

# **COHABITATION: SHARPENING A FUZZY CONCEPT**

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**by Jean Tansey Knab**

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# **Cohabitation: Sharpening a Fuzzy Concept**

Jean Tansey Knab<sup>\*</sup>

Princeton University

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<sup>\*</sup> Jean Knab, Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, Princeton University, 285 Wallace Hall, Princeton, NJ 08544, [jeanknab@princeton.edu](mailto:jeanknab@princeton.edu).

## **Cohabitation: Sharpening a Fuzzy Concept**

### **Abstract**

This paper uses Fragile Families data to examine (1) the degree of correspondence between measures of cohabitation, (2) the prevalence of 'part-time' cohabitation, and (3) the extent to which the characteristics associated with cohabiting relationship are sensitive to how part-time cohabitation is classified. The results show cohabitation is a continuous rather than a dichotomous variable. At both ends of the continuum, there is substantial agreement across measures about who is (not) cohabiting. In the middle of the continuum, however, there is considerable ambiguity, with as much as 15% of couples reporting part-time cohabitation. How we classify this group will affect estimates of the prevalence of cohabitation, especially among African Americans, and may impact the characteristics and outcomes of cohabitators.

## **Cohabitation: Sharpening a Fuzzy Concept**

Non-marital cohabitation has become an important family form in the lives of American children. Recent estimates suggest that between one-quarter and two-fifths of all children will spend part of their childhood in a cohabiting-parent household (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Graefe & Lichter, 1999). Some of these children will live with a mother and non-biological father after a divorce; others will be born to unmarried parents who are living together (Bumpass & Lu, 2000).

While the literature on cohabitation has grown exponentially over the past decade, our ability to measure cohabitation is trailing behind. Although in theory the concept seems straightforward – a couple is either living together or not – in practice, measuring cohabitation is not so simple. Recent qualitative research by Manning and Smock (2003) shows that many young adults “slide” into cohabitation while maintaining separate residences and spending only some of their nights together. Essentially, these couples are migrating into cohabitation without ever making a conscious decision to live together. Both physically and in terms of their commitment to the relationship, the cohabitation status of these couples is ambiguous. Estimates of the prevalence and even the characteristics and outcomes of cohabiting relationships are likely to be sensitive to how these couples are coded.

A few researchers have examined the ambiguous nature of cohabitation and how it impacts measurement. They find that levels of cohabitation differ depending on how the question is worded (Casper & Cohen, 2000; Teitler & Reichman, 2001) as well as who answers the question (Brown & Manning, 2004; Knab & McLanahan, forthcoming; Teitler & Reichman, 2001). Most measurement work on cohabitation compares responses across surveys rather than within surveys, and thus it is difficult to pinpoint how much of the differences is due to question

wording and how much is due to differences in respondents. Moreover, no study has focused on the phenomenon of part-time cohabitation.

In this paper, I explore three issues related to the measurement of cohabitation. First I compare the concordance between two different measures of cohabitation: one based on mothers' subjective reports of whether or not they are cohabiting, and another based on mothers' reports about how many nights a week the couple spends together. I call the first approach "subjective," since cohabitation status is based on how the mother sees her relationship, and I call the second approach "behavioral" since cohabitation status is based on the number of nights the couple spends to together. Next I examine mothers who report cohabiting "some of the time" (subjective measure) or 2-5 nights a week (behavioral measure) and ask whether part-time cohabitation is a transition or long-term status. Finally, I examine whether couples who are cohabiting part time are similar to full-time cohabitators or dating couples. The last analysis allows me to assess whether the characteristics and outcomes of cohabiting couples are likely to be sensitive to how part-time cohabitators are classified.

I use data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study because these data contain questions that measure cohabitation in terms of degrees rather than as a simple "yes/no" dichotomy. The Fragile Families Study consists entirely of couples who have recently had a child together, which limits the generalizability of the findings. However, there is no a priori reason to believe that parents of young children answer questions differently than parents of older children or non-parents. While we cannot infer prevalence estimates to the population of all cohabiting couples, part-time cohabitation is likely to be even higher among couples without children, which means that these figures probably underestimate the extent of part-time

cohabitation. Finally, cohabiting parents themselves are an important group to study insofar as much of the recent research is focused on the effects of cohabitation on children.

