

# DETERMINANTS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF UNMARRIED COHABITATION AND ITS IMPACTS ON MARRIAGE: WESTERN EXPERIENCES

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## Intisari

*Hidup bersama tanpa nikah merupakan fenomena yang tidak asing di Barat. Ada beberapa aspek menarik yang dapat dipelajari dari fenomena itu. Hasil-hasil penelitian menunjukkan latar belakang, karakteristik dan pola hubungan sosial yang spesifik pada individu yang memilih hidup bersama tanpa nikah. Hal lain yang menarik dari fenomena itu adalah efeknya terhadap perkawinan. Anggapan bahwa melakukan kumpul kebo sebelum nikah akan menurunkan risiko terjadinya perceraian, ternyata tidak terbukti. Tidak terbuktinya hipotesis bahwa kumpul kebo merupakan persiapan pernikahan memunculkan anggapan bahwa pola hubungan itu sebagai alternatif pernikahan atau upaya untuk tidak terikat. Ketiga anggapan itupun belum jelas terbukti dalam tulisan ini. Sementara itu ada anggapan yang kuat bahwa hakekat pernikahan tidak berubah dengan makin banyaknya pasangan yang memilih hidup tanpa nikah.*

## Introduction

One of the major changes in western societies has been the gradual acceptance the cohabitation of unmarried couples. It is clear that there was a substantial increase in the prevalence of unmarried cohabitation during the 1970's. Glick and Spamer (1980) estimated that in 1978 2.3 percent of American couples living together were not married. This rate rose to about 4 percent by 1981 (Spamer, 1983). In Australia the figure of unmarried cohabitation from the Family Survey conducted in 1982 shows that about 5

percent of all couples were not married (Khoo, 1986). Meanwhile in New Zealand the proportion was 6 percent in 1981 (Carmichael, 1984). In Scandinavian countries, the existence of unmarried cohabitation is not new. In Sweden, for example, unmarried cohabiting couples comprised about one percent of all couples in 1960. In 1970 the rate rose to 7 percent and became 15 percent in 1979 (Trost, 1979). It is predicted that there will be further increases in the incidence of cohabitation in the future.

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The increase in cohabitation has been considered an interesting phenomena to study, resulting in many early studies of cohabitation. These studies focus on the purposes of cohabitation and characteristics of cohabitants. Recent studies have been interested in the relationship between unmarried cohabitation and marriage. Topics such as the effects of cohabitation on marriage satisfaction and dissolution are salient in the literature. These studies obviously compare unmarried cohabitation with married couples. On the other hand, Rindfuss and Vanden Heuvel (1990) compare cohabitators with singles, assuming that cohabitation grows because of the rise of individuality and sexual freedom among the younger generation. The development of studies of cohabitation also has been broadened into policy aspect, especially the legal aspects (Knox, 1988; NSW Law Reform Commission, 1983), since several legal problems have surfaced.

Legal aspects of cohabitation are not discussed in this paper because the general aim of the paper is to discuss the social-psychological and demographic aspects of cohabitation in developed countries. More specifically, the paper assesses: why do people prefer to cohabit?; who is cohabiting?; and how does cohabitation influence marriage and fertility? To answer these question, this paper will discuss three major topics related to cohabitation. In the next section personal and social backgrounds will be examined to understand the trend of increasing cohabitation. Psychological and sociological views may dominate the discussion of motivation and personal

history of cohabitation. Demographic and socio-economic views will be used to explain the nature of relationships in the other section. Finally, the relationship between cohabitation and marriage as well as fertility are emphasized in the end of the paper.

### **Motivation and Personal History**

Despite the partners had known each other for several weeks or months before moving in together, they hardly ever arranged to live together. They become emotionally involved with each other and spend increasingly larger amounts of time together as the relationship develops. According to Knox (1988), the typical pattern is to spend an occasional night together, then weekend, a night before and after the weekend, and so on. The process of living together makes it difficulty to identify motivations for cohabitation. In other words, some motivations exist during the process of living together.

Newcomb's (1987) study identifies some psychological characteristic of cohabitants in Los Angeles County. The study found that cohabitators feel having fewer inner resources. On the other hand, needs for independence and autonomy are prominent among them. Thus, living together rather than marriage is to overcome the fear of being alone without disturbing their needs for independence and autonomy. This finding is in line with McDonald's (1988) speculation which hypothesizes that living together is an experiment in the pursuit of autonomy.

