

# Expectations of marriage among cohabiting couples

In the past, living together was often a stepping stone to marriage. As cohabitation has become commonplace, do people who are cohabiting these days expect to marry their partner? What are the marriage intentions of cohabiting men and women?

As in other developed countries, dramatic changes in family formation patterns have occurred in Australia during the last few decades. While the vast majority of people still marry, marriage rates have fallen and the proportion who never marry has increased sharply among the younger generations.

Of the total population eligible to marry, the proportions who did so each year fell from 6 per cent in 1976 to 3 per cent in 2000 for both men and women. The proportion of the never married population aged 25–29 years increased from 27 per cent to 67 per cent for men, and from 13 per cent to 53 per cent for women. This latter trend partly reflects the fact that people are marrying later in life. During the same period (1976–2000), the median age at first marriage has increased from 24 to 29 years for men and from 21 to 27 years for women (ABS 2001).

A marked surge in cohabitation (de facto relationships) has accompanied these trends. For example, the proportions of all couples who were cohabiting rather than married increased from 5 per cent in 1982 to around 12 per cent in 2001 (ABS 1995; de Vaus, Qu and Weston in this edition), with cohabitation now being the common pathway to marriage: 72 per cent of marriages registered in 2001 were preceded by cohabitation (ABS 2002).

As cohabitation has become more prevalent and marriage rates fallen, cohabitation is now widely accepted by both the law and the general population (Glezer 1993). In a national survey conducted in 1995, only one-third of all respondents (and 16 per cent of those aged in their 20s) disapproved of a man and woman living together without planning marriage (de Vaus 1997). While cohabitation was largely a stepping stone to marriage for earlier generations, more recent generations of cohabitators are less likely to marry and more likely to separate than cohabitators of earlier generations. Furthermore, more recent generations are more likely than earlier generations to have started a family while cohabiting (Qu and Weston 2001).

What do these trends suggest for the future of marriage? While most couples who marry do so after cohabiting, are cohabiting couples in general becoming less committed to the notion of “tying the knot”? While expectations of marriage cannot be interpreted as indicators that marriage will take

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place, apparently they are an important step towards marriage. In the United States, McGinnis (2003) observed that expectations of marriage were strong predictors of subsequent marriage.

So what are cohabitators' expectations about marriage, and to what extent do people have marriage in sight when they are cohabiting? Does the perceived prospect of marrying vary according to the length of time people have been cohabiting, or to the cohabitators' gender, age or previous marital status? To what extent do partners agree on their marriage prospects?

These questions are examined using the data from the first wave of the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey. The survey, which included face-to-face interviews with nearly 14000 respondents aged 15 or more years from nearly 7700 households, has been described in detail by Watson and Wooden (2002). Overall, 640 men and 708 women who were cohabiting reported whether or not they expected to marry their current partner. Of these, 596 represented couples in which each partner participated in the survey. Respondents who were cohabiting were asked to indicate their expectations about marrying their current partner by selecting one of the following options: “very likely”, “likely”, “not sure”, “unlikely”, or “very unlikely”.

This paper first examines links between the expectations of marriage of cohabiting men and women and their previous marital status, their age, and the length of their cohabiting relationship. It then looks at the extent to which both partners share the same or similar view on their prospects of marrying each other.

## *Expectations of marriage among cohabiting people*

Overall, cohabiting respondents most commonly expected to marry: more than half felt they were likely or very likely to marry their current partner (57 per cent of men and 52 per cent of women respectively), while roughly one quarter felt this to be unlikely or very unlikely (21 per cent of men and 27 per cent of women), and the remainder expressed uncertainty (22 per cent of men and 21 per cent of women) (Figure 1). While Fisher's (2002) analysis suggests that men are slightly more likely than women to shy away from having a



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family, cohabiting men and women had similar expectations that they would marry their partner.