## **I. BACKGROUND**

In response to dramatic increases in the prevalence of cohabitation over the past several decades, research on cohabitation has progressed at a rapid pace since 1990. Early work focused on the characteristics of cohabitators and cohabiting unions, typically comparing cohabitation to the institution of marriage. In the mid-1990s, Nock (1995) described cohabitation as an “incomplete institution,” a term Andrew Cherlin (1978) had coined years earlier to describe remarriage. The early research revealed that cohabitators differed from married couples on a number of dimensions, including relationship satisfaction and commitment as well as relationships with parents.

Roughly a decade later, Manning and Smock (2003) found that, for a number of reasons, cohabitation was still a “fuzzy institution.” Despite the increasing prevalence of this family form, these researchers found that the cohabiting couples they interviewed lacked a common word to call their partners, and many did not identify with the terminologies used in large-scale surveys. Specifically, they found that young couples were unclear about what was meant by terms such as “unmarried partner” and objected to characterizing their relationships using that terminology. Couples also described moving in together without necessarily having decided to “live together.” Finally, many couples who were living together did not consider themselves to be “cohabiting.” Whether these couples are classified as cohabitators or non-cohabitators is likely to affect estimates of the prevalence of cohabitation as well as the characteristics of cohabiting couples. Physical co-residence is assumed to be important because it signals the sharing of

resources and/or the quality of the relationship. However, if the couple does not consider themselves “cohabiting,” co-residence may not signal these things.

Perhaps most importantly, the couples in the Manning and Smock study often described moving in together as a process rather than a discrete event, which raises the question of when in the process couples shift from seeing themselves as “dating” to cohabiting? Couples living together part of the time, by definition, have attachments to multiple households and therefore may have difficulty deciding whether they “count” as a member of a particular household. There is also some evidence that part-time cohabitation may be more common among Blacks than other groups. Qualitative research on African-American fathers suggests that these men are attached to multiple households (mothers, sisters, children), making it difficult for them to determine whether or not they are ‘cohabiting’ or ‘dating’ the mother of their child (Sams-Abiodun & Sanchez, 2003).

Compounding these individual-level ambiguities, current large-scale surveys frame cohabitation in different ways. For example, labor surveys, such as the Current Population Survey, are very stringent in their criterion for being a household member to avoid double counting members of the population. Even among family surveys there are different criteria for being counted as cohabiting, and definitions are a mix of subjective and behavioral criterion. Some surveys try to restrict cohabitators to couples living together full-time. The National Survey of Family Growth – Cycle 5, for example, uses a “male partner” code on the household roster and restricts household membership to those “who live and sleep here *most* of the time.” Other surveys attempt to include couples who live together part-time. The National Survey of Families and Households – wave 1 uses a “lover/partner” code on the household roster, and includes as household members “everyone who stays here half the time or more.” Still other surveys

provide no guidelines regarding the amount of time required to be classified as cohabiting. For example, the NLSY asks “Are you currently living as a partner with someone of the opposite sex,” leaving it up to the individual to self-select into cohabitation or not.

Differences in question wording have been shown to affect the measurement of cohabitation among all cohabiting couples as well as among samples of cohabiting parents. Reports of cohabitation have been shown to vary across reporters (Brown & Manning, 2004; Knab & McLanahan, forthcoming; Lin, Schaeffer, Seltzer, & Tuschen, 2004; Teitler & Reichman, 2001) and even within the same reporter across waves (Casper & Cohen, 2000; Teitler & Reichman, 2001) depending on the wording of the question.

If part-time cohabitation is rare, how couples on the margin are classified is not likely to affect estimates of the prevalence of cohabitation. However, if a substantial proportion of couples are living together part-time, then decisions about classification could make a difference. Moreover, the treatment of part-time cohabiting couples may affect other key variables associated with cohabitation. For example, estimates of whether couples pool financial resources may vary depending on whether cohabitation is limited to couples that cohabit full-time. Similarly, we would expect part-time relationships to be less stable than full-time relationships which may affect estimates of overall union stability.