Sexuality of cohabitation is the least interesting topic among studies, however, it is unavoidable to agree that

one of the basic motivations living together is sex. This argument is based on some findings which show that cohabitators are more sexually-involved than partners who do not live together or married couples (Newcomb, 1987), with a greater percentage of them being sexually active with more coital frequency (Samson et al., 1991; Tanfer, 1987). An expression how important sexual need is among cohabitators was remarked on by a woman as quoted by Knox (1988: 193): *(before we) started living together, we had intercourse less frequently because we were not as available to each other. But when we were sleeping together every night, intercourse was always a possibility.*

Sexuality is not solely an inner state, but it has a social context as well. There is a hypothesis that cohabitor friends have indirectly influenced the sexuality of unmarried couples prior cohabitation. As shown in Newcomb's (1987) study, cohabiting women reported having more friends who were not virgin than noncohabiting women. In addition, cohabiting men reported that their friends more often had steady mates or dates. These influences lead cohabitators to be more competent with dating and involvement in romantic relationships. In many studies, cohabitants reported that their decision to live together was supported by their friends. In a more general context, modelling of parents and friends who were sexually active without marriage will convince someone to initiate cohabitation.

There is no doubt about the fact that financial considerations play an important role when deciding to live together. About 21 percent of couples

living together in Sarantakos's (1984) study held in Australia, reported that the major reason was to minimise household expenses. Sharing of rent and the costs for the acquisition and maintenance of household appliances are examples of how living together helps rationalise the use of a household budget. Economic motivation of cohabitation minimises budget expenses but increases *psychological* costs. As the autonomy and independence are basic goal among them, participants may maintain certain economic privileges that are difficult to preserve in a marriage. In line with this, cohabitation allows women to continue their participation in the labour force. Many cohabitators have career ambitions that are perceived to be inconsistent with marriage, family, household tasks, and motherhood, their career commitments are much higher than marriage (Henslin, 1980; Knox, 1988). About 6 percent cohabiting women reported this reason in Sarantako's (1984) study. Other benefits of cohabitation over marriage are possible since unmarried women may receive allowances from the government in many developed countries. These benefits will be stopped if they decide to marry (Knox, 1988; NSW Law Reform Formation, 1983).

There are many people cohabitating because of their *inability* to marry. If one partner is already committed to a marriage but separated it is impossible to get married in a country which forbids polygamy. The figure of this case is about 6 percent in Sarantako's (1984) study. Religious difference between partners may lead them to

prefer cohabitation, however, a marriage is possible if one of them abandons his or her religion. Because a marriage has religious values for many people and they don't want to change their beliefs, cohabitation is seen as a solution. Another cause preventing persons to marry is that one or both partners are under the legal age of marriage. Since the age of first intercourse has been declining (Hofferth, Kahn and Baldwin, 1987), and there is evidence that early initiation of sexual activity increases the preference to cohabit (Tanfer, 1987), it is possible that the cohabitant, especially females, is under-aged. Both religious and under-aged reasons have been found in Australia (Sarantakos, 1984), however, this accounts for a very small proportion of cohabitation.

Cohabitation is not only preferred by younger age groups without marriage experience, but some cohabitants have been married to someone else before living together. Even though the painful experience of marriage is not as common as a reason for cohabitation, psychologically this traumatic experience can lead to avoidance of another marriage. Consequently, to fulfil sexual needs and intimacy they should commence romantic relationship and cohabitation is a potential choice. To some extent this reason is the same as the rejection of marriage on *ideological* grounds (Sarantakos, 1984). The antimarriage ideology of cohabitants is not only because of traumatic experience of marriage, but also other factors.

Essentially, marriage is an agreement between a man and a woman. If there is an unwillingness of

a partner to marry, marriage cannot occur. Cohabitation is an alternative if there is reluctance to marriage of one of the partners, however, this reason may be less common in western society (Sarantakos, 1984) because the incidence of marriage initiated by parents is much smaller than that in developing countries.

### The Nature of Cohabitation

There are two common forms of cohabitation: The first is an alternative form of marriage and the other is the stage of courtship that is popular as a precursor to marriage (Wiersma, 1983). This classification, to some extent, is oversimplified since cohabitants sometimes cannot decide what is exactly the purpose of their partnership. They prefer to cohabit because they do not have strong reasons to marry. More extremely, they don't like to associate their relationship to their partner in a marital context. Thus, it could moderate to classify cohabitation as a *normative* phenomenon in western countries (Bumpass and Sweet, 1989; Spanier, 1983).

