

DEMOGRAPHIC DESTINIES

Interviews with Presidents of the Population Association of America

Interview with Wendy Manning PAA President in 2018



This series of interviews with Past PAA Presidents was initiated by Anders Lunde
(PAA Historian, 1973 to 1982)

And continued by Jean van der Tak (PAA Historian, 1982 to 1994)

And then by John R. Weeks (PAA Historian, 1994 to present)

With the collaboration of the following members of the PAA History Committee:
David Heer (2004 to 2007), Paul Demeny (2004 to 2012), Dennis Hodgson (2004 to
present), Deborah McFarlane (2004 to 2018, 2024 to present), Karen Hardee (2010 to
present), Emily Merchant (2016 to present), and Win Brown (2018 to present)

WENDY MANNING

PAA President in 2018 (No. 81). On May 23rd, 2024, we were able to have a Zoom interview with Dr. Manning. The members of the PAA History Committee participating in the interview included John Weeks, Dennis Hodgson, Karen Hardee, and Win Brown.

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS: Dr. Wendy D. Manning is the Dr. Howard E. and Penny Daum Aldrich Distinguished Professor in Sociology at Bowling Green State University in Bowling Green, Ohio. She was born in Ames, Iowa in 1964 and grew up mainly in Racine, Wisconsin, albeit with a five-year stint in Amsterdam when she was a teenager. She received her B.A. in Sociology, graduating with Distinction in 1985 from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. In 1988 she earned her M.S. in Sociology, also from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and in 1992 she received her Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The next two years were spent as a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Population Research Institute at Pennsylvania State University, and then in 1995 she accepted a position as Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology at Bowling Green State University, where she has been ever since. She was promoted to Associate Professor in 2000, to Professor in 2004, and awarded Distinguished Professorship in 2013, followed by promotion to the Aldrich Distinguished Professorship in 2018. Along the way, she founded the Center for Family and Demographic Research at BGSU and currently serves as its Development Core Co-Director. She is also the Co-Director of the National Center for Family & Marriage Research at BGSU. She has an outstanding record of funded research and publications, focusing especially on family demography.

OUR INTERVIEW WITH DR. MANNING:

John Weeks: This is the PAA History Committee here today to interview Past PAA president, Dr. Wendy Manning, who was PAA president in 2018. And let's see. You were the 81st PAA President in that year.

Wendy Manning: Okay, I did not know that. So, that's good to hear.

John Weeks: Yeah, 81 at that point. Hard to believe that was six years ago that you were there at Denver, and we were listening to your presidential address. And you are the Distinguished Professor in Sociology and the Co-Director of the National Center for Family Research at Bowling Green State University in Ohio.

Wendy Manning: Yes, not Kentucky.

John Weeks: So, let's start with your demographics. I have it in my notes that you were born in 1963. Am I correct on that?

Wendy Manning: No, I'm actually younger than that. I was born in '64.

John Weeks: '64?

Wendy Manning: I'm November 1964. So, I tell everybody – and you guys will all appreciate this – I'm the tail end of the Baby Boom.

John Weeks: Yes, you are.

Wendy Manning: So, people call me Boomer, but I'm really at that time.

Win Brown: That's the last of the cohort, I believe. That's the bracket year.

Wendy Manning: Yes, I am. So, I always have no problem understanding the end of the Baby Boom cohort. So, that's been... yeah.

Win Brown: You missed the Eisenhower years. You made the JFK years.

Wendy Manning: Yes.

John Weeks: Well, actually, I was looking at that. And it turns out that you and Bob Hummer [PAA President in 2021] are the most recently born PAA presidents. Actually, you beat him by a year in terms of recency.

Wendy Manning: Yay.

John Weeks: And so, no other PAA presidents besides the two of you have been born as recently as the 1960s.

Wendy Manning: Oh, okay. Well, there we go.

John Weeks: You young Boomers.

Wendy Manning: Yes, yes. Well, I beat Bob at something. There we go.

John Weeks: Okay. So, now, being born back in 1964, where were you at that time?

Wendy Manning: My father was a student. I was born in Ames, Iowa, and he was a student at Iowa State University.

John Weeks: Okay, okay. Very good. And so, did you grow up in Iowa?

Wendy Manning: No. So, he graduated from college, and we moved to Chicago for a very brief time. And then we moved to Racine, Wisconsin, where he worked for Tenneco Automotive. And then I lived there until 1976, and then our family moved to The Netherlands for five years.

John Weeks: Oh, really?

Wendy Manning: So, I went from a large American junior high to an international school in Amsterdam. And when I was a senior, we moved back to Racine, Wisconsin to a very large American high school where, when I was graduating from high school, someone asked me when I was returning to Denmark because they thought I was a foreign exchange student.

John Weeks: All right. Well, that's a good story. But except for those little five years in The Netherlands, you're a classic Midwestern person.

Wendy Manning: Yes. You can call me a cheesehead, any of those things you want to call people from Wisconsin. Yeah, I'll take any of that.

John Weeks: Oh, yeah. And so, out of high school, then you went off to Madison and got all your degrees there.

Wendy Manning: Yeah. So, I got all of my undergraduate and graduate degrees at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. And I like to tell people that I didn't have any of the same professors as an undergrad that I did as a graduate student. And I was a sociology major, so that tells you about the size of that department. Yeah.

John Weeks: Yeah, that's big.

Dennis Hodgson: Did you take any population courses as an undergraduate?

Wendy Manning: I did. I took a class with Karl Taeuber, an undergraduate population problems class. So, at the time, I didn't know who he was or how famous he was or anything along those lines, but that was my first population class as an undergraduate there.

Dennis Hodgson: Did you find it exciting?

Wendy Manning: I did. I really liked it. I don't know. Do any of you know Karl?

Dennis Hodgson: Yeah.

Wendy Manning: He's not the most dynamic. You can imagine he's not very dynamic. And he wasn't a very dynamic instructor, but somehow, I loved it. I loved social science research. Wisconsin, they had a concentration in analysis in research. And I took a great research and methods class with Pam Oliver, and I just really got the bug for research, but I enjoyed the population problems as an undergrad with Karl.

John Weeks: And so, is that why you then applied to the graduate program there?

Wendy Manning: Yeah. I really enjoyed all the classes I had. I got into other programs. I applied to other programs, but I'm really glad I've stayed there. I think at the time I wasn't aware of it, but sort of the hotbed of family demography was at University of Wisconsin. They had just put out the National Survey of Families and Households during this era. And so, I was there during that peak, one of the peaks, many of the peaks of time.

But from a family demography standpoint, it was really a peak time when you had people like Larry Bumpass [PAA President in 1990] and Jim Sweet and Hal Winsborough. And then, at the same time, Judy Seltzer [PAA President in 2016] and Rob Mare [PAA President in 2010], Sarah McLanahan [PAA President in 2004]. So, some of these, also, you recognize these names of former PAA presidents, as well. Alberto Palloni [PAA President in 2006] was there. So, it was just sort of a great time to be a student at Wisconsin.

John Weeks: Right, okay. And so, who was your major mentor there?

Wendy Manning: For my Master's, it was Betty Thompson. And for my PhD, it was Larry Bumpass. So, yeah, my dissertation was about cohabitation. And so, he was a great advisor for that.

John Weeks: Now, that's a topic that you've clung to.

Wendy Manning: Yes, yeah. And so, I was thinking about that when I was reading your questions. I thought, wow, I haven't transformed myself very much. I started there and have moved on to other topics, too. But yes, I've maintained that interest in cohabitation, for sure.

John Weeks: Now, then you spent a couple years as a postdoc at Penn State.

Wendy Manning: Yes.

John Weeks: And then how did the job opportunity come up at Bowling Green?

Wendy Manning: So, I was a postdoc at Penn State at a time, too, when they had a fabulous set of researchers and a lot of demography going on there. And so, I really enjoyed that. I learned a lot from that postdoc experience. I really value that contribution. And then there was a position at Bowling Green State University, and they had a strong program in demography.

