

Working Paper 08-03

October 2008

Cohabiting on the Edge: Living Together Apart

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We also gratefully acknowledge core support to the Three-City Study from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development through grants HD36093 and HD25936, as well as the support of many government agencies and private foundations.

For a complete list of funders, please see [www.threecitystudy.jhu.edu](http://www.threecitystudy.jhu.edu).

## Abstract

Cohabitation is usually viewed in terms of already established relationships types, particularly marriage. However, for many couples cohabitation is a relationship form in its own right, a situation particularly true for low-income women, who are increasingly unlikely to enter successful marriages. While cohabitation is generally believed to involve a serious, interdependent union, those who cohabit are not necessarily engaged in one. Among low-income couples, a combination of need and obligation, accompanied by shared parenting and a previous relationship, can create cohabiting relationships in which the cohabiters do not view themselves as a couple. Such couples share living space and may share financial, household, or parenting responsibilities even though they have no romantic attachment to each other. We term such relationships living together apart, or LTA. These relationships emphasize the bonds that shared parenting creates and may explain some disparate accounts of cohabitation status. In addition, LTA relationships demonstrate some of the previously unobserved diversity in cohabiting relationships and suggest that we further question how we define families.

While cohabitating relationships have always existed, especially among the poor and near-poor (cite), cohabitation garnered little attention before such relationships became mainstream. Over the last 20 years, cohabitation has emerged as a common practice among all social classes and racial and ethnic groups (Bumpass & Lu, 2000). In recent analyses, sociologists have generally viewed cohabitation in one of three ways: as a precursor to marriage (e.g. Bumpass & Sweet, 1989; Lichter, Qian, and Mellott, 2006), as an alternative to marriage, especially among minority or immigrant groups (Landale and Fennelly, 1992; Phillips and Sweeney, 2005), or, less commonly, as an alternative to being single (Rindfuss and van den Heuvel, 1990). These conceptualizations make use of an already commonly established relationship form – marriage – and try to place cohabitation in its context. This view of cohabitation is understandable, given that marriage constitutes a widespread cultural schema—a knowledge structure that allows individuals to fill in gaps when complete information is not available (Dimaggio, 1997). Marriage is in the “cultural toolkit” (Swidler 1986) of most Americans. Outside observers who see two people living together, therefore, may try to make sense of the relationship by placing it in the familiar context of marriage. However, the schema of marriage may be inadequate to deconstruct what is actually occurring in some of these relationships. In fact, a significant proportion of cohabiting couples express no interest in marrying (Manning & Smock, 2002). This article seeks to examine a form of cohabitation that exists outside the schema of marriage: women who live with their children’s father but say they are not in a cohabiting relationship. In particular, it asks how non-marriage based cohabitation may serve the economic, parenting, and social

needs of low-income mothers and how this knowledge should shape measurements of relationships, our conception of families, and public policy.

### *Theoretical Background*

Life course theory posits that there is a contextual order for life events, with the establishment of a couple's relationship and marriage occurring before childbearing (Price, McKenry & Murphy, 2000). The assumption is that the couple's relationship with each other should precede, and indeed supersede, the relationship either partner has with their children. [no paragraph]Most assessments of cohabitation assume the primacy of the relationship between the members of the couple. For many relationships, this makes sense, but people enter into cohabiting relationships for all sorts of reasons. Some *are* based on wanting to form an intimate union. Especially among middle-class couples, cohabitation is usually a step in the marriage process (Lichter, Qian, & Mellott, 2006). However, low-income women may face constraints that lead them to form cohabiting relationships with very different motivations that are disconnected from marriage.

In her study of women's choices regarding work and motherhood, Gerson (1985) points out that women must "respond to the social conditions they inherit" and "construct their lives out of the available raw materials" (p. 37). She notes that "class position exerts a particularly powerful influence upon a woman's choices, shaping her alternatives and defining her strengths and opportunities" (p. 40). Wilson has emphasized the practical inability of low-income men to earn sufficient wages to support a household (1990, 1996), which he says makes such men unmarriageable. Looking beyond earning potential alone, Edin and Kefalas (2005) say that the low-income Philadelphia-area

women they interviewed had little trust that the men available to them could earn a living, and in addition remain faithful, refrain from illegal activity, treat them as equals, or make their family their top priority, conditions they felt were all necessary to make a partner marriageable. In addition, many of the women saw themselves as unprepared for marriage because they were too immature and financially unstable.

