

# ESRC Centre for Population Change

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## Understanding the role of cohabitation in the UK

Cohabitation trends, policies and practices: Situating the United Kingdom in an international perspective

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Acknowledgements: Brienna Perelli-Harris, Paulina Trevena, Juliet Stone.





# Overview

- Cohabitation patterns in UK
- Findings from focus group research
- Summary
- Discussion

# Cohabitation patterns in UK (I)

See [summary report](#) (Berrington & Stone, 2015)

- Entry into marriage being postponed
- Vast majority of marriages preceded by cohabitation
- Increased non-marital childbearing (1/3 babies)
- Remain relatively short-lived (1/4 still going after 5 yrs)
- Cohabiting families compared to married families tend to be:
  - Younger
  - Less well off
  - Have more liberal attitudes
  - Less religious

Need to take account of these differences when comparing stability / outcomes of marriage and cohabitation





## Cohabitation patterns in UK (2)

- Generational shifts in attitudes (Park & Rhead, 2013)
- Majority see little difference in commitment of married and cohabiting couples (Duncan & Philips, 2008)
- Perception encouraged by “common law marriage myth” (Barlow, 2006)



## Findings from focus group research (Berrington et al., 2015)

- 8 Focus Groups
- Standardized focus group guideline (Perelli-Harris et al., 2014)
- Two socially diverse localities in Southampton
- 4 all male and 4 all female
- Aged 25-40
- Stratified by level of education (low = below degree; high = degree or equivalent)
- Variety of partnership histories



## Findings from focus group research

- I will make a few remarks regarding:
  - Hierarchy of commitment in relationships
  - Role of marriage
  - So why not marry?
  - Knowledge of the law



# Hierarchy of commitment in relationships

## (I) Personal commitment

- Range of opinion as to whether hierarchy
  - Marriage as “the ultimate commitment”  
vs cohabitation as “Just living together”
  - Cohabitators as more committed because whether couples remain together is expression of free choice  
*“If you are together and you’re not married it almost says more, doesn’t it, because you’re not together because of that bit of paper, you’re together because you’re together.”*  
(Mark)



# Hierarchy of commitment in relationships

## (2) Moral and structural commitment

- Most FG participants thought that married couples would work harder to save a marriage.
- Moral obligation to their spouse / the marriage / their family
  - Promises and vows
  - Cost of wedding
- Structural obligation
  - Perceived difficulties of ending marriage
- However, some FG participants highly skeptical of marriage
  - Since divorce is so common, marriage is no longer such a big commitment



# Hierarchy of commitment in relationships

## (3) Alternative expressions of commitment

- New sequences of family formation – commitment expressed in different ways
  - Having children
  - Buying a house

*“I think one of the biggest commitments people make is like joint financial projects and the like, mortgages particularly, because that seems harder to get out of.....mortgages they’re for 30 years which may in fact last a lot longer than marriages.” (Joshua)*



# Role of marriage

## (I) The wedding as a public statement

- Little evidence rejection of marriage as patriarchy
- Aspirational fairy-tale ending
- The importance of a “proper wedding”



# Role of marriage

## (2) Journey of commitment

- Couples talked about “progression in a relationship” and marriage as “the next step”
- But childbearing can come before marriage

*“[I]t's not like the old days where people had to get married if the kid came along. (...) See, we got married because we thought at the time that was the next natural progression in our relationship. We already had kids, we'd got a place, so we thought next thing is we're going to get married.” (Kenneth)*



## Role of marriage

### (3) Providing security

- Greater expectation among higher educated groups that marriage would precede childbearing
- Marriage talked about in terms of greater psychological and financial “security”
  - For partners
  - For children



# So why not marry?

## (I) Intervening life events

Often marriage not rejected, but not a priority compared to children and housing

*“Accidents happen along the way, you can be cohabiting and before you know it, you've got children that come along. Children take priority, and then getting married tends to take a back seat. It's maybe something that you may wish to do later on, or after probably 20 years together, and that you think, oh we're right as we are now, so what's the point?”*  
(Bob)

*“Where the housing market is so extortionate a lot of them are having the children, and cohabiting, because obviously they can't afford that first step onto the property ladder before thinking about carrying on with, sort of, the next steps of marriage .....”* (Kenneth)



# So why not marry?

## (2) Men's Fear of Commitment – what some men say

In response to a question as to why some couples continue to cohabit for a longer time

*Mathew: "I guess it's that security of having someone and being committed to a certain level but not wanting to take the plunge."*

*Jonathan: "I think it may reflect society more broadly in that today in society we have a lot more choice in every area of life, whether it's work, travel, products... We're not as committed to necessarily one thing as we are a multitude of options."*

*Tim: "You're always aware that once you commit, you may not be able to upgrade... there will be certain people who are scared of missing out on an opportunity that comes, because we're always being told to seize the moment and go for the biggest and the best."*

(FG7)



## So why not marry?

### (3) Fear of Commitment - what some women say

In response to the question why couples cohabit for a long time, Natasha and Susan agree that some couples may be cohabiting because the male partner did not want to marry.