In this paper, I explore the consequence of using different approaches to measuring cohabitation, with a special focus on part-time cohabitation. I compare subjective and behavioral measures and I examine the prevalence of part-time cohabitation. I also examine differences between part-time cohabitators and other romantically involved couples in terms of income pooling, relationship quality, union stability and father involvement to see if decisions about how to classify part-time cohabitators are likely to affect the association between relationship status and

these other variables. I chose to focus on these particular outcome variables because they are commonly used in studies that compare cohabiting and married couples and because they include both subjective and behavioral indicators.

## **II. DATA AND METHODS**

I use data from the baseline, one-, and three-year follow-ups of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (hereafter “Fragile Families”). Fragile Families is a longitudinal birth cohort study of children born in twenty large, urban areas, with a large oversample of non-marital births. Baseline surveys were conducted from 1998-2000, at the birth of the focal child. First follow-up interviews were conducted approximately one-year following the baseline interview, and second follow-up interviews occurred around the child’s third birthday. See Reichman et al. (2001) for more detail on the sample design.

Fragile Families conducted an over-sample of non-marital births and, therefore, has a large sample of cohabiting parents. Even more important for this study is that Fragile Families contains multiple questions about cohabitation answered in terms of degrees, rather than simply as a dichotomy. These questions allow me to look at the prevalence of part-time cohabitation and the correspondence between subjective and behavioral reports of cohabitation.

To maximize generalizability, I restrict the sample to the 16 cities selected randomly as part of the nationally-representative sample. Because I am looking at non-marital cohabitation, I exclude mothers who were married at birth. The response rate for baseline unmarried mothers in this sample was 87 percent and the initial sample size was 2,659 unmarried mothers. Of these mothers, 90 percent responded to the one-year follow-up survey, yielding a sample size of 2,364. By this time, 267 mothers (11 percent) had married. I do not include these mothers in my

analysis as I am focusing on the prevalence of cohabitation among currently unmarried mothers. Finally, 221 mothers were dropped because the cohabitation question was added after they were interviewed. Because the analysis is descriptive, cases missing on individual items are only excluded from particular measures. In no instance did the percent of cases missing exceed two percent. The final sample for most of the analysis is 1,903. When I look at union transitions by the three-year follow-up, I limit the sample to the 91 percent of mothers who responded to the three-year interview and weight the data to account for non-response.

Results in this paper are weighted to be representative of births in large cities in 1999 and to account for (1) survey design effects (including strata, city, hospital, and birth selection probabilities), (2) the fact that a city was dropped because the cohabitation question was not asked (treated as non-responding), and (3) individual non-response across waves. I look only at cohabitation with the focal child's father since that is what I have the most complete data on. Therefore these results do not represent all cohabitations among mothers in the Fragile Families data. In my sample, 5 percent of mothers were cohabiting with new partners at the one-year follow-up interview, representing 11 percent of all cohabitations.

### **Measuring cohabitation**

At the one-year interview mothers were asked "What is your relationship with (the child's) father now? Are you married, romantically involved, separated/divorced, just friends or not in any kind of a relationship?" Mothers who said they were married or romantically involved were then asked "Are you and (father) living together: all/most of time, some of time, rarely, or never?" This is the first measure of cohabitation I examine, and I refer to it as the "subjective" measure of cohabitation. Mothers who reported living together at least some of the time were

then asked “How many nights a week do you and father usually spend the night together?”

Response categories ranged from zero to seven nights. This is the second measure of cohabitation, and I refer to it as the “behavioral” measure of cohabitation. Whether the second measure merely represents “sleeping over” or is a better reflection of the father’s presence in the household is unclear.

### **Measuring relationship quality, pooling, union stability, and father involvement**

To measure relationship quality I use a set of questions that ask about partner’s supportiveness, frequency of disagreement, controlling behavior, and domestic violence, all of which been shown to be related to later union transitions (Carlson, McLanahan, & England, 2004). For each of the scales, only a handful of cases were missing on individual items. Therefore, I took the mean of the non-missing items. Since the analysis is descriptive, cases missing on all of the scale components were excluded on that particular measure only.