These kinds of constraints may lead lower-income women to marry later in the life course or not at all (Edin & Reed, 2005), and the importance of romantic relationships may diminish. In the Families and Communities Study, a sample of 302 low-income African American families in Chicago who had adolescent daughters, mothers reported rarely discussing relationships within the realm of marriage, even though many of them had married or cohabited themselves. Only 9% mentioned either marriage or a “stable, long-term, or happy relationship” as a goal they had for their daughters’ futures (Coley, 2002). These mothers emphasized “the centrality of financial, emotional and general independence.” The likelihood of marrying by age 30 is substantially lower when a woman is African American, but it is also lower for women who are lower-income or live in a central city (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002), indicating that similar relationship trajectories may exist across racial-ethnic lines among the urban poor.

When cohabitation occurs, its primary purpose may extend beyond the relationship itself. Sassler’s (2004) qualitative study of the process of entering into cohabitation indicates that finances and housing were two of the main reasons couples gave for why they began to cohabit, with a marriage trial rarely mentioned by any of the respondents. In Edin’s (2000) study of low-income mothers, many professed enforcing a “pay and stay” rule, in which men were invited to cohabit only as long as they provided

necessary economic support to the household. Even women who felt romantic love for their partners might force them out if they lost employment. Defying life course theory, many women have children outside of marriage or stable cohabiting relationships (Hertz, 2006). For many women, then, cohabitation may be a *result* of childbearing rather than its precursor. Raley (2001) found that young, single pregnant women were more likely to enter cohabitations than marriages as a response to the pregnancy and that cohabitators who became pregnant were unlikely to marry formally. While some couples may ultimately commit to one another, research indicates that even when low-income, cohabiting parents express an interest in marrying, few actually do (Parke, 2004).

Relationships, therefore, may center around the production and needs of children rather than on the adult couple. Parents may decide to cohabit for the benefit of their children or because cohabitation allows both parents direct daily contact with their offspring. In her analysis of the Time, Love and Cash in Couples with Children (TLC3) study, Reed (2006) found that nearly three-quarters of the respondents began their cohabitations in response to a pregnancy. These couples talked about their decisions to cohabit in terms of wanting to be a family and allowing them to share expenses and parenting. Regarding his baby daughter, one father said it was important to “be a part of her everyday living...at least for the first year or whatever” (p. 1123). His decision to live with his partner was based on having access to his child. His phrasing “for the first year or whatever” indicates that once the need for daily intensive parenting decreases, the cohabitation will end. Similarly, one mother says her primary reason for cohabiting is that her partner “can help me with the baby” (p. 1123). Rather than viewing cohabiting relationships as marriage-like, these couples specifically valued the ease with which they

can leave the *relationship* should they want or need to, while still being able to share in *parenting* their child.

Edin and Kefalas (2005) found that the low-income couples they interviewed generally did not plan to marry but still wanted children. For them, “marriage is both fragile and rare, and the bond shared children create may be the most significant and enduring tie available” (p. 31). The primacy of the parenting relationship over the couple relationship is evident when the terms “baby mama” and “baby daddy” are more common terms for former partners than “ex-girlfriend” or “ex-boyfriend.” Despite the fact that cohabitation supposedly offers participants the ability to exit a relationship with ease, sharing a child establishes a legally permanent tie through the child. Couples who view cohabitation as a temporary convenience find that their children have created an enduring bond. As a result, while couples may intend for their relationship to be fleeting, they may instead maintain long, ambiguous, uncommitted “suspended relationships” (Roy, Buckmiller, & McDowell, 2008).

Nock (1995) argues that cohabitation, like remarriage, is an “incomplete institution.” And like remarriage, cohabitation is rife with boundary ambiguity. There is no institutional ceremony and no law that enforces or recognizes the inception or demise of a cohabiting relationship. Those analyzing previously-collected data have found discrepancies in direct versus inferred reports of cohabitation. Manning and Smock (2005), for example, observe that cohabitators often have trouble citing exactly when a cohabitation began, as they often “slide into cohabitation,” blurring the lines between cohabitation and singlehood (p. 995). In their analysis of data from the Fragile Families study, Teitler, Reichman, and Koball (2006) find that cohabitation reports are influenced

by relationship quality. They report that in two surveys a year apart, retrospective reports of cohabitation are influenced by current relationship status. Those currently cohabiting tended to revise past cohabitation status upward, while those who were no longer cohabiting revised downward. In their analysis of cohabiting stepfamilies in the Add Health data, Brown and Manning (forthcoming) identify “boundary ambiguity” among teens and their mothers, in which adolescents and mothers living in the same household report different family structures. In particular, they say that “boundary ambiguity is associated with less effective family functioning and reduced relationship quality” (p. 10). In other words, in some cases in which there may have been co-residence, the teen and the parent could not agree that a cohabiting relationship existed.