Cohabitation can occur before, after, or even during marriage which is especially among separated married couples. Ever married cohabitation can be divided into two categories, e.g., both or only one of couples who have ever married. In the United States the percentage of divorced persons who cohabit increased accordingly from 1975 to 1980 (Spanier, 1985). The age of ever married cohabitants, especially male, are obviously older than that of never married cohabitants.

There are three ways to understand the characteristics of cohabitations. First, characteristic of each cohabitant is described separately. Second, joint characteristics of unmarried partners are drawn to explain the nature of couples as a whole. Finally, it could be more understandable studying cohabitation by comparing unmarried with married couples or single persons. The description of cohabitants comparing with married persons individually is common as well. The differences between the social demographic characteristics of cohabitants and married persons, as a couple or an individual, are mostly consistent over time in many countries such as Australia (i.e., Khoo, 1986; Sarantakos, 1984), the United States (Bumpass and Sweet, 1989; Spanier, 1983; Tanfer, 1987), Canada (i.e., Rao, 1990; Teachman and Polonko, 1990) and Sweden (Bennet, Blank and Bloom, 1988). The most prominent different characteristic is age. Many studies have found that unmarried couples are younger than married couples in general or within age groups.

There are more men had cohabited before marriage (Bumpass and Sweet, 1989; Thornton, 1988). The difference is caused by the age at marriage in which females tend to marry earlier than males. In addition, there are many women who live together with previously married men than the reverse.

The highest rates of cohabitation in the United States and Australia are found among the lower education group (less than high school). In addition, unmarried cohabitants, especially male, are less likely to have

tertiary education (Bumpass and Sweet 1989; Khoo, 1986; Tanfer, 1987).

The difference of education between married and cohabiting persons is possibly associate with economic characteristics, especially employment status and occupation. The proportion of unemployed males among cohabitants is higher than married men. Although cohabiting women have been found more likely to be employed than married women (Glick and Spanier, 1980; Spanier, 1983; Tanfer, 1987). It does not mean that many unemployed men cohabit with employed women because the rate of cohabitation is higher among women.

The high proportion of cohabiting women who are employed is related to a familiar pattern that shows the continuing movement of young women into the labour force. Furthermore, the pattern associates with the increase of age at the first marriage with the number of cohabitation as well. This may reflect the nature of female cohabitants who are necessary to be more independent.

In the United States (Bumpass and Sweet, 1989; Glick and Spanier, 1980; Macklin, 1983; Spanier, 1983; Tanfer, 1987) and Australia (Khoo, 1986) unmarried couples were more likely to live in metropolitan areas. Social and economic factors seem to influence this trend such as high proportion of unemployed and expensive cost for renting flat. In addition, urbanization in western countries may be related to cohabitation.

Men and women with no religious preference are more likely to have cohabited than those who identified themselves with religion (Tanfer, 1987).

Other studies (Khoo, 1986) show that cohabitants who affiliate with a particular religion are not practising religion. The effect of church or other religious institutions in which the leaders and community suggest to prefer marriage rather than cohabitation can influence the members to marry, while people who rarely attend to church are not subject to such influence.

There are other characteristics associated with the cohabitation rate such as parent's education. A study (Bumpass and Sweet, 1989) found that persons who cohabit tend to have parents who had a higher education attainment. On the other hand, Tanfer (1987) showed that individuals whose mothers had not completed high school are more likely to be cohabitants. The latter seems to be consistent with other proximate socioeconomic status in which generally is lower among cohabitants. However, Bumpass and Sweet argue that well educated parents are associated with liberal attitudes which also has been considered an important factor affecting the motivation to cohabit. It is difficult to conclude how the relationship is. There should be other factors mediating the relationship that were not controlled in those studies. It is also possible that the relationship between parent's education and cohabitation rates is U shape.

#### **Cohabitation, Family Formation and Dissolution**

Several characteristics as mentioned above would influence the nature of the relationship of unmarried cohabitation.

Many scholars agree that the most remarkable characteristic of living together is the instability of the relationship. This is not only because of the proportion of dissolution among unmarried couples but also supported by the background and characteristics of the relationship. The need for autonomy that motivates individuals to prefer cohabitation rather than marriage in corporation with economic independence among participants would contribute to the instability of the relationship.

