiting couples are economically more like single parents than like married couples'.<sup>86</sup> A comparative study of the poverty rate (in the USA in 1996) of children of cohabiting and of married parents showed that '[w]hile the poverty rate for children living in married couple households was about 6%, it was 31% for children living in cohabiting households, much closer to the rate of 45% for children living in families headed by single mothers'.<sup>87</sup> Another study shows two-parent families have mean levels of wealth six times as high as cohabiting couple families.<sup>88</sup> In the United States in 1990, 2.2 million children lived in cohabiting couple families. Data from the 1990 census gave information about parental income and showed that the income of cohabiting couples resembled more the income of single-parent families than of married couples. The 'mean income of male cohabiting partners is substantially lower – almost one half lower – than the mean income of males in married couples. Children in married-couple families (at least in the USA) appear to be better off economically than children in cohabiting-couple families because of the education and income of their parents, rather than simply because they share a residence with two adults'.<sup>89</sup> Neither is the deficit merely economic. While the literature on single-parent families 'acknowledges their resilience and commitment', it 'also shows how the life-chances of children are impaired in a number of specific respects'. Married-couple families are 'more likely to foster wellbeing', and to demonstrate to children the values of 'trust, faithfulness and love'.<sup>90</sup>

<sup>85</sup> Gershuny and Berthoud, *New Partnerships?*, p.5.

<sup>86</sup> Popenoe and Whitehead, *Should We Live Together?*, p.8.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p.9, summarizing Wendy D. Manning and Daniel T. Lichter, 'Parental Cohabitation and Children's Economic Well-Being', *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 58 (November 1996), 1009.

<sup>88</sup> LingXin Hao, 'Family Structure, Private Transfers, and the Economic Well-Being of Families with Children', *Social Forces* 75 (1996), 269–92.

<sup>89</sup> Manning and Lichter, 'Parental Cohabitation', 1009.

<sup>90</sup> Keith White, 'The Case for Marriage', *Third Way* 19.1 (February 1996), 12.