They didn't have a population center, but they had some key people here, for example, Ted Groat, who did a lot of work on fertility and had grants, and Jerry Wicks and Ed Stockwell, who was one of the big authors of the big red book that we've all treasured and read. And so, there were some core people here who really drew me into it. And I didn't know I would stay as long as I did. I started here right after the postdoc.

John Weeks: Okay. I was going to ask you about Ed Stockwell, because before you'd gotten to Bowling Green, he'd come out to San Diego State for a semester sabbatical. And it was actually back when I was chair of sociology here, and I got him an office. And so, we used to have long talks about what was going on in demography. And I like to think that I helped you guys in that way. Right?

Wendy Manning: Yes, of course. Yes, you have. So, definitely. Yeah. Yeah, it was really an honor to be amongst people who've been doing demography for a long time.

Dennis Hodgson: I just had one question about Penn State. You had a National Institute of Aging postdoc.

Wendy Manning: Yes.

Dennis Hodgson: Did you study aging at all?

Wendy Manning: I did. I was studying aging as broadly conceived. So, at the time I got that postdoc, it wasn't as... Aging has really blossomed, and I think it's a little different than it

was at the time. But yeah, I was working with Dennis Hogan on social support questions. So, yeah, I did start there. And then there was a lot of flexibility in what you did. I did sit in on a Soc of Aging class that Mark Hayward taught and published a lot of papers about living arrangements and child wellbeing, influenced by a lot of the great demographers. But yeah, I was in a postdoc, but they didn't require that you were focusing on older adults. It was more of an aging perspective through the life course at the time.

John Weeks: Okay. And of course, the life course really is what your research has focused on.

Wendy Manning: Yes.

John Weeks: Over time. And looking through your CV, honestly, Wendy, you have published so many papers over your career. I mean, I look at what you've accomplished, and I think, do you ever sleep? Seriously, do you ever sleep?

Wendy Manning: I have a lot of great co-authors. That's what I'll say. You'll notice there aren't very many sole-authored papers. Most of them, I've collaborated with people. I really like being part of a team. I really enjoy working with others. I publish with my colleagues from graduate school like Pam Smock. I've published with my colleagues here at Bowling Green, with students. I really enjoy working with other people, and I think the work is better for it. I think the papers that I've written, some of them, you get an idea by yourself, but I think in our field there's a lot of collaboration. I think that's really acceptable.

And when I write letters for promotion for individuals for tenure, I always comment that I think our field, that some people think if you don't have a lot of sole-authored papers that you're not an independent scholar. But I think if you can do enough collaborative papers then you also benefit from other people's perspective. So, when I came to Bowling Green, I worked a lot with Peggy Giordano and Monica Longmore. Peggy Giordano is a world-renowned criminologist who's won the Stockholm Award, and Monica Longmore is a social psychologist.

And so, that was really exciting for me to move outside of demography and work with people who were not trained in demography and who were helping me integrate new perspectives into demographic analysis. So, that was really exciting for me, and we've continued collaborating for almost 30 years.

John Weeks: Yeah. Well, that's fantastic. And you were the one that got the Center on Marriage and Family going. Right?

Wendy Manning: Yes, I was the founding director of that center. And at the time, we had a lot of great demographers here, and I had been raised in the pop center environment and saw the benefits of a pop center. And so, a group of us really worked together on trying to come up with a center that would be somewhat unique from other centers, but nonetheless doing high-quality demographic research. And so, we had to try a couple times, but we eventually were successful and have maintained support for that over the course of many years. So, I think that's been really

exciting to bring that experience here.

And also, it makes me aware of what population centers offer and some stratification in our field related to pop centers and how I think a lot of great demographic research is occurring outside of pop centers. It's made me be more sensitive, I think, where you might take that all for granted if you were just starting. There was an era where there were a number of new centers that started, like at Ohio State and Texas and UCLA. But I have a great sense of what it takes to build a center and sustain one.

John Weeks: And thinking about Ohio State now, am I right that you've been working to sort of build a collaboration with them?

Wendy Manning: Yes, yeah. We're trying. Fingers crossed, it's going to hit, but we're collaborating with them in one of the first ever joint pop centers. It's the Ohio Population Consortium. And so, that will be really exciting, and that's been led by Sarah Hayford at Ohio State and Susan Brown here at Bowling Green.

John Weeks: Very good, all right. Dennis?

Dennis Hodgson: I've got one question. You have this unique relationship with cohabitation. It was your dissertation topic, and you continued on for 30, 35 years studying cohabitation. Could you tell us a little bit about the surrounding issues around cohabitation way back then, '85, '90? What was the study of cohabitation like? What was controversial? And maybe a little bit of how that evolved over the course of your studying the topic.

Wendy Manning: Oh, sure. That's a great question. I think the opportunities to study cohabitation were driven a lot by the data infrastructure. So, until we had surveys that included questions about cohabitation, we weren't really able to study it. So, it doesn't mean that cohabitation didn't start or exist until the NSFH or the early NSFG survey started asking about it. I think people started first asking about it in relation to marriage and then started asking about it on its own. And so, I was sort of at the right place at the right time with the right people who were interested in this.

And I was really focusing on family building and how the fertility behavior of people who were cohabiting in terms of contraceptive use and whether they were having children and thinking about how it compared to being married. I think that, initially, a lot of people were trying to focus on that. There was a notion that cohabitation was something that college-educated people did. And I think that ended up being probably refuted with a lot of empirical analysis over time, but the notion was that college students would cohabit before they got married, but they were all on the pathway to marriage.

And I think, over time, the field has shifted in thinking about how cohabitation fits into the American family system. And is it something that you do on your way to marriage? For some folks, it is. For some people, it's something you're trying out with a new partner, sort of another way of being single but having a closer intimate relationship and living with each other all the time. And I think what

we've... And I've done survey research, analyzing survey data. And then, also, that's what I did with Pam Smock, where we did qualitative interviews and were trying to unpack what does this mean, and really showing that it means different things to different folks, and that not everybody is on a pathway to marriage. Some people are quite instrumental about their cohabiting relationships. Some people are more really trying to test out the relationship and see what happens. The reality is you might think you're going to test out the relationship. But once you've already invested and embedded yourself with one another, are you really going to separate?

And so, the big question became: Is this an effective weeding-out mechanism? Are people able to? And one way to measure that would be, once you get married, do you have a lower divorce rate than those people who didn't cohabit before marriage? And so, that's sort of the question that even continues today. But what's shifted is that now almost three-quarters of people--of young adults--have cohabited at some point. And what's also changed is that they're cohabiting with more than one person. So, before, it might have been we weren't asking the right questions about: Have you lived with more than one person? But I really think we've shifted to what we call that term.

And I think I had a correspondence with John about serial cohabitation and whether that's an important issue. People don't like that term because it evokes serial killer or sounds negative, but it's really meant to just be multiple cohabiting relationships. And so, people, as they're delaying marriage, are doing that more often during their young adult years. So, those are the questions that I was really interested in in my address, and I continue to be fascinated by. And we're fortunate to still be asking questions like in the National Survey of Family Growth about cohabitation. And so, we can still address that.

I would argue those data aren't that great at understanding why. It's more demographic, and the questions in the field are: Really, why is this something that you're looking at? And also, the questions that have emerged I think are looking at the younger stages of the life course and what cohabitation means for older folks. My colleague, Susan Brown, has done a lot of work on this in trying to figure out what cohabitation means among older adults.

And is that something you're doing to sort of protect your assets? You don't really need to be married in the same way you might have needed to be married when you were younger and having children. So, long answer to a good question, but then I think cohabitation has changed over time. It shifts across the life course. There are differences according to social class.

John Weeks:

I think it's really important because you really do -- I mean you talk about this in your presidential address, but it's really the case that when you start talking about these issues, particularly amongst the young people, you do dive into how society is changing. And I was thinking about your research just this morning when I was reading this week's *Economist*. I don't know if you saw the story, but they're talking about: How are countries going to get women to have more babies?

