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“Part of the Life Course?” Cohabitation in Contemporary America

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The U.S. Census Bureau has just reported that cohabitation among heterosexual couples has hit record numbers as living together — as opposed to getting married — becomes more and more mainstream.

USA Today provides extensive reporting on this issue, along with analysis that seems to celebrate this development.

In one article, [“Census Reports More Unmarried Couples Living Together,”](#) the paper provides a summary of the findings. As the paper reports:
The number of opposite-sex couples who live together, less than a million 30 years ago, hit 6.4 million in 2007, show federal data released Monday. Cohabiting couples now make up almost 10% of all opposite-sex U.S. couples, married and unmarried.

That’s up from 2006, when the Census bureau reported 5 million unmarried, opposite-sex households. But that figure was based on a question that some respondents might have found unclear.

The important shift is not found between 2006 and 2007, but between 1977 and 2007. Just thirty years ago cohabitation was rare and marriage was the norm for heterosexual couples. All that has seemingly changed.

Nevertheless, the other side of the story was downplayed. If cohabitating couples make up “almost 10%” of heterosexual couples, then marriage is still very much the norm. In fact, the American numbers on marriage are much different than those found in many European nations, where the percentages of unmarried couples living together is much higher. The resilience of marriage is a big part of this story, but that fact doesn’t provide much headline fodder.

The paper also suggested that the true figures concerning cohabitation are obscured by the fact that many couples who are currently married had previously cohabitated. One researcher cited by the paper suggested that the American pattern of cohabitation is more of a life stage than a permanent lifestyle.

Sociologist Linda Waite of the University of Chicago “says living together in the USA isn’t very stable or long-term, compared to some Scandinavian countries where it’s more likely to be a long-term committed relationship.” She said that in America cohabitation is “part of the life course.” As she explained: “It’s something people do that leads to somewhere,” she says. “If it doesn’t lead to marriage, it leads to splitsville.”

USA Today also provided an analysis article, [“Living Together No Longer ‘Playing House.’”](#) In this article, Sharon Jayson argues that cohabitation has been falsely blamed for later marital problems and breakups. As she introduced her article:

A generation ago, unmarried couples who lived together were often derided for “shacking up” or “playing house.” Studies in the 1980s supported those negative stereotypes, suggesting that cohabitation could doom a long-term relationship, substantially raising the risk of divorce.

While researchers say the overall divorce rate is higher among those who lived together before marriage, now they don't blame cohabitating.

As Pamela Smock, a sociologist at the Population Studies Center at the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, suggested, "There's been a sea change in societal, cultural and individual acceptance of cohabitation."

More from her article:

"The nature of cohabitation has changed," says Jay Teachman, a sociology professor at Western Washington University in Bellingham. "Cohabitators 20 years ago were the rule breakers, the rebels, the risk takers — the folks who were perhaps not as interested in marriage, and using cohabitation as an alternative to marriage."

"Twenty or 25 years ago, if you were cohabiting and then married them, the marriage was more likely to dissolve and end in divorce," he says. "Today, that's not the case. You can cohabit with your spouse and not experience increased risk of divorce. We're making these finer distinctions that we didn't make before."

In an interesting twist, one researcher argued that cohabitating couples should be seen as "a family form in its own right," as completely distinct from marriage. *USA Today* rounded out its reporting with a poll. As the paper reported its findings:

Most people today reject the notion that couples who live together before marriage are more likely to get divorced, finds a weekend USA TODAY/Gallup Poll of 1,007 adults.

Almost half (49%) said living together makes divorce less likely; 13% said it makes no difference. Just 31% said living together first makes divorce more likely; 7% had no opinion.

The fascinating aspect of this poll is the very fact that the paper thought that a poll would be valuable. The poll actually reveals nothing about the actual impact of cohabitation on marriage, but only on what people *think* about the impact of cohabitation.

Once all this is put together, a portrait of a changing America comes into view. The most significant data reveals the incredible cultural shift on cohabitation since the late 1970s. The larger picture concerning marriage would have to include the impact of so-called "no-fault" divorce laws that became widespread during the same period.

Even as marriage is still the norm, increasing numbers of heterosexual couples are cohabitating before, if not instead of, marrying. The Census Bureau reports statistics, but the more urgent dimension of this development is moral. The subversion of marriage comes at great cost, even if couples do not experience what they describe as trauma or trouble. The reality of sexual intimacy outside of marriage always comes with a moral and spiritual cost, but this is rejected by a culture in denial.

For many, cohabitation is now just "part of the life course."