Partner supportiveness was measured by mother’s report about the frequency that the father exhibits six types of behaviors: 1) “is fair and willing to compromise when you have a disagreement,” 2) “expresses affection or love toward you,” 3) “insults or criticizes you or your ideas” (coding was reversed), 4) “encourages or helps you to do things that are important to you,” 5) “listens to you when you need someone to talk to,” and 6) “really understands your hurts and joys.” Response options were recoded to be “1 - never”, “2 - sometimes”, and “3 - often.” The six items were averaged to obtain an overall supportiveness score (range=1 to 3), with higher scores indicating a greater level of supportiveness. The Cronbach’s alpha for this scale is .83.

Partner controlling behavior was measured by a three-item scale using the mother's report of the father's frequency of doing the following: 1) "he tries to keep you from seeing or talking with your friends or family," 2) "he withholds money, makes you ask for money, or takes your money," and 3) "he tries to prevent you from going to work or school." Response options were recoded to be "1 - never", "2 - sometimes", and "3 - often." The three items were averaged to obtain an overall controlling score (range=1 to 3), with higher scores indicating a greater level of controlling behaviors. The Cronbach's alpha for this scale is .67.

Partner disagreement was measured by a question that asks how often the couple argues about things that are important to the mother. Mothers respond on a scale of "1 -always" to "5 - never." Any domestic violence is coded as 1 if the mother reported the father sometimes or often slaps, kicks, or hits her with a fist or other object, or the mother reports that she was ever cut, bruised, or seriously hurt in a fight with her partner. Overall relationship quality equals 1 if the mother responded 'excellent' to the following question about her relationship with the child's father -- "In general, would you say that your relationship with him is excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor?" Mothers are coded as zero otherwise. The results are similar if I combine excellent or very good.

Union transitions were measured as of the three-year follow-up interview. I look at whether the couple has married or is no longer in a romantic relationship. Three-year follow-up data are available for 91 percent of my sample, so this portion of the analysis is limited to these cases and the findings are weighted to account for non-response across waves. Financial pooling was measured by a question that asked mothers how they handle their money. Mothers were asked "Do you '...each keep your own money separate,' 'put some of your money together but keep the rest separate,' or 'put all your money together.'" I classify mothers who keep all of

their money together as pooling. Finally, to measure father involvement, I used three questions (of the 10 available) that asked mothers how many days in a typical week the father “played inside with the child with toys such as blocks or legos,” “hugged the child,” or “read to the child.” The results are similar across the measures not presented.

### **III. RESULTS**

#### **Subjective Versus Behavioral Measures**

*[Table 1 about here]*

Table 1 compares subjective and behavioral measures of cohabitation. Several important conclusions can be drawn from this table. First, mothers who are living with the fathers of their children full-time are fairly consistent in their reports of cohabitation regardless of how the question is asked. Roughly 95 percent of mothers who report living with the father 6/7 nights also report that they are cohabiting “all/most of the time.” Similarly, 99 percent of mothers who report spending no nights with the father report that they are not cohabiting. Discrepancies arise for mothers who are spending between 2 and 5 nights per week with the father and who report that they are cohabiting ‘some of the time.’ While the patterns are fairly linear, couples living together the same number of nights respond in various ways to whether or not they are cohabiting. Between 21 and 50 percent of mothers living together 2-5 nights per week say that they are living together all or most of the time.

#### **Prevalence of Part-Time Cohabitation**

Next I look at the prevalence of part-time cohabitation, using both the subjective and behavioral measures. I examine the size of the part-time cohabiting group both absolutely and

relative to full-time cohabiting and dating couples – the two groups with whom they are mostly likely to be classified. Table 2 summarizes the overall relationship status of unmarried mothers at the one-year interview using the subjective (top panel) and behavioral (bottom panel) definitions. Using the subjective measure, 6 percent of mothers report that they are cohabiting part of the time. If we “count” these mothers as cohabiting, the prevalence of cohabitation among unmarried mothers with very young children would increase from 40 to 46 percent. In contrast, if we count them as dating, the prevalence of dating relationships doubles.