Wendy Manning: Yes, yeah.

John Weeks: And of course, one of the things that comes up is young people are cohabiting, and they're not marrying and having kids at a young age like they used to. And so, what's going on? And that just seems to jump right into everything you've been doing all your academic life.

Wendy Manning: Yeah. I really am fascinated by family change. I really find that very intriguing in how children fit in. And one thing that we talk about, about two-fifths of children are born outside of marriage, but about half of those are born in cohabiting unions. So, a lot of those kids are actually born to two-parent families. It's just not a married two-parent family. And so, sometimes, when I see things in the media that are making claims that are... There's been a lot of discussion about single motherhood and marriage, the role of marriage, and the retreat from marriage in the United States. And I sometimes just wish people would actually interview a demographer. That might help answer some of those questions.

Karen Hardee: Can I ask a question, John?

John Weeks: Oh, of course, go ahead.

Karen Hardee: I'm really intrigued, Wendy. You said you'd lived in The Netherlands for those years. Have you done any cross-cultural work in the sense of not within the U.S. but cross-national work?

Wendy Manning: Yeah. I wish I had an opportunity to do more, and I have not. I've focused so much largely on the United States. I did have a project with Melinda Mills and a graduate student, and we did some work. We put in a proposal. It didn't hit. But I'm very interested in family patterns in other countries. And so, I wish I had had the opportunity more. And I love when I'm teaching and writing.

The data that are available in Europe are so different than the United States. So, I think there's a lot to be learned. But yeah, I haven't myself been part of a international team like that, but that would have been fabulous and I think really important. And a hallmark of demography is comparing across countries, looking within countries. So, I really applaud that work, and it's very intense. It's challenging.

Karen Hardee: Great, thanks.

John Weeks: And one of the things that is coming up lately – and I think I remember you've published a paper recently or a chapter in a book by my old classmate, Bob Schoen, focusing on intimate domestic violence. Are you looking at that topic yourself?

Wendy Manning: Yeah, we have. We call it the Toledo Adolescent Relationship Project, and we've been following these high school... They were in seventh, ninth, and 11th grade in about 2000. We've been following them for almost 25 years. And so, one of the waves of data collection was really dedicated to trying to understand more

about intimate partner violence. And working with a criminologist was really helpful, and also with Monica who's a social psychologist who's really great, because we could infuse those notions into our understanding of intimate partner violence. And I think some of the contributions are that it's also mutual.

There are, of course, horrible situations that are very tragic that aren't what we call situational intimate partner violence but are really a different form of intimate partner violence. But trying to get at that back-and-forth of how it emerges in a relationship. And we have some great questions that we're able to include in the surveys trying to unpack that. And so, I think that's really important that most people are having some form of disagreement. Then intimate partner violence emerges.

And I think we've tried to look at trajectories over time, and we've focused on some... A term that's drawn from criminology is desistance from intimate partner violence, so people who've sort of stopped engaging in intimate partner violence in the relationship. And what are the factors associated with that? So, that's the real advantage of a longitudinal cohort design data collection. So, we're able to follow these respondents from adolescence, and now they're in their late 30s. And so, it's really been a really unique opportunity to see how their lives have evolved over time.

John Weeks: And you were mentioning mutual. So, it is interesting, isn't it, that men seem to respond that they've been harmed by their partner. It's not just women, because I think the popular image is it's women being beaten by men.

Wendy Manning: Yeah, which is horrible and wrong and illegal and shouldn't happen, but there are a lot of... It's hard to talk about rates or levels about intimate partner violence, but there's often what might start off as relatively minor forms of pushing or grabbing that then can escalate. And so, that's often what we would have occur. We would observe that quite often. And then what we did is we had surveys, but then we also did in-depth interviews with subsets of individuals, and then have couple level in-depth interviews.

So, we interviewed both members of the couple about their experiences. And so, that's been really informative and insightful, and we've learned a lot from that. So, yeah, I think it's important to consider what – A lot of people like to focus on relationship quality, which is often a very positive outcome, but I think we need to think about the other side, too, which are more negative relationship dynamics, which would be something like an intimate partner violence or disagreement, levels of disagreement. And so, we have a large series of papers on that. It's been very rewarding.

John Weeks: Yeah, good. Yeah, Dennis?

Dennis Hodgson: I've got a question. You were mentioning using longitudinal datasets. And I see from all the articles you've published, you really looked at both race and class and how it affects partnerships. And I'm curious about whether or not there's data out there about immigration. We really have now, I think, 14% of the population not

born in the United States, and a good chunk of that is early adult population.

So, I don't know what percent of our early adult population is actually born out of the United States, but it's rather significant, and it's largely Hispanic and Asian. Do we know if there's big systematic differences between how they experience partnerships? And oftentimes, it might be sex ratio difficulties for them when they come in. Is there anything out there that would allow us to tease that immigration impact on partnerships?

Wendy Manning: I think there are. There are some great data sources that have addressed that. It's not really possible with our dataset. It's too small of a sample to focus on that, and everybody was in Toledo going to a school. So, it's a select area in northwest Ohio, but certainly, some of the big national datasets. I have had students who've done this kind of analysis with the Add Health data or with the NLSY data in trying to understand that. At the National Center for Family and Marriage Research, we do a lot of family profiles, and we have tried to focus on native-born and foreign-born Asian and Hispanics when sample sizes allow us to do that.

But yeah, I think the motivations for... There are so many factors at play. The students that have written dissertations on this, it's very complicated, but also a really important segment of the population. And young age groups are immigrating. And it's sort of when are they immigrating, and who are they partnering with, and questions. People have asked really great questions about if they're partnering with someone who is also an immigrant or somebody who is a native-born, a co-ethnic of the same ethnicity. So, I think there's a lot more could be done with that.

And so, one of the big things that I advocate for is also better data infrastructure in the United States. So, anytime I get a chance, I'm always arguing – Oops, the light went off here. We're always arguing for collecting better and more high-quality data about populations that are understudied, so that would include immigrant groups. I myself have focused a lot on gender and sexual minorities, but I think that's just something that...

If we want our science to inform our policies, we have to be sure to be collecting data from people who are the targets of those policies. But yeah, I think there's a new generation of students who are interested in those questions and bringing new perspectives and challenging some of the older theories about immigrants, because the context is so different. Yeah.

John Weeks: Well, yeah. Kind of interesting to think about the fact that you were born just as the new immigration law went into effect.

Wendy Manning: Yeah.

John Weeks: Now you're studying the changes in the demography of this country as a consequence of those migration changes in your lifetime.

Wendy Manning: Yes, yeah, no. There's been a lot of changes that have occurred in this timeframe.

Another topic I'm focused a lot on are gender and sexual minorities and focused a lot on trying to understand those groups, and those rights have changed a lot in more recent years. But certainly, everybody's research is driven in part by the context you're in.

So, what I'm studying would be different than what my students are studying because – I bring this up as an example – because they seem to forget that it wasn't until 2015 that the Obergefell decision came through, and they sort of take that for granted. And I'm like, "What? What are you talking about?" And so, I try to remind them. Or they'll say things happened before they were born. I'm like, "That doesn't mean it's not important."

Wendy Manning: Yeah, right. Yes, Win? There we go.

Win Brown: There we go, yeah. Thanks so much, Wendy, for all the comments so far. Taking a look at your research more recently as a whole, I wonder if you could provide us with your thoughts on the concept of a cultural mainstream? Richard Alba writes a lot about this. Insofar as you're studying so many changes in family, family structure, relationship structure, sexual minorities, I wonder who is a minority? Who is a majority? And what are your thoughts on this concept of a mainstream? Do we still have a mainstream? How would you comment on that?

Wendy Manning: That's a great question. I think, as demographers, we can reflect that there are patterns that people follow on average--that occurs. So, we can talk about, for example, the median age at first marriage and how that's increased on average, but that doesn't still mean that people still don't get married at age 20 just because it's age 30 now for men. There's still a lot of variation. And so, I think the mainstream are sometimes what we value or what we think is important, but what's actually the behavior doesn't always match up with that.