Certainly parenting relationships can be rife with ambiguous boundaries, a circumstance that is frequently observed in cases of divorce (Madden-Derdich, Leonard, & Christopher, 1999; Stewart, 2005). But boundary ambiguity that exists between adults does not have to trickle down to children. It may be that parents who cannot clearly define their relationship to each other have no doubt about their roles in relation to their children. Each parent may also feel unambiguous about the other’s parenting role. A shared commitment to children, however, can further complicate the ambiguities of the adults’ relationship.

### *Alternative Relationship Forms*

Because cohabitation is so often framed in terms of marriage, it is usually interpreted as a serious, interdependent, couple-based relationship that includes a genuine interest in being together. When this is not the case, what do we call ambiguous

cohabitations/co-residences? Irene Levin (2004) recently explored what she calls “living apart together,” or LAT, a relationship that she says has developed in response to changing norms. To be considered LAT, “the couple has to agree they are a couple; others have to see them as such; and they must live in separate homes” (p. 227). These LAT couples are more serious than “going steady”; they are often married or have marriage-like levels of commitment, yet they are not living together. We would suggest that, in contrast, some couples who co-reside may *not* agree that they are a couple, and others may not see them as such, even though they *are* living together. Rather than living apart together, these couples are living together apart, or LTA.

Levin says that LAT couples often maintain separate residences because of work or family obligations. Ironically, LTA couples may share a residence for similar reasons. Couples who can afford to maintain two households are generally now low-income. For low income couples, cohabiting may allow for partners to share childcare so that both may work. Transportation might preclude their availability to their children if they lived separately. Since housing is very expensive, parents may not be able to afford to have separate residences, even if that would be their preference. In general, we know very little about the reasons behind or dynamics of LTA relationships. To further understanding of the full spectrum of cohabitation, we must take a closer look.

### *Data*

In this paper, we analyze the Three-City Study, an ethnography examining the well-being of children and their families who were residing in low-income neighborhoods in Boston, Chicago, and San Antonio. We draw supporting information from a survey of families in the same neighborhoods. Families were recruited into the

ethnographic sample between June 1999, and December 2000. Recruitment sites include formal childcare settings (e.g., Head Start); the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program; neighborhood community centers; local welfare offices; churches; and other public assistance agencies. Of the 256 families who participated in the ethnography, 212 families were selected if they included a child age 2 to 4. The other 44 were recruited specifically because they had a child age 0 to 8 years with a moderate or severe disability. Families were visited an average of once or twice per month for 12 to 18 months and then every six months thereafter through 2003.

The Three-City Study survey was conducted in 1999 with a random-sample survey of 2,402 children and their caregivers. The survey was conducted as follows. In households in low-income neighborhoods (93 percent of the selected block groups had poverty rates of 20 percent or more) with a child age zero to four or age 10 to 14, with a female primary caregiver, and with incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty line, interviewers randomly selected one child (the “focal child”) and conducted in-person interviews with that child’s primary caregiver (a mother in over 90 percent of the cases). Families receiving benefits from Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the main cash welfare program, were over-sampled. The response rate was 74 percent. The survey data are weighted to correct for over-sampling and to give equal weight to the experiences of families in each city (see Cherlin, Fomby, & Moffitt, 2002).

### *Methods*

When evidence of LTA relationships began emerging in the ethnographic data, we turned to the survey to see if we could find confirming evidence. To determine

whether women in the survey may have been involved in an LTA relationship, we first selected all women from Wave 1 who said they were not currently married or cohabiting. We looked at the household roster, in which the women listed all of the people in the household. The rosters identified each person's relationship to the mother and to the focal child. We selected all the cases in which the focal child's father was on the roster. We also selected cases in which the roster listed a man not related to either the mother or the focal child, but who was less than five years younger and no more than 20 years older than the mother. Women who had one of these two types of men on the household roster were considered to be in LTA relationships. We then ran a series of cross-tabulations looking at how LTA status interacted with age, race-ethnicity (white, black and Hispanic), number of children in the home, and measures of childhood abuse and domestic violence experienced by the mother.