*[Table 2 about here]*

The classification of these part-time cohabitators matters even more when we use the behavioral measure. If we treat these couples as cohabiting, the prevalence of cohabitation increases from 36 to 49 percent (a much larger increase than with the subjective measure). Perhaps the best indicator of the prevalence of cohabitation is the percent of mothers who said they were living together part-time on either measure. This measure yields a part-time cohabitation rate of 15 percent.

*[Table 3 about here]*

While the prevalence of part-time cohabitation is significant overall, it is especially important for certain subgroups. Table 3 shows mothers’ cohabitation status by education, and age, and race/ethnicity. Most striking, regardless of the measure used, the prevalence of part-time cohabitation is much higher among Blacks than among Whites or Hispanics. Using the subjective and behavioral definitions respectively, 9 to 18 percent of Blacks are added to the cohabiting category if we include part-time cohabitators, compared with 2 to 9 percent of Whites. In fact, if we group the part-time cohabiting mothers with the cohabiting mothers, we greatly reduce the observed gap in cohabitation across racial and ethnic groups, particularly for the

behavioral measure. In short, decisions about how to classify part-time cohabitators have important implications for our estimates of racial and ethnic differences in cohabitation rates.

A closer examination of the responses across racial and ethnic groups (not shown) reveals that at each given number of nights per week spent together, Blacks are less likely than Whites or Hispanics to say that they are cohabiting, which means that they are essentially “downgrading” their relationship status relative to other groups. Whether this finding is due to differences in the quality and commitment of these relationships or to cultural differences in thinking about relationships and household membership is unclear. However, the fact that such differences exist suggests that we need to carefully examine the meaning of cohabitation for these groups and perhaps tailor our definitions accordingly.

If we look across educational categories, we see that mothers with a college degree are much less likely to cohabit part-time than mothers without a college degree. The prevalence of part-time cohabitation also varies across age groups. Using the subjective measure, mothers aged 20-24 have the highest rates of part-time cohabitation (9 percent). Using the behavioral measure, mothers under 21 and over 29 have the highest rates of part-time cohabitation (15 percent). The differences in education and age, however, are not as striking as the differences in race and ethnicity.

### **Part-Time Cohabitation Stable or Transitional Status?**

To determine whether part time cohabitation is a stable or a short term relationship I used the longitudinal data to examine what proportion of part-time cohabiting couples were in transition. Comparing retrospective reports of cohabitation at the child’s birth to reported cohabitation at one-year, I found that one-quarter of part-time cohabiting mothers had moved

from a full-time cohabitating relationship (all/most) to a part-time relationship (some) during the past year and about 35 percent had migrated into a part-time cohabiting relationship from a dating relationship (results not shown in table). Only 40 percent of the part-time mothers were in stable relationship status, (cohabiting part-time at both waves) as compared with about 90 percent of full-time cohabitators.

Many researchers would like to know how part-time cohabitators are likely to answer a “yes/no” question about their relationship status (if given the discretion)? Although these data do not allow me to examine this question directly, I can “guesstimate” the answer by comparing the “yes/no” question that is asked of mothers at the birth of the child (“Are you and father living together now?”) with the retrospective question that is asked of mothers at the one-year follow-up interview. This comparison shows that, among mothers who reported (at one year) that they were living with the father “some” of the time at the child’s birth, 40 percent answered “yes” to the baseline question and 60 percent answered “no.” This comparison is problematic since question wording is confounded with when the question is asked and there is some evidence that changes in relationship status may affect retrospective reports of cohabitation (Teitler, Reichman, & Koball, 2004). Allowing for this recall discrepancy, about one-half of part-time cohabitators would probably have classified themselves as cohabiting.

### **Couple Characteristics**

To further explore whether there are substantive differences between part-time cohabitators and full-time cohabitators (and hence whether we should worry about how these couples are classified), I compare the bivariate means/distributions of relationship quality, union transitions, pooling finances, and father involvement using both sets of definitions. I compare mothers who

are cohabiting part-time with mothers who are cohabiting full-time and mothers who are in dating relationships. Tests for statistical significance are based on Wald tests of mean differences.

### *Relationship quality*

The first measure of relationship quality is partner supportiveness. Table 4 shows that, using a subjective definition, part-time cohabitators report lower levels of partner supportiveness than full-time cohabitators and similar levels of supportiveness as dating couples. The difference in means is small (.2 of a standard deviation) and the behavioral measure shows no difference in supportiveness.