And so, some people view that as a problem. If I aspire to get married, but I never get married, is that...? Or I want to have children, and I don't have children. Those kinds of questions I think are important. But yeah, I don't know if there's – We like to think about this sort of average, white, middle-class, mainstream society. And I'm not sure that that even exists in the same way as it used to, or maybe it always was there, and we just didn't have the data to measure it, or we ignored it as a society, the variation.

But I think there is more acceptable variation than there used to be in American families. And I appreciate all the historical work that we know about families as they never were-- Stephanie Coontz's work. But definitely, I think we do have a broader... If I take, for example, age at marriage, I can plot out how concentrated the age at marriage used to be. And now it's become much more flat. It's much more spread out with larger swaths of the population never getting married, but still some people getting married at very young ages, where before there was more of a conforming to one pattern.

There's a lot of discussion about this. Some of it is political. But I like to think about it just from a demographic standpoint about: What are the average patterns,

and how are different people sequencing their lives? And it doesn't necessarily mean that people are rejecting marriage or rejecting the values of marriage. It's just some people don't have the opportunities and haven't historically had the opportunities and the same levels of access to resources. So, I think we're acknowledging how some of our structural systems also modify people's family trajectories.

And I think that sensitivity has helped us be a little more open that there are varying family circumstances and family trajectories, and it's not always about individual choice that, sometimes, our own society makes those constraints. So, very sociological, but yeah, it's a challenge. I think it's fun to talk about with students and less fun to talk to reporters about.

John Weeks: Well, on that same thing, though. Do you get into your research the issue that seems to keep coming up, by the press, at least, about how women are now becoming better educated than men? And so, you've got this young generation of men who can't get a date because women don't want to go out with a guy who's less well educated than they are and that then creates societal problems, if you will. And of course, that could then get back into the issue of who's having kids and how many and so forth. Did you look at that issue at all?

Wendy Manning: No, I haven't. I have myself not focused that much on some of these gender questions or gender issues, but I think they're nonetheless very intriguing and interesting. I think we have to acknowledge – I would say a theme of my research and some of the research focused on fertility is not only about economic circumstances that determine whether or not people intend fertility, and that's some of the research I've done related to the pandemic. It's about uncertainty in general, not just your economic circumstances. I'm uncertain about my relationship.

During the pandemic, I'm uncertain about my health circumstances. There are other ways to capture that outside of the economic realm. And so, when these gender discussions focus so much on economics, I sometimes think we're missing the mark. So, that is some of the more recent work I've done about responses, specifically fertility intentions during the pandemic. And relationships are the most proximal factor that's going to determine whether you want a child or not.

And we just, as demographers... There aren't very many datasets that ask about relationships besides if you're married or cohabiting and your fertility plans. And I think if people would focus – If people are really interested in changes and understanding fertility, that would be something they would include alongside some of these core issues about who's responsible for caring for children. What are the supports we're offering as a society? So, Karen brought up other countries. And of course, if we were in Sweden or The Netherlands or other countries that actually have a paid parental leave, we might observe different levels of fertility than we have in the United States. So, certainly, those gender and the economic and employment factors weigh in, but I think there's other subjective – I think we're starting to realize this. And there's a whole body of work from Italy with Daniele Vignoli. His whole team is thinking about that. It's called "Narratives of

the Future.” And it’s a very life course perspective. It’s sort of uncomfortable for demographers, but it’s sort of thinking about how your subjective views of the world influence your behavior.

John Weeks: Okay. Dennis?

Dennis Hodgson: In your PAA presidential talk, you used generations as your framework for understanding change, so taking a look at Millennials and taking a look at Baby Boomers. And you began with noting that you’re the very tail end of the Baby Boom generation. And if you think about the history committee, we’ve been interviewing all these old past presidents of the PAA.

So, what we’ve experienced, and being an old member of the PAA, we have this past experience of what demography was and what the PAA was that’s very much focused on international population problems and the development of all those first population centers that all had an international focus. And you’re coming post that to a large extent, particularly since you went to Wisconsin. So, I’m curious as to your perceptions. My first PAA meeting was 1969, overwhelmingly male, both grad students and faculty, overwhelmingly focused on these types of international fertility family planning types of issues.

And then what you’re doing is living that transformation both of the PAA, which I think now is overwhelmingly female and overwhelmingly centering on issues like the ones you studied about family formations and relationships, et cetera. So, do you have any reflections both about what’s happened to the field of demography and what’s happened to the PAA and maybe reflections on where you think all this might be going? Because we’ve seen dramatic changes in both the PAA and the field, and you’re sort of the change that we’ve seen. So, I would love to have your thoughts.

Wendy Manning: Yeah, that’s a good question. I mean my first PAA – I checked – was 1987 in Chicago. So, I was a graduate student. And Chicago was close to Madison, so we drove down. And then next was New Orleans. And I think I’ve been to almost every one except the year my father passed away. I missed that one. But other than that, I’ve been to virtually all of them. I agree with your assessment of change in the field. I think having been part of the leadership of PAA has given me a unique insight as well. I was vice president when David Lam was president. I’m not sure what year that was exactly [*editor’s note: 2011*].

But I’ve seen a change in our membership, like you say, it’s less male and I think reflecting better the demography at least of PhD programs, if not our nation, but definitely, I think, more representative of... But at the time, it was representative of who were professors and folks who were doing demographic work at other organizations. So, yeah, I agree there’s a dramatic change. I think the topics persist. The good thing about demography is some of those topics, they persist over time. We’re still very interested in migration, mortality, and fertility. I mean those are the core elements.

I think what’s shifted somewhat is a focus on health. That’s emerged as a really

big area. When you're organizing the program now, there are a lot of sessions on health. That stems somewhat from funding. And so, my perspective would be when PAA first started, NIH was not the only game in town maybe for funding. It seems like there were a lot more foundations and other sources of funding for demographic research. And that I think drove what some of the research questions were and what the organization looked like and the kinds of topics.

And so, I think with the NIH emphasis and the pop center emphasis... And pop centers can only retain their pop center funding if they get more grants and, specifically, if they get NIH grants. So, if you are a pop center, and you're only getting grants from NSF, you're probably not going to be able to continue being a funded NIH pop center. So, the pop centers are driven not so much by science, I find, but more about research grants. And so, in a way, you're further generating more research that aligns with what NIH is doing as opposed to maybe the larger field of demography.

And so, I think that shapes a lot of what we do. I'm very happy to see that we have become what I think of as a more inclusive organization. There's been a lot of efforts to think about the pipeline of demographers. So, we have a great group of faculty who are running the pop scholars program [NexGenPop], which I really think is great, trying to get undergraduates involved. I think that's Marcy Carlson at Wisconsin and Kelly Musick at Cornell, and they're really moving that process forward. And I know there's lots of opportunities for undergrads with PAA.

So, I think that's really critical. People aren't sometimes coming to demography as an undergrad being at an institution like Bowling Green, and I'm thinking other state schools as well. So, we have to work a little harder to think about: What are the applied skills that you can...? What are the advantages of becoming a demographer? And people want to know what the skills are, and I think that's a fabulous thing about demography is there's so many applied skills that you will learn. And our techniques are what sometimes drive us as a field and keep us afloat, I think, sometimes, during challenging times and maybe unite us somewhat--our techniques, as opposed to one question that we're interested in.

And how can an organization sustain itself with so much? But the great thing is there's so much change, so there's always something to study. So, that's what I also tell my students. If we were just staying the same, that wouldn't be maybe as exciting. But I think PAA staff is more sensitive to this. I think PAA leadership is more sensitive to these questions, trying to maintain our international ties even under circumstances where we have less funding to support people to come to PAA but trying to sustain that international focus, because I think if we just focus on the U.S. that's a mistake as an organization.