In the ethnography, we reviewed the family profiles of all 212 non-disability cases. These profiles range from approximately 10-150 pages and categorize relevant information, gleaned from transcripts and ethnographers' field notes, on a broad range of topics from household routines, to education, to intimate relationships. All profiles were read at least twice. The women we classified as being in LTA relationships lived with men who one would assume to be their intimate partners, men whom they had known for a number of years. These relationships were classified as LTA if they met all of the following criteria:

- The couple had been in a romantic relationship in the past and had a child together.
- The couple had separated at some point.

- The couple were co-residing and had been for at least one month.
- At least one member of the couple said that they were not in a relationship.
- The cohabitation was based on a sense of need or obligation on the part of one or both partners, rather than on romantic interest.

After identifying women who engaged in LTA relationships, we further examined full transcripts and field notes for those cases. Women were classified by race-ethnicity, including Hispanic sub-categories. We also observed the race ethnicity of the men, the ages of the men and women, the number of children in the household and their sexes and ages, and the number of children in the home who were the offspring of the couple. Coding of economic, parenting, cultural, and other life aspects was done with MAXQDA qualitative analysis software.

### *Results (Quantitative)*

An analysis of the survey indicated that on the day it was conducted, 52 women were potentially in LTA relationships. Of these 52 women, 28 listed the father of the focal child on the household roster, and another 24 listed a man no more than 5 years younger or 20 years older who was not biologically related to them or the focal child (it is possible that this man could be the father of another child in the household). However, all of these women said they were neither married nor in a cohabiting relationship.

Women in the survey who appear to be in LTA relationships tend to be younger than average (around 28, versus a mean of 33 for the survey sample as a whole) and were more likely to be African American than white or Latina. The number of children in the

household was not significantly different than in the households of non-LTA women, and women in LTA relationships were not more likely than other women to have experienced domestic violence or childhood abuse.

While the absolute number of potential LTA relationships encompasses a small percentage of the total survey participants, it is important to consider that LTA relationships often do not last long. Thus, many more of the women surveyed could have been involved in an LTA relationship at some other point. This data simply indicate that 52 were potentially in LTA relationships on one particular day.

### *Results (Qualitative)*

An analysis of the non-disability cases in the Three City Study ethnography produced 19 women—almost 10%—who were in an LTA relationship at some point during the course of the study. In the ethnography, LTA relationships usually involve a combination of need and obligation that results in people co-residing in a relationship that does not look like what is ordinarily considered cohabitation. The women in these relationships generally have little trust in men. If they trust their partners at all, they often exhibit “compartmentalized trust” (Burton, Cherlin, Winn, & Estacion, 2008), in which they trust their partners to fulfill certain roles, such as financial obligations or parenting responsibilities, but they do not trust them overall as husbands or partners, and they do not call them such. Shared children were present in the LTA relationships of all 19 of the women. Two LTA relationships involved couples who were legally married, and one other was a divorced couple. Most of the other couples would have considered themselves as being in a committed relationship at some point in the past. In all but one

case, the woman identifies the relationship as LTA, usually specifically saying that she and the man she lives with are “not together” or “separated” and referring to the him as a “roommate,” a “tenant” or her children’s father. Though it is generally unclear what the man thinks, as only the women were interviewed, in the one case mentioned above, the woman tells the ethnographer that she is upset that her daughter’s father has begun living with her, yet denies to outsiders that they are in a relationship.

Of the women in the ethnography who reported an LTA relationship, 2 are non-Hispanic white, 4 are Puerto Rican, 6 are U.S. born women of Mexican heritage, and 7 are African American. For all but two women, their male LTA partners are of the same race-ethnicity. The women range in age from 16 to 42 and have from 1 to 9 children. Ten have a child with at least one man in addition to their LTA partner.

Women engage in LTA relationships with both practical and emotional motives. These relationships are primarily based on housing and co-parenting, with other financial or social needs occasionally contributing to sustaining the relationship. Mothers may rely on an LTA partner for housing or childcare. Conversely, they might feel obligated to provide housing to a man because he is the father of their children, or they might believe that he and his children should be together. An LTA couple may have little or no interest in being with one another but be quite committed to co-parenting. Some women may seek social legitimacy through creating the appearance of a conventional family (see Roy & Burton, 2007). Sometimes the woman has one primary motivation for the LTA while the man has another.