*[Table 4 about here]*

Next I examine the frequency of couple conflict. Again, part-time cohabitators report poorer relationship quality than full-time cohabitators, this time in the form of higher levels of disagreement. However, as was true of supportiveness, this difference only holds for the subjective measure. Next I look at partners' controlling behavior. Here we find that part-time cohabitators have the lowest level of controlling behavior, but only using the behavioral measure. The fourth measure of relationship quality, violence, shows a similar pattern, only here the difference appears only for the subjective measure of cohabitation and not the behavioral measure.

Finally, we look at whether or not the mother reports that her relationship with the father is "excellent." Using either definition, part-time cohabitators report overall relationship quality similar to dating couples and different from full-time cohabitators. Using the subjective definition,

39 percent of full-time cohabitators report having an “excellent” relationship, compared with only 15 percent of part-time cohabitators and 23 percent of dating mothers.

In sum, the relationship quality indicators show mixed results regarding whether part-time cohabitators resemble full-time cohabitators or dating mothers. Using the subjective definition, part-time cohabitators tend to be more like dating mothers than mothers who are cohabiting full-time (with the exception of domestic violence). Using the behavioral definition, however, there is no clear pattern. The behavioral definition appears to be blurring the distinctions across the groups. As I move people who consider themselves cohabiting “all or most of the time” into part-time and dating categories using the number of nights spent together, I often observe “better” outcomes for these groups. Therefore, the subjective report of cohabitation may be intertwined with relationship quality in such a way that the relationship quality outcomes line up nicely with the subjective definition and less well with the behavioral definition.

### *Union transitions*

Next I look at what percent of the couples have married by the three-year follow-up interview. Regardless of the measure used, full-time cohabitators are much more likely to have married than part-time cohabitators. While 16 percent of full-time cohabitators have married, only 2 or 7 percent of part-time cohabitators have done so, using the subjective and behavioral measures respectively. Using the subjective measure, part-time cohabitators have lower rates of marriage than dating couples (2 percent versus 9 percent) but this is not the case for the behavioral measure. Relationship dissolution follows a similar pattern. While nearly one-quarter of full-time cohabitators have broken up two years later, closer to one-half of part-time cohabitators and

dating couples have broken up. Using the behavioral measure, the part-time cohabitators look more like the dating couples than they do using the subjective measure.

### *Pooling finances*

Next I look at whether the couple pools their income or keeps part of it separate. Using the subjective measure, over one-half of couples cohabiting full-time keep all of their money together compared with only 17 percent of part-time cohabitators and 15 percent of dating mothers. In this instance counting part-time cohabitators as cohabiting would diminish the rates of pooling for cohabitators. The behavior measure leads to a similar conclusion regarding the difference between the groups. Part-time cohabitators are more like daters than full-time cohabitators in terms of their pooling behaviors.

### *Father involvement*

Finally I look at three measures of father involvement (hugs, plays, and reads.) We might expect these measures to be highly correlated with the actual amount of time the father actually lives in the household, and thus we might expect the behavioral measure to be more closely tied to father involvement than the subjective measure. Using the latter, we see that our expectations are correct. Father involvement is highest for full-time cohabitators (mean = 6.8 days), followed by part-time cohabitators (5.7) and then dating mothers (3.9). In this example, part-time cohabitators fall in between full-time cohabitators and daters. Moreover, there does appear to be a continuum of father-child involvement based on the amount of time the father is in the household. The results are similar using the behavioral measure.

If we look at a second measure of father involvement, playing inside with toys such as blocks, we also see a clear continuum regardless of which measure is used; the results are remarkably similar in both magnitude and differences. For example, using the behavioral definition, mothers report that fathers living together full-time play inside with their child 5.7 days per week, compared to 4.4 days for part-time cohabitators and 2.6 days for dating mothers.

Finally if we look at the number of days the father reads to the child, the pattern is less clear pattern and the results differ across the two measures. First, using the subjective measure, we see that mothers report the mean number of nights in a typical week that the father reads to the child is 2.9 for full-time cohabitators, 2.2 for part-time cohabitators and 1.5 for dating mothers (NOTE: the p-value of the difference between dating and part-time is .106). Using the behavioral definition, fathers living together 2-5 nights are as likely to read to the child as fathers living together 6 or 7 nights.