And they're trying to make the meetings, I think. I don't know what your latest experiences are at PAA, but I think they're trying to make them more welcoming for everybody, trying to make them something for across generations. So, this year, they had karaoke, which was as popular I saw among young people as old people, older folks. So, I was dragged up there with a group of people. At first, I was like, "Why do we need karaoke?" But I saw how people really had fun. And

so, I think trying to infuse a little fun in demography is important, too.

John Weeks: So, are you going to start doing that at Bowling Green?

Wendy Manning: No. Our graduate students here do karaoke in town. And so, we have some very skilled ones. So, that was helpful.

John Weeks: All right, good. Win, did you have another question? Win, no?

Win Brown: No, I didn't. I was just following up on Wendy's comment about getting undergraduates to get into the program. And I worked with Marcy on that. And I'm just saying I wish we could do more of those kinds of things. Yeah, I just put that in the chat as an aside.

Wendy Manning: Yeah, no. I really think that's so important. I just think there are a lot of students who really have benefited. We have some faculty at Bowling Green who have R15s, which are awards to institutions that are more like R2 institutions that don't have high levels of NIH funding. And so, that's partly to train undergraduates and to help elevate the research environment and institution. So, I know that a number of those students were excited about being able to participate in PAA as well. So, yeah, I think we're all sensitive to it.

Before, I think we could just sort of rest on our laurels and say, "Whoever comes to a graduate program in demography, we'll just include in PAA." And people don't know what demography is, so it's sort of a challenge. We sort of have an identity crisis. When reporters are looking for someone to talk to, I wish they would reach out to a demographer just like they reach out to an economist if they want to ask about the economy. If you want to ask about population, talk to a demographer or population scientist, and we'll be more than happy to help out, but it feels like... So, we're trying to build that reputation, I think.

John Weeks: Okay. Dennis, go ahead.

Dennis Hodgson: I've got one follow-up question on this, and it's a very political question. Now, I agree with you in terms of what demography is very good at and can become even better at in terms of more empirical evidence-based generation of knowledge. What do we do, or what do graduate students think about when the political environment in which this knowledge is being put into is such that policy seems to be less and less connected to good data. We have an experience of four years of a Trump presidency in which immigration policy was totally divorced from any kind of analysis of what the economic impact of immigration might be on the economy.

We have Supreme Court decisions about women's reproductive rights, again, that have tremendous impacts on how people live their lives--huge policy impact. We have states generating laws and implementing policies that seem to be totally disconnected from any of the evidence-based knowledge that demographers can produce. As a field, isn't this a major issue and problem? And do you see it reflected in the context of your grad students and how they feel about studying

this when there's nobody out there to listen to their findings?

Wendy Manning: Well, I think you raise a good point about how research is translated to policy as well as translated to the broad public. And I think there are more ways that demography is actually translated to the broad public because we can use social media. I can put something out on Twitter, and I don't need to have a journal support it. And so, that's what we've done at the National Center for Family Marriage Research. We have these family profiles that are a two-page profile. We just put them out. They're not peer reviewed. We review them internally. And I'm going to tell you what the marriage rate is, what the divorce rate is.

And we have a reputation for being reliable. You want to tell me I'm wrong? Nobody's ever told us we're wrong. So, I don't think... Our argument is if you're doing sound work, and you're rational, and you justify what you're doing, the decisions you've made, and you put it out there, if people don't want to listen to you, that's above your paygrade. It's not my job to make sure that our leaders are listening to me. I can try. I participate in the PAA advocacy days where we go to the hill. I've done that many times.

And I don't know how well you can convince somebody who doesn't want to believe what you're saying. Those sometimes feel like futile arguments, but I think they should still be made. I wonder if, as demographers, we should be doing more editorial pieces, but those are a lot of work. And then you're setting yourself up to express an opinion maybe more – you know. Different people have entered that space and been more or less successful at it, but maybe we should be more brave and do that. People always want to know what the link is from your research to policy.

And I would love to say that my research actually created a change in a policy, but I would want to know how many of us could actually say that. I think very few can actually do that. You could say I might have informed a discussion. I might have contributed this way. I contributed to an amicus brief for ASA. That seemed very applied, but I can't argue that my work itself led to the Obergefell decision. Of course, it didn't, but it was part of a package. So, I'm not sure that anybody can actually draw that line as solidly as we would like. I mean I have lots of opinions that I wish I could even get my local politicians to listen to.

I think continuing to strive to do high-quality research is just really important, especially in these times, and the peer-review is a very important process. And one thing that we are challenged to do at the university level is to train people, and I think it's the advantage of a university education that not all information is equal. Just because it appeared on Twitter or X or somewhere doesn't mean it's right. And so, sometimes, when I see popular press things that are wrong about marriage or family, I sometimes post a correction or tell them because I can't help myself.

When someone tells me that something is going on with the marriage rate, I try to weigh in if I can, but it's hard to do that. And our access to media is really mixed, too. People often ask me about that. And sometimes, it's relationships you have

with reporters. It's whatever's hot that day. So, for example, if two media stars get divorced, then they want to know if it's a gray divorce. And that's one reason some of the topics are interesting because people can see how they're playing out in the real world, and they want to know. So, you'll see.

I think Susan Brown and I-Fen Lin started their gray divorce research when Al Gore and Tipper Gore got divorced. And then I think they just said, "Well, how often does that happen?" And then they went and found out, and then that started this whole area of research. But yeah, it is frustrating when you feel like you know an answer, and nobody is listening. I just try to say you just continue your high quality work. I really strive for the high-quality research and explaining the decisions you've made and why you've done them.

And then if you can stand behind that... And I'm all for intellectual debate and discussion, and that's what makes PAA so great is you get to talk to other demographers about how they would tackle it. And as demographers are more spread across the country and not just isolated in pop centers, I think meetings like PAA become even more important. And so, PAA meetings are important when there aren't as many jobs just at the schools that have the pop centers, or people don't want to live in that pop center space.

Not everybody wants to be in an R1. There are a lot of people who talk about work-family balance and how you can achieve that. And so, I think demographers are spread more widely, and there's more of a place for PAA. So, I'm excited about that. I can go on. But yeah, I agree with you. It's very difficult to hear policies or attacks on our census bureau. That's very difficult to hear, yes.

John Weeks:

But this kind of gets into what I had said we hope to come back to later in this discussion. It's about the whole issue of demographic literacy in the population and even elsewhere in academia. And Win just posted a little note about the new president and CEO of the Population Reference Bureau who has a book about trying to do this. And Deborah McFarlane – we were talking about this at the very beginning before this recording started – is coming back on the committee to help us see if we can move toward ways of improving demographic literacy and thinking obviously that the PAA is the source point for trying to do something like that.

And so, what do you think about trying to get the word out to other people? Deborah's actually a Professor of Political Science, even though her background is in public health. But where do political scientists and psychologists and others learn about demography so that they can actually apply it to their own work and teach their own students how their work relates to what they see going on around them in the world? What do you think about that?

Wendy Manning:

I mean I think demography is interdisciplinary, and that's the fabulous thing about this field. And what makes it, I think, sustainable and exciting is that it's not just housed in one kind of department, and that we're willing to accept all kinds of data. I'm happy to take any kind of data to try to understand problems. I think political science is so interesting because we've found in many ways about how

voting patterns are related, different kinds of behaviors, which is really exciting.

I think that's where a journal like *Demography* is really important, a very highly regarded peer-reviewed journal. It's open. A lot of it is open access, so I think you can find anyone can read the articles. I think making those – I heard at the PAA membership meeting that they're striving to try to package articles together and get more social media out to try to share information. So, I think, sometimes, as demographers, we're a little closed. We know the answer, and then we're like, "Okay, I'm done."

But I think we have to be a little more expansive and try to communicate with broader audiences what we know. And that's not easy, and that does take some training. And it's not something where you just get a PhD and you know how to do it. And demographers sometimes are very deep in the weeds. And a reporter or somebody you're talking to from another discipline doesn't want to hear about the exciting way you computed your rate when you didn't have the – you know. It's just they don't care. And so, you have to think about ways of communicating what we do and the value of what we do, I think.