The proportion of persons cohabiting as an alternative to marriage is small (Bolewin, 1982; Sarantakos, 1984), since most subjects obviously report that they want to marry in the future. Undoubtedly, Carmichael (1990), based on his analysis, refuses to accept the opinion that cohabitation is a substitution for formal partnering. To test cohabitation as a form of trial marriage there should be evidence showing the contribution of living together in marriage and divorce. If the assumption of cohabitation as a trial marriage is true, there should be evidence showing that cohabitation leads to better marriage in terms of, for instance, satisfaction and low rates of divorce among couples who cohabited prior to marriage.

Research in the United States (Teachman and Polonko, 1990) shows that about 21-23 percent of a survey sample reported having cohabited before marriage. This figure seems to be lower than earlier research conducted in 1983 which shows nearly 30 percent (Tanfer, 1987) and more than 40 percent for males in 1985 (Thornton, 1988). These differences should be caused by

the different age at marriage of the samples. Although in Sweden (Bennet, Blanc and Bloom, 1988) shows about 65 percent of females surveyed samples did cohabit premaritally and in France (Leridon, 1990) two-thirds of first unions began outside marriage between 1983 and 1985.

When does cohabitation lead to marriage? The most common answer given by participants is that they would marry their partners when they found compatibility. This statement would be difficult to prove because compatibility has several dimensions such as value, role, life style, goals compatibility and others. Another possibility to marry among unmarried couples is when they reach sufficient economic condition.

Cohabitators may decide to marry when they want to have children (Trost, 1979), and Leridon (1990) found evidence that some marriages occurred because of the first birth of a child. The initial reason to marry may be to mend their relationship. They hope that the added commitment of a marriage and having children will increase the viability of a relationship. This reason, of course, dissents with need for autonomy and independence.

External pressure from family members, friends and community may force a cohabiting couple to legitimate their relationship with marriage. A very good example of external pressure has been described by a respondent of Sarantakos (1984: 144) who reported: *I couldn't bear all that stress put upon us all these years. We didn't seem to be able to make any friends or to be accepted by our neighbour .... We have to move away ...Marriage makes life easier.* This isolation can cause the lack of social support and

social control which in Stets's (1991) study causes aggression to the partner. Thus, couples who have bad experiences during their cohabitation may perceive marriage more convenient. This perception often leads them to marry.

Does marriage change the relationship? Marriage may increase commitment and foster greater acceptance by family and society, however, it may bring more role playing, possessiveness and a reduced sense of independence and autonomy (Newcomb, 1987).

Ideally, cohabitation prior to marriage provides some advantages to the couple entering married life. Unfortunately, there is not consistent evidence supporting the statement that premarital cohabitation has positive effects on marriage. The only evidence is from Canada (White, 1987, 1989) that shows that cohabitation has a positive effect on marital stability. Despite the fact that cohabitation significantly increases the likelihood of subsequent marital dissolution was found in Canada as well by a study conducted by Balakrishnan et al. (1987). The positive effect occurred because ever cohabited couples could adjust to each other better than couples who had never cohabited (Watson, 1983). However, the more recent research (Watson and DeMeo, 1987) does not confirm this earlier finding. White is also criticised by Trussel and Rao (1989). They find the greater proportion of dissolution among ever cohabited married couples when using different method for the same data and they conclude that White had made a methodological error.

According to Yelsma (1986) and De-Maris and Leslie (1984), ever cohabited couples were less communicative than never cohabited married couples. The lower quality of communication between spouses leads to lower marital satisfaction (Tucker and O'Grady, 1991). Thus, it is not surprising that marriage is less stable among ever cohabited married couples. There is evidence that shows a negative relationship between premarital cohabitation and marital stability. In Sweden, for instance, Bennet, Blanc and Bloom (1988) found that women who cohabit premaritally have nearly 80 percent higher marital dissolution rates than those who do not do. In addition, the longer premarital cohabitation is, the higher the dissolution rates that occur. Finally, they conclude that the negative effect is because this group fail to have a strong commitment to the institution of marriage after having relatively weak commitments to their relationships before marriage.

Recent evidence in the United States (Teachman and Polonko, 1990) also shows that cohabitation prior to marriage significantly increases the risk of marital instability. Consistent with the finding in Sweden, after 10 years ever cohabited marriage couples are more likely than never cohabited to have dissolved their marriage. The difference between the United States and Sweden (Bennet, Blanc and Bloom, 1988) is the level of marital dissolution for ever cohabited women that is mostly twice as high in the United States (.35 versus .18). The level of marriage dissolution among ever cohabited women in the US is also

higher than that in Canada, e.g., .32. (Teachman and Polonko, 1990).