Expectations about marriage were linked with previous marital status. Those who had never married were more likely to expect marriage than those who had been previously married – 60 and 61 per cent of never married men and women respectively compared with 51 and 35 per cent of ever married men and women (Figure 2).

Compared with never married cohabitators, those who had been married tended to be older and were more likely to have a child from the previous relationship. Some of these previously married respondents may consider marriage unnecessary unless they intend having another child. On the other hand, the experiences of marriage breakdown possibly led many of the previously married group to think twice about committing to marriage again, particularly now that cohabitation has become a socially accepted arrangement. Nevertheless, previously married men (51 per cent) were more likely than previously married women (35 per cent) to expect to marry their partner.

### **Never married cohabitators: expectations of marriage**

This section focuses on cohabiting men and women who had never been married (69 per cent and 66 per cent of all cohabitators) and examines expectations of marriage according to age and length of the cohabiting relationship.

For the first analysis, respondents were subdivided into four age groups – under 25 years, 25-29 years, 30-39 years, and 40 years or older (Figure 3). While nearly three quarters of never married men and women in the two younger age groups considered marriage to be likely or very likely, only 56 per

cent of never married men and 49 per cent of never married women aged 30-39 years held such views. The never married men and women in the oldest age group were the least likely to expect to marry (37 per cent of men and 19 per cent of women).

It appears that older never married cohabitators were more likely than younger counterparts to have lived with someone else beforehand (about 50 per cent compared with 27 per cent). As the adage “once bitten, twice shy” implies, previous experience of relationship breakdown may increase wariness of marriage. In addition, older never married cohabitators tended to have lived with their current partner for a longer period than younger couples, and expectations of marriage appear to vary according to length of the relationship.

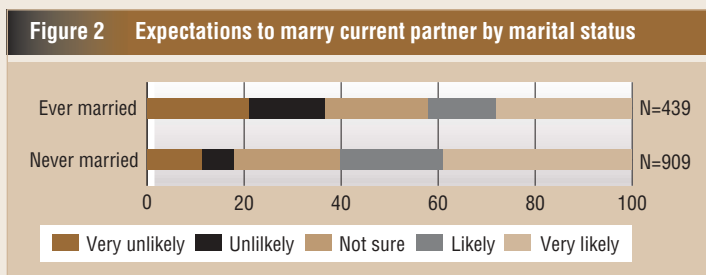
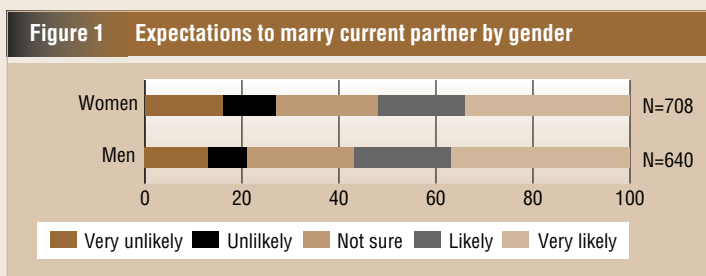
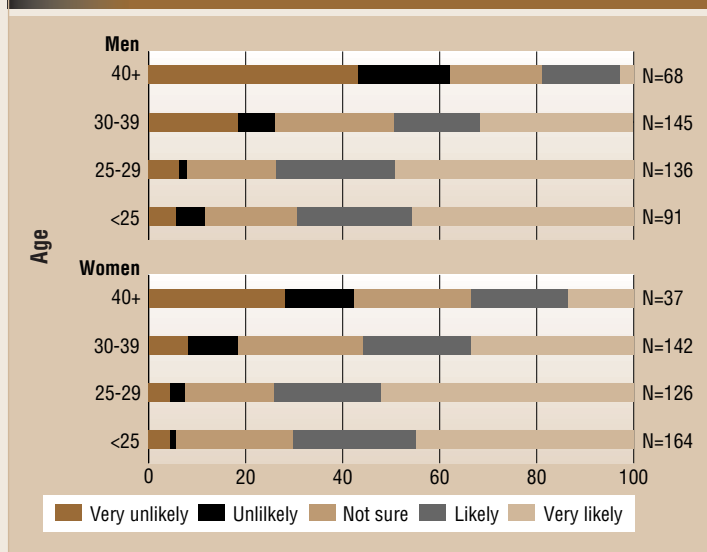