And I think our journal from PAA, *Demography*, is a great example of that. I think moving outside of the publisher realm as we did – we're partnering with Duke University – was a really great move forward. I think more efforts to share what we know from our academic published work in different formats, I think we've shown that that matters. But I don't know. You all have been hearing people talk about this for a while. You know better than I do. Yeah, Win.

Win Brown:

Wendy, I wonder... You're talking about our own journals. And we read them, and probably nobody else does. And we value them, as you say, for all the reasons. But I think of the really landmark popular science books – Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, the 1968 *Population Bomb*, which probably took us in the wrong direction, the Robert Heilbroner book where he talked about economists.

And I don't think there's ever been a popularization, if that's a word, of our field in a book that the public reads widely, that sells tons of copies. And I wonder why that is. Maybe it's because you don't get tenure from a book like that. But could that be written? What would it look like? Is that something that could sort of transcend social media, as you say, where it's all kind of a couple of clicks, and then you're done.

Wendy Manning:

So, you mean everybody doesn't want to read John Weeks' book on population? So, I think – go ahead.

John Weeks:

Win and I actually talked about this a little bit ourselves, about taking that book to the public, shall we say, trying to get the basic ideas of demography to go everywhere. One of the central tenets here is that demography is related to everything, and you show people how that is in a popular version. And that could be one of the next goals of the history committee here is to make history by having such a book.

Wendy Manning: Yeah. I mean something like that could be exciting. I think one of the challenges is that demography is about so many things. So, that could make it great, or it could get diffuse. So, there are people who have written more popular books about, for example, family, but not from a necessarily demographic lens. And as I think Dennis was talking about, topics can become quite political. And so, then people sort of don't trust what you're saying because they feel like you're coming at it from a certain political perspective.

And so, there's been some newer books about American family that have been sort of challenging to me because they do seem to have a strong perspective. But I'm wondering, in the popular realm, if you don't have a perspective, are you not going to find a publisher? My sister-in-law writes more popular books, and I see a little bit about how that process works. And I think it's a challenge to imagine, and I think you'd have to give some examples of what the aim was.

And I've seen someone do this with social science research – I think Michelle Janning [Professor of Sociology at Whitman College] did – where here's a headline from the news, and then here's what social science could contribute to that. I think she has a book, and I contributed a chapter to it. And that was really a way of thinking about it that I thought was a little bit novel. It wasn't a big popular book. But I think talking to some people who have been successful in that space would be useful. There are some sociologists I know who have crossed over and done that. My sense is it works best if it's about a specific question and not demography as a field.

One of our core issues is: Are we demographers or population scientists? We have these mixed terms we're using, and I sometimes wonder about that. But I think anything we could do to demonstrate the value of the field and the value of the perspective would be great. And so, if I think of any examples, I'll send them along for your new book.

John Weeks: Well, that would be great. Appreciate that very much. And thinking about moving forward, do you have goals for your own students, your graduate students in terms of what you want them to contribute to the field?

Wendy Manning: They're all varied. What's fun with the graduate students is to see how they start off and then where and how they end up in their development. And some people feel like being a professor is a little bit like Groundhog's Day where you're just saying... I feel like I have five things to say, and I just say them over and over, and I don't have anything new to add. But what kind of takes us out of that realm of just repeating yourself over and over is watching them develop and develop their own careers to whatever they want to do.

Some people are seeking a traditional academic setting. More and more I'm seeing students who want to move into more applied work outside of academics, and so, to see how their work is achieved there. My goal for them is really to help give them training and skills they need to answer research questions. What's your hypothesis? How can we best answer this question? And then thinking about what it means, and how are we challenging prior work? And so, I think it's really

exciting to see students take that on in whatever way they see fit. But yeah, there's no one-size-fits-all in the case of students, for sure.

John Weeks: Okay. Karen, is there anything that you can think of that we should have asked that we haven't asked yet?

Karen Hardee: I don't think so. Fascinating.

John Weeks: So, Wendy, are there things that you were thinking we would talk about and we haven't yet that we should be doing?

Wendy Manning: I don't think so. I went through the interview guide, and I think we've covered a lot of the questions. I've found this to be a very rewarding career. I really enjoyed being president of PAA. I think it's very rewarding. At the same time, it's a lot of responsibility, and I was honored to have been given that responsibility.

And I didn't quite know what I was in for, even though I had served in these other roles, but I really enjoy being part of it. I think something we did that's different is now you give the address the year after you organize the meeting. And so, that was something that I proposed during the pandemic year, and that I think has worked out well for people. It's a lot to organize the meeting and come up with an address in the same year.

John Weeks: I agree with that. I didn't realize that was your idea.

Wendy Manning: Well, I think my email was, "Let's make lemonade out of lemons." And someone else might have had the same idea, and I'd known other organizations had done that. A lot of people had asked me, "Wow, that's weird that PAA does it that way." So, I'm sure there were other people who thought of it. I wasn't the only one, but I was happy to see that. It's a great group of people. That's what I love about PAA is I love the people and seeing the more senior people at the meetings and then meeting new folks. And I think they're doing receptions to try to encourage new membership, and I enjoy going to those.

And as president, I really enjoyed so many different things. I learned so much about the organization I didn't know. So, it was great for me, and I'm happy to continue being involved and participating and, when they need help, lending a hand, or they want advice. We're all happy to give advice. Right? So, that's easy. But I think all the former presidents understand the organization quite well and are happy to participate even after our terms are over.

So, it's not like you walk away, and you're like, "OK, I'm done." And this is the one meeting that I continue to go to, and I see other people continue to go to well into their retirements. They don't stop coming because it is rewarding, and you do learn about the latest work.

John Weeks: Just think about your role as president. Actually, when you're elected, technically, it's really a three-year term because you're president-elect, then president, and past president. So, it's really three years you're on the board there doing things.

- Wendy Manning: Yeah. They get a lot of work out of you, but I think it's great to have continuity. They really do need to have that because you have staff who are in place who are great. And Danielle Staudt is wonderful in her role and has really done wonderful things for the organization as well as Mary Jo Hoeksema, who's been fabulous in her role as well. And so, they kind of help guide you. But I think one thing they're working towards is trying to get more institutional memory.
- And so, that's where the president can say, "Wait a minute. We talked about this four years ago. Here we are again." So, I think that institutional memory is good and documenting it and making sure that that is not just... I assume that's one of the reasons why this committee is very important and valuable is to make sure that these messages are not lost from prior presidents, but definitely trying to come up with institutional ways as well as this format to make sure that the essence of PAA is maintained. I don't know what you would say. For example, Dennis, has the essence of PAA changed from when you first went to your first meeting?
- Dennis Hodgson: Has it changed? I think so. Because remember back then, all these issues that we have been talking about, there was much more of a coalescence. You had foundations wanting a certain agenda. You had the U.S. government wanting a certain agenda. You had the construction of the whole set of population centers that were focused on this agenda. And then you came to the PAA, and there was much more of a coordinated focus on a much more action type agenda.
- As a discipline, there's big problems with that because essential questions never got asked about the nature of that agenda. But today, it's much more open from what I see, and the variety of topics is much more diverse. And in a way, there's less of a direct policy connection between the discipline of the PAA and that policy.
- Karen Hardee: I wish I could remember which meeting it was, just people passing in the hallways. And I think I was going to the – There was a lunchtime meeting for the women's caucus at PAA. I don't know if you – Anybody remember that? And there were two gentlemen in the hallway saying, "Oh, my gosh, PAA is really changing, all this women stuff." I can't remember what year it was, but anyway.
- John Weeks: Well, there was the New Orleans meeting where there was the women's backlash. The women's caucus actually did stand up and make a difference because...
- Karen Hardee: Yeah, yeah.
- Dennis Hodgson: Women couldn't go to the bar in New Orleans.
- John Weeks: Right, exactly.
- Dennis Hodgson: The hotel wouldn't let them, and the PAA went along with it.
- John Weeks: Right, that was right. Whereas now, we've got a situation where eight of the past 10 PAA presidents, including Wendy, are women.