The analyses of the effect of premarital cohabitation on marriage stability using a control variable such as age at marriage and education. These studies (Bennet, Blanc and Bloom, 1988; Teachman and Polonko, 1990) show that ever cohabited couples have generally a higher age at marriage and education. These factors have reduced the risk of marital instability for ever cohabited couples, however, the level is still higher than never cohabited couples. These results have motivated Teachman and Polonko to try another method of analysis, by incorporating the total amount of time spent in union into the model. The finding shows that there is no difference in the rate of marital disruption by cohabitation status. In other words, the main cause of different marital dissolution rates between ever and never cohabited couples is the total amount of time spent in union. The finding stresses that having cohabited does not necessarily contribute to marital stability.

### **Fertility**

Most couples who live together do not have children living with them. In Australia, according to Sarantakos (1984), 38 percent of cohabitants reported having children. In the latter study (Khoo, 1986) the finding is not so different, thirty percent for men and 35 percent for women. In the earlier study only 29 percent of all children were born in the cohabiting union as children of both partners. However, the children from the current cohabitation in Khoo's study are about fifty percent of all



children. The low proportion of cohabitants having children is in line with their intention to delay until marriage or to not have a child at all.

The other indication of fertility among unmarried couples can be detected from ex-nuptial birth data. Khoo and McDonald (1988) found that forty percent of women aged 20-29 were living together at time of birth. Among the older age group, 30 and over, the percentage is nearly 55. The higher proportion is found in France (Leridon, 1990) in which three-quarter of births outside marriage was born by women who were cohabiting. While ex-nuptial births where paternity was acknowledge in Australia (Khoo and McDonald, 1988) was 68 percent in 1985 and acknowledgement of paternity mostly means that the couples are living together without being married, the contribution of defacto relationship on ex-nuptial birth is significant enough. However, these results should be interpreted carefully because there are no data that show when the conception occurs. In other words, it is possible that they are not both partner's children or the occurrence of conception can be before living together.

Premarital birth can lead to a stronger commitment of partners or bring them to marry. Some findings (Morgan and Rindfuss, 1985; Teachman, 1982) show that having a premarital birth increases the chance of marital dissolution but not a legitimate birth. It means that if unmarried couples have their own child(ern) and then marry, their marriage is less likely to dissolve. In contrast, if only a partner having children but not the other, their

marriages tend to be ended by divorce. The distribution of legitimate births reducing marital dissolution among ever cohabited couples have been found by Teachman and Polonko (1990) as well. Thus, not only does premarital birth while living together motivates cohabitants to marry but also preserves marriage.

### Concluding Remarks

Bumpass (1990) argues that cohabitation has changed the uniqueness of marriage. However, he believes that the meaning of marriage has not been changed by cohabitation. Unfortunately, Bumpass does clarify his reasond for stating this.

The recent paper has discussed the differences of living together and marriage. Generally speaking, cohabitation differs to marriage on background and characteristics. These differences lead to different outcomes. Marital dissatisfaction and dissolution, for instance, are higher among ever cohabited couples than never cohabited marriage couples. The finding did not support the hypothesis stated the objective of cohabitation was preparation to marriage. The differences between married and unmarried couples, especially in commitment, also shows the failure of the assumption that cohabitation alters marriage.

The high proportion of cohabitation among younger aged group and the prediction of the increase in the future has several implications. First, some policies which used to be based on marriage and family considerations such as housing demand should take

into account this trend. Secondly, analysis of marital status in demography, especially the meaning of *single*, should consider the existence of cohabitation. The position of cohabitant is between single and marriage. By neglecting this phenomenon the result of demographic analysis may be inaccurate. Finally, the recent trends of marriage, marital dissolution and fertility have been affected by the rise of cohabitation rates, however, the contribution of cohabitation on these aspects has not been studied throughly.

The study of cohabitation has focused on the demographic, sociological and psychological aspects

separately. However, there should be interactions amongst these factors. For instance, it is predicted that the psychological determinant of high dissolution rates among ever married couples have been predicted as an effect of need for autonomy and independence. Unfortunately, there is not enough evidence to demonstrate this relationship, and methodological problems have also arise. Future research needs to take into account more complicated factors and the interaction between demographic, sociological and psychological variables.

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