### *Parenting Based LTAs*

A woman who is uninterested in having a relationship with her child(ren)'s father may still value the man's fathering role. Three women engaged in LTAs solely for parenting reasons, while another 5 engaged in LTAs for parenting in combination with housing. Parenting can benefit the children, the mother and the father on a practical level—the children get two parents, the mother gets help with childrearing, and the father gets to spend time with his kids. Sonny, who is Hispanic, and Joanne, who is white, live in San Antonio and have an 11-year relationship history riddled with domestic violence. Joanne no longer sees them as a couple. However, Sonny lives with her, even though this jeopardizes Joanne's housing status, primarily because Joanne sees his role as a father to their six children as very important. The ethnographer writes:

Sonny has been helping Joanne with the day-to-day care of the children.

Importantly, she notes that she and this man work together to be mother and father to their children, even though they cannot be together as husband and wife.

Joanne says she has had only one boyfriend since she and her children's father separated, and she tried to keep it clear that he was not taking over their father's role with them. She says she would never bring a guy into the house because she thinks it would be disrespectful and confusing to the children.

Of course, Sonny does sleep there, but Joanne is clear that they are not intimate, as that would give Sonny the kind of control over her that she feels a husband or cohabiting partner expects to have: *“Because once we sleep together, it's all over but the*

*complaining and 'you can't go here, you can't go there.'*” Sonny contributes financially to the household when he can, but there are times when Joanne supports him.

Similarly, Yasmin, a 23-year old Puerto Rican mother of a preschooler in Chicago, allows her former boyfriend to live with her in part because she sees him as the “perfect father.” When asked about their relationship status however, Yasmin says, “*We live together but we are not really together together.*” She does not trust him as a partner because of his previous infidelities, but she trusts him as a parent and roommate. She outlines the conditions of his living in her home: “*I was like, the only way you gonna stay here is if you do what I want you to do, if you do what I tell you to do. That's pay all the bills...and do everything.*” The ethnographer notes that “Joel cleans the house and washes. Yasmin doesn't want him there but he's helping out a lot and [Yasmin says] ‘*That's why I haven't kicked him out yet.*’” Joel sleeps in the same bed with Yasmin and their son Jake because the apartment is so small, but Yasmin says, “*We need more space; I need more space.*” When asked her relationship to Joel, she calls him her “baby's father.” She dates other men and plans to terminate the relationship as soon as she no longer needs Joel's assistance. She does not want to stay with Joel on a permanent basis. Though they have lived together for the majority of the time they have known each other, she feels little obligation to the relationship that she and Joel have with each other.

Parenting based LTAs can also have a strong social component, in which the mother feels strongly about presenting as a conventional family and preserving her own sense of respectability. Marka, a Puerto Rican mother in her mid twenties, began dating John when she was in her teens. They have had an on-and-off relationship involving frequent domestic violence, and in the past Marka has moved to try to escape from John.

Marka has dated others, but at age 22 gives birth to Tia, who is fathered by John. Conventional parenting ties are especially important to Marka, for her own sake as well as her daughter's. She is more invested in the social appearances of the relationship than in the relationship itself. While John is serving a three-year jail sentence, he is anxious to resume his relationship with Marka upon his release. Marka is reluctant, but says she believes he will change in part because "*he is Tia's father.*" Though she says, "*I don't feel anything for him anymore*" and she is dating another man, she allows John to move back in with her when he is released from prison. Later, she conceives another child with him. She says that "*I am not in love, you know?*" and that she is ready to terminate the relationship. However, she does not want to "*be having kids in my 30's*" and she does not like when women have children with several different men. She continues to let John live with her when he becomes unemployed.

#### *Housing based LTAs: Men*

When Stack (1997) studied a low income community in the late 1960s, she found that extended kin networks kept people afloat through hard times. However, she pointed out that a lack of reciprocity could force someone out of the network. More contemporary scholars indicate that these extended kin networks have broken down further, and for many people may be virtually non-existent (Kaplan, 1997; Roschelle, 1997; McDonald & Armstrong, 2001; Dominguez & Watson, 2003). When a former partner needs housing, the bonds of shared parenthood may be the last vestige of extended kin that can be tapped for resources, leading to an LTA relationship. Even when there is no reciprocal support, one parent may be willing to help the other.