Karen Hardee: They're women, yeah.

John Weeks: Eight out of 10. So, the women's caucus knew what they were doing.

Karen Hardee: And Karen Mason – we were just talking about her yesterday – gave a rip-roaring presentation with her gender work. So, yeah.

Wendy Manning: Yeah. I think the field has changed. And I think something that I like at PAA are the presidential sessions where they try to come up with themes, or there're ones that are organized by certain groups like maybe the applied demographers or other groups about – I like those sessions. I like the individual research ones, but those are the real exciting ones. So, I encourage them to continue coming up with those thematic sessions, because I think that's where a lot of exciting conversations are. And yeah, I'd like there to be more discussion.

And that's a unique thing about PAA is we actually have discussions, and your work is held to a high standard and that someone's actually going to talk about it and critique it. And that doesn't occur at all professional scientific organizations. So, I really appreciate that, and I think that... The odds your paper gets in isn't that high. I remember when I was president. I was like, "This is about the same as the journal acceptance rate."

And so, I think maintaining that quality is important, but also being inclusive. And I like the new format we have of the flash sessions where it's sort of a quick presentation, and then you can go see the poster. I think that those are helpful, too. People don't have the same attention span as I think we used to.

John Weeks: That's true. That's a good point. Very good. All right, okay. Win, Karen, Dennis, anything else to add to that?

Dennis Hodgson: Just thank you very much, Wendy.

Wendy Manning: Yeah. This has been tremendous fun for me to think about. Nobody asks me these questions, so it was fun to talk about.

Karen Hardee: This is the best kept secret at PAA. This is the best committee to be on.

Wendy Manning: Oh, okay. Then I'm going to put this on my list then.

John Weeks: Okay. We may be getting back to you about this demographic literacy business.

Wendy Manning: Yeah, let me know. Yeah. And I'll send you all the link to that book I referenced to see if I can find it, because it was a good example of how translating... yeah. I think demographic literacy is important.

John Weeks: Very good, okay. Thank you so much. We're going to get this recording transcribed, and you'll have the final editing approval on it.

Wendy Manning: Okay.

John Weeks: So, that'll be two or three weeks from now. It takes a little while to get all that organized.

Wendy Manning: Okay. I appreciate all you do. Thank you, guys.

John Weeks: Okay, thank you so much.

Dennis Hodgson: Thank you.

Karen Hardee: Thank you.

Win Brown: Thanks, Wendy.

Wendy Manning: Bye.

Win Brown: Thanks very much.

Wendy Manning: Have a great day.

John Weeks: Have a great rest of your day. Okay.

Wendy Manning: Bye.

Win Brown: Bye, everyone.

John Weeks: Bye.

Dennis Hodgson: Bye-bye.

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Young Adulthood Relationships in an Era of Uncertainty: A Case for Cohabitation

Wendy D. Manning¹

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Abstract

The young adulthood years are demographically dense. Dr. Ronald Rindfuss made this claim when he was Population Association of America (PAA) president in 1991 (Rindfuss 1991), and this conclusion holds today. I offer both an update of his work by including Millennials and a new view on young adulthood by focusing on an increasingly common experience: cohabitation. I believe we need to move away from our marriage-centric lens of young adulthood and embrace the complexity that cohabitation offers. The cohabitation boom is continuing with no evidence of a slowdown. Young adults are experiencing complex relationship biographies, and social science research is struggling to keep pace. Increasingly, there is a decoupling of cohabitation and marriage, suggesting new ways of framing our understanding of relationships in young adulthood. As a field, we can do better to ensure that our theories, methods, and data collections better reflect the new relationship reality faced by young adults.

Keywords Cohabitation · Cohorts · Marriage · Family · Measurement

Demographically Dense Young Adulthood

Rindfuss's PAA presidential address nearly 30 years ago was visually effective (Rindfuss 1991). He included a set of age-specific rates in clear graphs that showed the concentration of events in the young adult years. I build on his portrait by contrasting the young adult Baby Boomers of his address with the Millennials of today.¹ As demographers, we are well aware of these birth cohort distinctions. I am

¹Of the varying definitions of cohorts, I select the following for this article. *Baby Boomers* are individuals born between 1946 and 1964 and were age 30 between 1976 and 1994. *Millennials* are individuals born between 1980 and 1994, reaching age 30 between 2010 and 2024.

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not reifying these cohort definitions but instead using them as tools—a set of bookends—to demonstrate change over time for an age group. In the panels of Fig. 1, I replicate the Rindfuss (1991) graphs but include cohabitation, add incarceration and military service for men, and update with a new cohort. The dashed lines represent Millennials in young adulthood, and the solid lines are the Rindfuss Baby Boomers (most of his data reference behavior in the 1980s). The bold areas in the graphs indicate the young adult years. These graphs present general patterns for age groups and two cohorts; there certainly is variation in these experiences across social and economic groups that is not shown here.

Cohabitation is a significant demographic event that was excluded from the Rindfuss (1991) depiction of young adulthood. As shown in panel j of Fig. 1, cohabitation peaks in young adulthood, and the rates are much higher for Millennials than for Baby Boomers. Although many of the rates of other demographic events are lower today than in the 1980s, the rates still peak in the young adult years. Specifically, fertility, mobility, marriage, divorce, and remarriage rates are higher in young adulthood than later in the life course. An obvious exception is mortality: death rates are still highest at older ages. In addition, Rindfuss showcased that young adulthood represents the peak years for building human capital, such as school enrollment, as well as employment transitions. Two key American institutions relevant for young adults—the military and incarceration system—were not part of the Rindfuss portrait. Both military service and incarceration rates are highest in the young adult years.² Taken together, it is just as apparent now as in 1991 that the young adult years continue to be demographically dense. I join many other social scientists who argue that we need to expand how we contextualize young adulthood by including all these events and roles to provide a more comprehensive portrait.

Since the Rindfuss (1991) address, there have been new streams of work on young adulthood, each employing unique perspectives. Frank Furstenberg, sociologist and demographer, formed and led the MacArthur Network on Transitions to Adulthood in 2000. That body of work showcased the prolonged path into adulthood and differential patterning of transitions based on socioeconomic status (Furstenberg 2010; Settersten et al. 2005). Around the same time, developmental psychologist Jeffrey Arnett coined the term “emerging adulthood” and established a journal and national conference on this topic. He argued that these were the in-between years that included exploration of identities, resulting in a “winding path through adulthood” (Arnett 2000, 2004). The more recent work of Jennifer Silva (2012, 2013) has focused on the uncertain futures of young adults of the working class and their concerns, which potentially lead them to avoid relationships. As she stated (Silva 2013:59), “the working class seem trapped between rigidity of the past and flexibility of the present.” Stefanie DeLuca et al. (2016) introduced the term “expedited adulthood,” portraying how some young adults who do not have the luxury of a college degree acquire independence by pursuing the shortest path to adulthood.

Despite healthy debates about young adulthood, there seems to be consensus around the idea that it is increasingly challenging to achieve the traditional markers of adulthood. Although this body of work on young adulthood acknowledges cohabitation, it is most often treated as an indicator of the shifting centrality of marriage and not

² The figure represents time spent in prison and not in jail.