Figure 4 shows the expectations of marriage reported by never married male and female cohabitators by length of their relationship (less than two years, two to four years, or five or more years). The figure suggests that a disproportionate number of “long-time cohabitators” may view cohabitation as a replacement for marriage. While this assertion could not be tested directly, it is consistent with the fact that those who had been living together for five or more years were less likely to expect to marry than those who had lived together for a shorter period of time. Less than half in this group (42 and 45 per cent of men and women) said that they were likely or very likely to marry, compared with nearly two-thirds (64 per cent of both men and women)

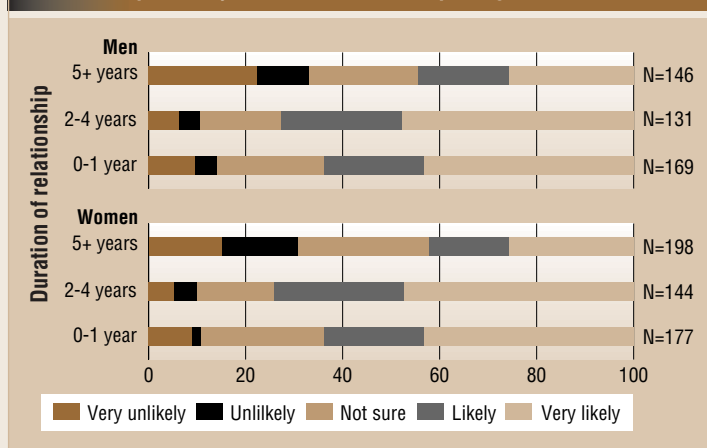
**Table 1 All couples: expectations to marry each other reported by both partners**

Both partners: likely/very likely	47.0
Both partners: unlikely/very unlikely	14.7
Both partners: unsure	10.8
One partner unsure, the other likely/very likely /unlikely/very unlikely	22.1
One partner likely/very likely, the other partner unlikely/very unlikely	5.5
<b>Number of cases</b>	<b>592</b>

**Figure 3 Never married cohabitators: expectations to marry current partner by age and gender**



**Figure 4 Never married cohabitators: expectations to marry current partner by duration of relationship and gender**



who had been cohabiting for less than two years, and nearly three quarters (73 and 74 per cent) who had been cohabiting for two to four years. As time progresses, relationships that continue for five years or more are increasingly likely to include an over-representation of people who consider marriage to be redundant.

Figure 4 also shows that uncertainty about getting married was more likely to be expressed by those who had been living together for the shortest and the longest of the three periods – 25 and 22 per cent of men and women cohabiting for less than two years, and 27 and 22 per cent for more than five years, compared with 16 and 17 per cent of men and women who had been cohabiting for two to four years.

The reasons for feeling uncertain about the prospect of marrying may be different for the two groups. For the “new cohabitators” group, the feeling of uncertainty may be due to the fact that they were still getting to know each other. For the “long-time cohabitators” group, it might be that they were questioning the need to marry when they were happy the way they were and were more inclined to the idea that marriage was “just a piece of paper”. On the other hand, some “long-time cohabitators” might have postponed marriage because they were experiencing difficulties in their relationship.

### Agreement between partners in reporting the likelihood of marrying

One of advantages of the HILDA survey is that, for a sizeable number of cases, data were collected from each cohabiting partner. It is thus possible to examine the extent to which couples held similar views about their prospects of marrying. Whereas marriage is a public commitment made by each spouse to a life-long relationship, cohabitation may have a variety of meanings over which partners may not necessarily agree.