Overall the subjective and behavioral measures of cohabitation appear to operate similarly for the three measures of couple behavior (union transitions, pooling, and father involvement) in terms of the differences across the groups and, at times, the magnitude of the outcomes. Results for father involvement, for examples, suggest that subjective measures may do as good a job as behavioral measures in capturing outcomes that are exposure-based. However the measures yield somewhat different results for the relationship quality outcomes, as the behavioral measures dampened the differences between the groups.

#### **IV. DISCUSSION**

This analysis addressed three questions: 1) what is the degree of correspondence between subjective and behavioral measures of cohabitation; (2) how common is ‘part-time’ cohabitation

and is it a transitional or long-term status; and (3) are estimates of the characteristics and outcomes of cohabiting relationships likely to be sensitive to how part-time cohabiting couples are classified. With respect to the first question, I find fairly high rates of concordance between subjective and behavioral measures of cohabitation among mothers for whom cohabitation status is unambiguous (the couple is living together nearly all the time or none of the time). However, I find much less agreement about cohabitation status among mothers who are cohabiting part of the time. These findings reinforce the notion that cohabitation is a continuous rather than a dichotomous variable.

With respect to the second question, I find that part-time cohabitation is fairly common among unmarried couples – between 8 and 13 percent depending on which measure is used. This status also contains a high proportion of short-term relationships. About 60 percent of mothers who are cohabiting part-time are in the process of entering or leaving a full-time cohabiting relationship, as compared with 10 percent of full-time cohabiting mothers. This means that the prevalence of *ever cohabiting part-time* is substantially higher than what point-in-time estimates might imply. One of the most striking findings in the analysis is that part-time cohabitation is much more common among Blacks than among white and Hispanics, 18 percent as compared with 9 percent using the behavioral measure. Among couple who are spending the same number of nights per week together, Blacks are always less likely than Whites or Hispanics to say that they are cohabiting. This finding indicates that the prevalence of cohabitation for blacks is likely to be very sensitive to how the concept is measure in different surveys. Substantively, it suggests that the meaning of cohabitation may differ across racial and ethnic groups.

With respect to the third question, the findings show that how we classify part-time cohabiting couples is likely to affect our understanding of nature of cohabitation. Although there

are exceptions (e.g. violence), for the most part part-time cohabiting couples resemble dating couples more closely than they resemble full-time cohabiting couples. Thus classifying these couples as ‘cohabiting’ will minimize the difference between cohabitation and dating relationships. In cases where the difference between full-time cohabitators and dating couples is small (e.g. relationship supportiveness) how we classify part-time cohabitators will not have a very large effect. However, in cases where the difference is large (e.g. pooling income, union formation and dissolution), measurement decisions will make a big difference. Much more research is needed in order to identify the domains in which the differences are large enough to matter and to determine whether part-time cohabitators are more similar to full-time cohabitators or dating couples.

In sum, although the idea that cohabitation is an ambiguous status is not new and although recent research is uncovering more details about the diversity of cohabitators (Sassler, 2004), our understanding of how to measure the concept of cohabitation is trailing behind substance in this regard. This paper has identified several different areas in which cohabitation is still a fuzzy concept – most importantly, the prevalence of part-time cohabitation. It also has shown that “measurement matters” and that it matters differently across racial and ethnic subgroups.

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Table 1. The Correspondence between Subjective and Behavioral Measures of Cohabitation Status among Unmarried Mothers (N = 1,902) (row percents reported)

<b>Behavioral Measure</b> (Nights per week)	<b>Subjective Measure</b>			<b>Total</b>	<b>N</b>
	<b>All/Most</b>	<b>Some</b>	<b>Rarely/ Never</b>		
7	97.8	1.9	0.4	100%	644
6	93.1	0.7	6.2	100%	23
5	39.6	42.1	18.3	100%	46
4	50.2	30.0	19.9	100%	66
3	20.9	55.7	23.4	100%	77
2	32.2	21.8	46.0	100%	82
1	6.5	27.3	66.2	100%	24
0	0.5	0.2	99.4	100%	915
Don't know/refused	49.0	0.5	50.5	100%	25
<i>N</i>	777	110	1015		1902