*Natasha: "I've noticed with some of my friends it's actually been the men who've resisted and the women of the partnership want to get married. So they will compromise to stay with that man by not marrying."*

*Susan: "Yeah it's much rarer to have a couple who are both genuinely happy with living together and not getting married I think."*

(FG1)



# Knowledge of the law

- Very good understanding of **parental responsibility** for unmarried fathers
- Patchy understanding of differences in **legal protection** for couples following dissolution of cohabitation
  - apart from:
    - those with personal / vicarious experience
    - those who knew because of their line of work

*“Isn’t it six months, if you’ve lived with someone for six months it’s classed as common law, so you have those same rights if you split up.”*  
(Nicole)

*“I think there’s a lot of confusion over that, actually, sort of misconceptions that if you’ve been together for this length of time then it’s as good as getting married.”*  
(Dawn)



# Summary - the role of cohabitation

- Varies between couples and within a couple across the life course
- Marriage can be postponed because of:
  - A lack of certainty about the partnership
  - A fear of divorce
  - A fear of commitment
  - The cost of the wedding
  - Other priorities
- Cohabitation has high personal commitment but can have less moral and structural commitment
- Marriage remains an ideal and expectation for all groups



# Discussion in relation to Cohabitation Rights Bill

- In our sample
  - cohabitation not often a rejection of **patriarchy / regulation** of marriage
  - Marriage (or at least wedding) often **remains an ideal** but **low priority** given everyday pressures
  - **Common-law marriage myth** remains for some people
  - Some evidence that cohabitation response to **one partner** (more often male) **not wanting to marry**



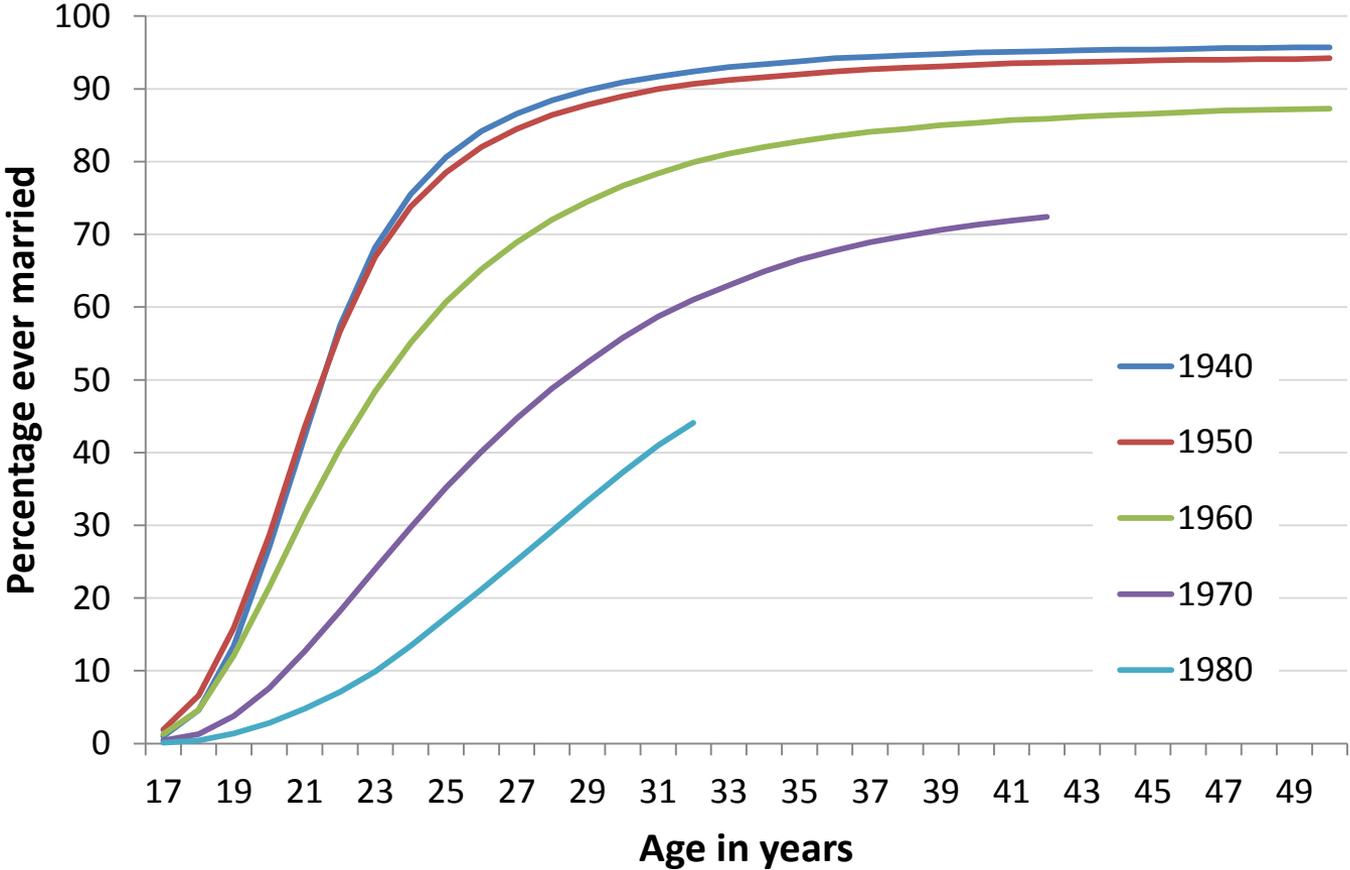
## Thank you!