Lizzy, a white mother in Boston, has her white ex-husband and the father of her two grown children living in the house, though they separated about 20 years ago and are now divorced. She says, "*He just needed a place to stay but he is not in my life.*" In emphasizing how much she is not interested in an actual relationship with anyone, Lizzy says that as a single woman and foster parent, she is "*happier and does not want to take anyone's crap.*" Even though her former husband meets no needs of hers, she feels obligated to let him live with her because of *his* needs.

A similar situation exists between Tonya, an African American mother in Boston, and Curtis, the African American father of her youngest child. The ethnographer refers to Curtis as Tonya's "recliner tenant" because he sleeps on a recliner in her living room. Tonya does not find the relationship worthwhile: "Tonya is giving Curtis until May or June to find a new place to live; she does not want to be bothered with maintaining a relationship with him. He only wants to sit around the house and does not contribute to the household finances. He is 36 years old and wants to be treated like one of Tonya's children. They do not sleep together and Tonya does not even want him near her. He has lived in Tonya's apartment for about one year and Tonya has not given him a key."

Tonya may have initially hoped that Curtis would contribute more. Her decision to end the LTA is indicative of the "pay and stay" rule (Edin, 2000): Those who cannot contribute cannot live in the household. On the other hand, while Curtis contributes little or nothing, Tonya does not want to see her child's father living in the street, so he is not put out immediately.

Tonya may also have hopes that if she gives it time, the relationship will change for the better. In a study of low-income, Midwestern fathers, Roy, Buckmiller and Mc

Dowell (2008) found that many men were in long-term, ambiguous relationships with their children's mothers, a situation they term "relationship suspension." While some relationships were suspended because of incarceration or immigration problems, many existed in limbo because the parents were waiting for transformations in themselves or their partners that would allow them to make a commitment. Roy, Buckmiller and McDowell analyzed only men, but the Three City data indicate that this hope that a suspended relationship will ultimately grow into something more meaningful can be present among women as well. Such a hope may contribute to engaging in an LTA relationship. In a follow-up interview conducted long after Curtis moves out, Tonya says that she no longer lives with or sees Curtis because "*he just wasn't for me. Just too boyish, wasn't grown up yet.*" While he is living with her, she has so little trust in him and so little faith in their relationship that after a year of co-residing, he does not even have a key to the apartment. However, her statement that she finally let him go because he wouldn't "grow up" indicates that she may have been waiting for his transformation but finally gave up. Like Marka, who believed John would change, "because he is Tia's father," Tonya may have hoped that Curtis would care enough for his daughter to "grow up." Without the connection of their shared child, Tonya probably would not have let Curtis stay for so long nor maintained any hope for their relationship.

### *Housing Based LTAs: Women*

While public assistance provides some low-income women with housing resources that men may try to access, other women themselves lack social, familial, and financial resources and risk homelessness. These women may call on the obligations to

their children to obtain housing and other financial support. For instance, Tashina, an African American mother in Chicago with a history of substance abuse, has exhausted the generosity of her kin network. Her daughter's father, who was abusive in the past, pays regular child support, though the amount is small. Her current partner, her son's father, is not a consistent provider. While her children lived with relatives, Tashina has sometimes lived in her car. To avoid homelessness for herself and her children, she moves in with her daughter's father for several months, even though his two-bedroom apartment is "totally wrecked," and she shares it with him and his mother, three brothers, sister, two nephews, and niece. During this time, she continues her relationship with her son's father.

When men control the residence, they may be able to set certain parameters regarding issues such as housework or sex. In describing the LTA situation of Margerita, a Mexican-American mother in Chicago, the ethnographer says, "Margerita has been at the mercy of her callous, selfish [partner] since the birth of their first child 15 years ago. She feels dependent on the little financial contribution he makes. Jesus pays only the mortgage and Margerita covers everything else. In the past, Margerita was homeless without Jesus. She has not been able to rely on assistance nor her parents for support." As is true for many low-income women, what kin networks exist are limited in the support they can provide.