Overall, there was a fairly high level of agreement between partners. Table 1 shows that nearly three quarters of couples held very similar views on their marriage prospect. In 47 per cent of couples both partners expected to marry each other, in 15 per cent of couples neither partner had any expectation of marrying each other, and in 11 per cent of couples both partners reported uncertainty about marrying each other. For the remaining 27 per cent of couples, partners disagreed on the prospect of marrying one another.

For couples where partners indicated divergent views, one of these partners was more likely to express uncertainty than to report a view opposing that of their partner. In the future, as the couples are followed up, it will be interesting to see how level of agreement between partners on their marriage prospects affects their relationship.

While level of agreement between partners was high regardless of whether or not one or both partners had been previously married, the nature of their agreement appears to differ according to their previous marital status. Couples where both partners were never married (“never married couples”) tended to agree that they were *likely* to marry each other while couples where both partners had

previously been married (“ever married couples”) tended to agree that they were *unlikely* to marry. For example, partners in 56 per cent of “never married couples” and 33 per cent of “ever married couples” agreed that they were likely to marry each other. On the other hand, partners in 8 per cent of “never married couples” and 32 per cent of “ever married couples” agreed that they did not expect to marry each other.

Finally, level of agreement between partners did not vary much according to the length of relationship. However, couples who had lived together for five years or more were more likely to agree on not marrying each other (27 per cent) than couples who had lived together for a shorter duration (6 and 10 per cent for couples who lived together for less than two years and two to four years respectively).

## Discussion

Over the decades cohabitation has changed from a deviant act in the 1950s and 1960s (Glezer et al. 1992) to a common practice, particularly as a prelude to marriage. The growing social acceptance of cohabitation appears to have been accompanied by reduced pressure on cohabiting couples to marry. Nevertheless, the results suggest that most couples who cohabit expect to marry. In other words, cohabitation is not generally viewed as either a replacement for marriage or as a relationship involving minimal commitment. More than half the cohabiting men and women indicated that they expected to marry their partner, and nearly half of the couples agreed with their partner’s view.

However, expectations of marriage varied with previous marital experience, age, and duration of the relationship. Never married cohabitators were more likely to expect to marry their partner compared with ever married cohabitators, and older never married cohabitators were less likely to expect marriage than their younger counterparts. Perhaps older cohabitators were more cautious about marrying, for they were also more likely to have lived with a partner previously and thus experienced separation. Older cohabitators had also lived with their current partner for a relatively longer period of time compared with their younger counterparts.

While expectations of marriage were relatively high in the first few years of the cohabiting relationship, they were lower for those who had been living together for a longer period. Disproportionate numbers of these long-time cohabitators may see no need to marry because they interpret marriage to be redundant, or because they perceive problems in their relationship. Consistent with the second interpretation, research in the United States by Brown (1999) suggests that, like marriage, the perceived quality of cohabiting relationship tends to decline over time. Furthermore, Brown observed that this decline is greater for cohabiting couples than for married couples.

However, the direction of any causal link between duration of cohabitation and marriage expectations remains unclear. On the one hand, declines in the quality of the relationship over time may lower marriage expectations; on the other

hand, many of those who were expecting to marry at the outset would have done so earlier, in the first few years of cohabitation.

Overall, the level of agreement between partners on their marriage prospects was very high, particularly where neither partner had been married previously and where the couple had been living together for a relatively short period. This suggests that many young cohabiting couples see their relationship as a prelude to marriage instead of a



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substitute for marriage or an indefinite cohabiting relationship. Future waves of HILDA will enable us to identify the extent to which expectations are fulfilled or change with time.

In summary, the HILDA survey data suggest that, despite the growing trend in cohabitation, cohabitation is largely perceived as a stepping stone to marriage. Many people who are cohabiting are still hoping to “tie the knot”. Marriage remains the preferred family form.

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