For further details on the focus group research see:

B. Perelli-Harris et al. (2014) Towards a new understanding of cohabitation: Insights from focus group research across Europe and Australia. *Demographic Research*, 31: 1043-1078.

A. Berrington et al. (forthcoming) Commitment and the changing sequence of cohabitation, childbearing and marriage: insights from qualitative research in the UK.

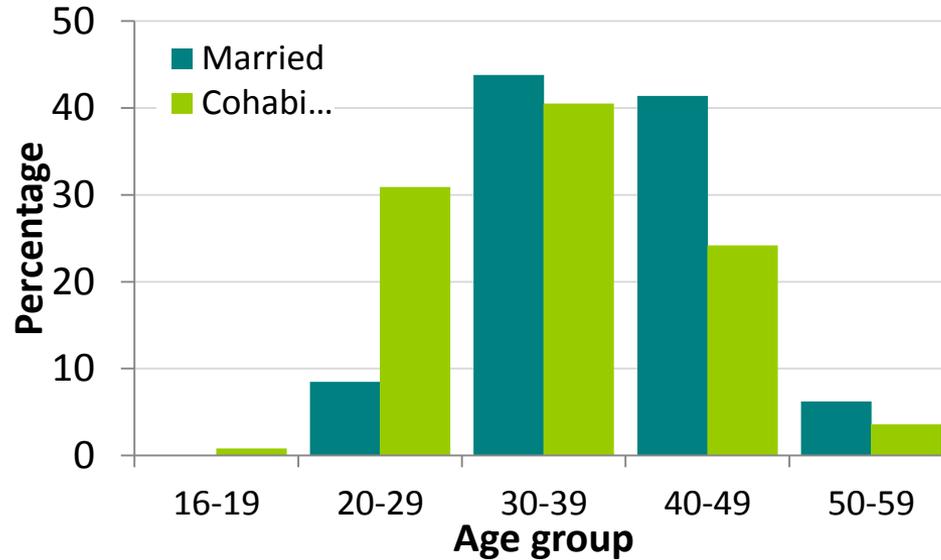
# Proportions ever married by age, England and Wales female birth cohorts, 1940-1980.



Source: ONS 2014

# Characteristics of cohabiting and married couple families

Age profile of married and cohabiting women with at least one child under 16



Source: Berrington and Stone's analysis of Understanding Society 2012/3 data

# Characteristics of cohabiting and married couple families

- Socio-economic resources

	<b>Married (n=4,646)</b>	<b>Cohabiting (n=1,182)</b>	<b>Total (n=5,828)</b>
Neither parent in work or education	5.5%	13.1%	7.1%
Housing tenure			
Owner-occupied	77.2%	46.1%	70.6%
Private rented	11.4%	22.4%	13.7%
Social rented	11.4%	31.6%	15.7%
Mother's education			
Degree	51.8%	32.7%	47.8%
A level	17.8%	20.9%	18.4%
GCSE etc	25.7%	37.4%	28.2%
No quals	3.9%	8.0%	4.7%
Unknown	0.9%	0.9%	0.9%
How often attends religious services			
Never/weddings etc.	50.9%	76.2%	56.2%
At least once a year	21.7%	14.9%	20.3%
At least once a month	24.7%	7.0%	21.0%
Unknown	2.7%	1.9%	2.5%

Source: Berrington and Stone's analysis of Understanding Society 2012/3 data