Jesus takes advantage of Margerita's dependence. She does all of the housework, and Jesus does nothing—not even repair a broken window in the winter. Avoiding homelessness drives Margerita to stay; although she is employed, she does not believe

she can make it on her own. In describing Margerita's perspective, the ethnographer writes:

Margerita says that [Jesus] makes twice as much as she does and that it's his money, "*That's why I say we are only roommates.*" I ask her if they are only roommates, we both laugh, and she says, "*Well once in a little while.*" Margerita blushes, tilts her head a bit to the right and shrugs her shoulders. The ethnographer blushes too because they both understand that she is admitting to having intimate relations with him. "*I see it as roommates, because we don't get along, we just try to live day by day calm because of our kids.*" He has told her that if she leaves that he will take her kids away. She tells me that that is part of the reason that she stays with him because she does not have the money to hire a lawyer.

Margerita has no trust in Jesus other than her belief that he will continue to provide housing for her. She does not value his fathering skills, but rather believes staying preserves her own role as a mother and gives her children stable housing. In contrast to Yasmin, who controls Joel because she controls their housing and access to their son, Margerita sees Jesus as the person with all the control, thus obligating her to stay in their LTA relationship on his terms.

### *Conclusion*

Until recently, marriage was the only socially acceptable way to maintain a cohabiting relationship. As a result, as rates of cohabitation exploded over the last two decades, observers focused on cohabitation's connections to marriage. The main

questions the literature addressed were about the place of cohabitation in a marriage-centered schema of family relationships: was it similar, or a precursor, or an alternative to marriage? While many cohabiting relationships *are* precursors to marriage, as the dominance of marriage diminishes in American family life, it is clearer that some cohabiting relationships do not fit into a marriage-oriented perspective. To gain more perspective on the many meanings and constructions of cohabiting relationships, cohabitation needs to be examined as phenomenon in its own right. By making this shift, we observe relationships that stretch conventional boundaries of family life. These relationships are evolving, ambiguous, and often short-term. They may complicate the answers to survey questions, since the partners may not even agree with each other on the nature of their relationship. They are, nevertheless, a part of the reality of intimate partnerships.

Couples cohabiting on the edge, like most cohabiting couples of yesteryear, tend to be found among low-income populations. The lack of material resources available to low-income women hinders their ability to form more conventional intimate partnerships, though they may desperately need the resources those partnerships provide. In the case of LTA relationships, women have practical and emotional connections with men whom they do not view as boyfriends, much less committed partners. These connections usually stem from shared parenthood, which ties people together long after their interest in their relationship as a couple may have ended. The ongoing ties can lead to co-residence that does not fit any current notions of cohabitation.

In some sense, the reasons women give for maintaining LTA relationships resemble the practical considerations that were central to marriage until the twentieth

century, such as shared parenthood and the pooling of resources. Until the twentieth century, sexual relations and companionship were less important for marriage (see Coontz, 2005). In this way, LTA relationships resemble the marriage-based families of the past more than the present. However, sharp differences with families of the past also exist, most notably the short-term nature of these relationships and the frequent sexual relationships that parents often have with persons outside of the household. If LTA relationships are to be considered as families, we must, at the least, stretch the definition of a family beyond the usual criteria we use to recognize a family when we see one.

Cohabitations that resemble LTA relationships should make us question public policy, particularly certain aspects of marriage policies. The idea that a second adult can keep a family financially afloat is confirmed by LTA cohabitators, but it seems unlikely that anyone would suggest that such couples possess the stability to marry. The existence of LTA relationships makes us realize that cohabitations may be formed for practical reasons by people who have few alternatives. Thus, while promoting marriage may help some cohabitators to enter into more long-term, stable unions, it is not realistic to assume that all cohabiting couples are appropriate candidates for marriage.

In the end, the question of whether LTA relationships constitute families, like questions of whether they are similar to marriages, may be beside the point. Rather, it may be more important that we accept LTA-based households on their own terms without attempting to fit them into the cultural schemata of conventional marriage and family life. The broader significance of LTA relationships may be to reorient that viewpoint of researchers and policy makers. Just as cohabitation itself became mainstream, as more families face economic hard times, we may see widespread adaptations within cohabiting

relationships. By not shoehorning all partnerships into existing categories, we may be able to systematically observe not only LTA couples, but also couples in other, as yet undefined, relationships. In this way, research on the edge of personal life may help us to better understand the true nature of intimate partnerships and how best to help the children and adults in such situations to lead safe and productive lives.

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