Table 2. The Prevalence of Part-Time Cohabitation Using Subjective and Behavioral Measures  
(*N* = 1,902)

	Percent of Total
<b>Subjective Measure</b>	
Living together ALL/MOST of the time	40.4
Living together SOME of the time	6.0
Rarely/Never	7.7
Not romantically involved	45.9
<b>Behavioral Measure</b>	
Living together 6+ nights	36.1
Living together 2-5 nights	12.9
Living together <2 nights	5.2
Not romantically involved	45.8
<b>Said part-time in subjective or behavioral</b>	<b>14.9</b>

Table 3. Demographic Characteristics of Unmarried Mothers by Cohabitation Status (N=1902)

	<i>N</i>	<u>Subjective measure of Cohabitation</u>				<u>Behavioral measure of Cohabitation</u>			
		All/Most	Some	Rar/nev	Not rom	6+ nts	2-5 nts	<2 Nts	Not rom
White	321	53.3	2.1	4.7	39.9	48.5	8.5	3.2	39.9
Black	1003	28.8	8.8	10.0	52.4	24.3	17.8	5.5	52.4
Hispanic	520	49.6	4.3	6.1	40.1	45.4	9.1	5.8	39.7
LT H.S.	746	41.9	6.4	6.1	45.6	37.2	13.5	3.7	45.6
H.S.	647	40.2	5.9	7.4	46.4	36.1	12.8	4.8	46.4
Some coll	454	38.9	5.9	11.7	43.6	34.4	13.1	9.5	42.9
College degree	54	23.3	1.0	7.5	68.2	22.0	2.9	6.9	68.2
Age lt 20	463	36.9	4.6	7.3	7.3	31.8	14.9	2.2	51.1
Age 20-24	813	40.7	8.5	6.3	6.3	37.9	13.0	4.7	44.5
Age 25-29	362	41.8	2.7	9.3	9.3	40.1	7.8	6.5	45.5
Age 30+	265	44.0	5.8	10.0	10.0	34.7	14.8	10.2	40.3

Table 4. Differences in Relationship Quality, Union Transitions, Pooling, and Father Involvement by Cohabitation Status, Among Romantically Involved Mothers (N=1,044)

	<u>Subjective Measure</u>			<u>Behavioral Measure</u>		
	All/Most	Some	Rr/nev	6+ nts	2-5 nts	< 2 nts
<b>Relationship quality</b>						
Partner supportive (mean)	2.67 *	2.59	2.61	2.67	2.63	2.60
Disagree w/ part (mean)	2.81 *	3.00	2.79	2.82	2.76	3.10 **
Partner controlling (mean)	1.13	1.14	1.12	1.14 ***	1.06	1.15 *
Partner hits/slaps (%)	4.0	1.8	7.1 *	4.2	3.9	5.1
Excellent relationship (%)	38.5 ***	15.4	23.4	38.8 ***	20.8	29.9
<b>Union transitions</b>						
At three-year follow-up <sup>1</sup>						
Married (%)	16.3 ***	2.3	9.2 *	16.4 ***	7.2	10.5
Dissolved (%)	21.0 ***	46.6	57.6	22.0 ***	42.8	46.5
<b>Pooling finances</b>						
Put all money together (%)	54.5 ***	16.9	15.1	55.9 ***	22.7	21.9
<b>Father involvement</b>						
# days in typical week father...						
Hugs child (mean)	6.82 ***	5.74	3.95 ***	6.87 ***	5.73	3.61 ***
Plays with toys (mean)	5.65 ***	4.73	2.67 ***	5.74 ***	4.41	2.59 ***
Reads to child (mean)	2.86 **	2.21	1.52	2.76	2.55	1.64 *

Notes:

Stars represent differences between group and part-time: \*\*\* =  $p \leq .01$ ; \*\* =  $p \leq .05$ ; \* =  $p \leq .10$

<sup>1</sup> Three-year follow-up data available for 91 percent of the sample.