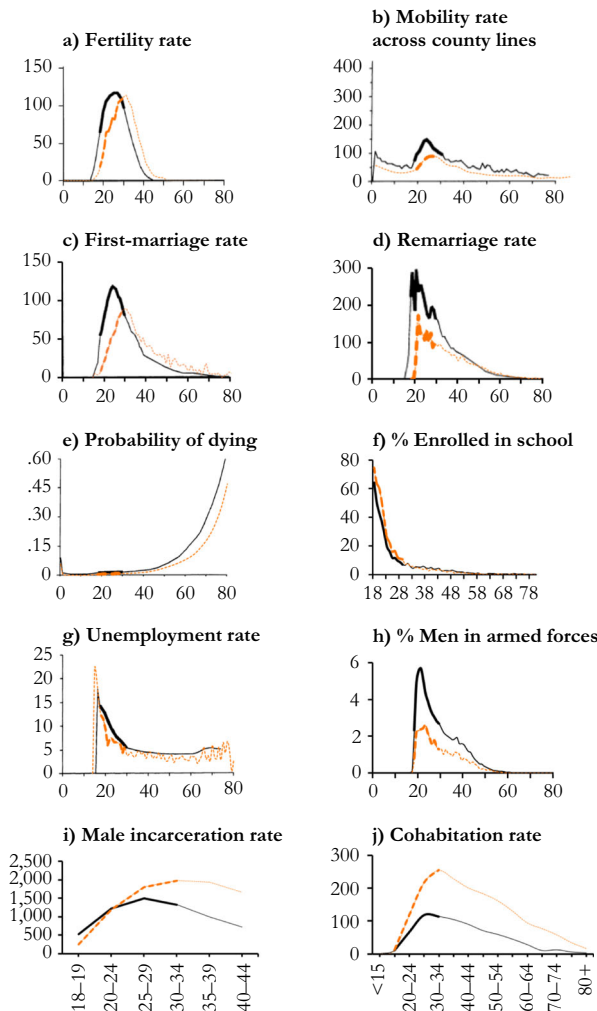


Fig. 1 Age-specific rates and percentages for Baby Boomers and Millennials in young adulthood. The solid line represents the Baby Boomer cohort in young adulthood, and the dashed line represents the Millennial cohort in young adulthood. *Sources:* Panel a: 1989, National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS); 2016, ACS one-year estimates fertility rates per 1,000 women. Panel b: 1989, U.S. Census Bureau; 2013, U.S. Census Bureau, CPS. Panel c: 1990, NCHS; 2016, ACS one-year estimate first marriage rates per 1,000 never-married women. Panel d: 1990, NCHS; 2016, ACS one-year estimate remarriage rates per 1,000 previously married women. Panel e: 1990, NCHS; 2011, Centers for Disease Control/NCHS National Vital Statistics System. Panel f: IPUMS-CPS, University of Minnesota. Panel g: 1989, March CPS; 2017, IPUMS-CPS, University of Minnesota. Panel h: 1990 Decennial Census 1990; 2016 ACS one-year estimates. Panel i: 1997 Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS); 2016 BJS national prison statistics rates per 100,000 U.S. residents. Panel j: 1995 and 2017, IPUMS-CPS, University of Minnesota currently cohabiting rates per 1,000 not currently living with a spouse.

the central theme of young adult lives. A marker of adulthood for young adults today may indeed be cohabitation because it is increasingly how young adults start their relationships and children are increasingly born and raised in cohabiting-parent families. Because cohabitation has become the most common family experience during

young adulthood, beating out parenthood and marriage (Hemez 2018), it merits more attention.

These young adult years are consequential: young adults are often the engines or drivers of social change. As Kingsley Davis implied in his 1963 presidential address, it is the actions of young adults that provide the well-known “multiphasic responses” (Davis 1963). It is not hard to imagine that the decisions and actions of young adults are far-reaching. For example, just take the Baby Boomers of the Rindfuss address, who are now navigating older age. Brown and Lin (2012) showed the ripple effects of Baby Boomers’ early family decisions, such as divorce and repartnering, on the well-being and caregiving of aging Baby Boomers. Questions that merit consideration include the long-term ramifications of Millennials’ early adult decisions on how they navigate their own middle and older years. However, these questions will remain unanswered unless we broaden our relationship scope in all surveys to include full cohabitation histories.

Cohabitation Boom

Until recently, young adult *nonmarital* romantic relationships were not viewed as particularly formative or important. However, in recognition of the consequences that these relationships can have for individual well-being, behavior, and later union experiences, we have begun to acknowledge their developmental significance (e.g., Fincham and Cui 2010; Giordano et al. 2012). Rather than imposing a marriage blueprint on these nonmarital relationships, we need to study them in their own right and assess their meaning for this new generation of young adults.

Figure 2 presents a snapshot of relationships for U.S. Baby Boomer and Millennial cohorts using data based on the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) and the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97). At the beginning of adulthood, age 18 (panel a), the relationship circumstances of Baby Boomers and Millennials are not so different across cohorts. However, at the end of early adulthood, age 29 (panel b), clear cohort differences emerge. There has been a large shift away from marriage, a nearly threefold increase in cohabitation, a remaining substantial share who are in relationships, and many who are single (32%).

The increase in cohabitation in young adulthood is not limited to the United States. Cohabitation is advancing worldwide, as we have learned through excellent research across the globe (e.g., Esteve et al. 2016; Perelli-Harris and Lyons-Amos 2015; Raymo et al. 2015). Esteve and colleagues have called this growth in cohabitation a “cohabitation boom,” referring to the increase in cohabitation across North and South America (from Canada to Chile).³ The indicator they used is the share of women cohabiting (or living in consensual unions) among women aged 25–29 residing in a union. In 1970, there were 25 regions where at least one-half of women in unions were cohabiting; today, the overwhelming majority, outside the United States, have reached these high levels. Although the U.S. boom is not as high as the rest of North and South America, it has moved forward at a rapid pace. Building on work by Lesthaeghe et al. (2016), Fig. 3 shows that the level in the United States has nearly tripled over about a 25-year time

³ The term “cohabitation boom” might imply that there will be an explosive growth followed by a retreat akin to a baby boom. I use the term to focus on growth, and I am not suggesting that it is a temporary phenomenon.

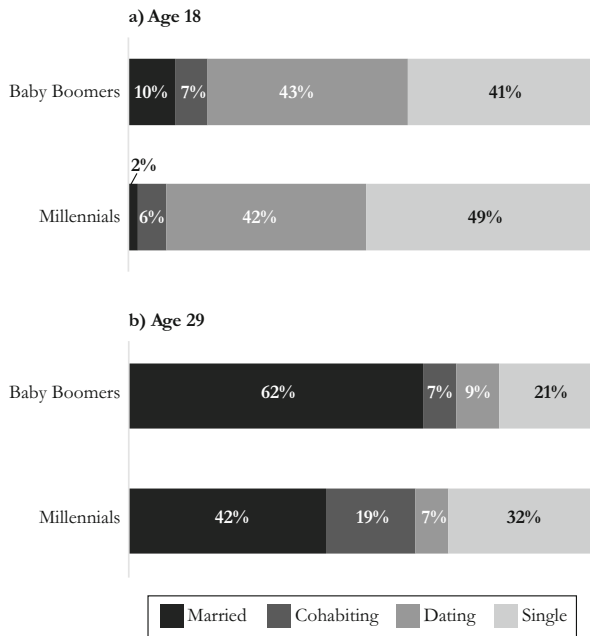


Fig. 2 Young adult relationship statuses at ages 18 and 29. *Sources:* NSFG 1987/1988 and NLSY-97.

span, from 10% at the time of the Rindfuss (1991) PAA presidential address to 27% in 2016. Although cohabitation has sometimes been characterized as a family experience for those who are the least well off, the rise has been fairly even across socioeconomic groups, with no current differences in this measure in the United States according to education level. Like many other nations, cohabitation is not just experienced by the disadvantaged, but there appears to be a convergence: it crosscuts all social classes. This measure allows important comparisons but is limited because it represents only a snapshot, and the basis of the indicator is women who have formed a coresidential union.

Another way to encapsulate and compare experiences is by focusing on whether young adults ever experienced cohabitation. Baby Boomers and Millennials are similar in that almost all have had sex, dated, and formed a coresidential union during young adulthood. Among coresidential relationship types, cohabitation has surpassed marriage as the most common family experience in young adulthood. Based on the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), Fig. 4 indicates that cohabitation for young adult Baby Boomer women was a minority experience: 42% ever cohabited by their late 20s. Comparatively, cohabitation has become a majority experience for Millennials, with nearly three-quarters experiencing cohabitation by the end of young adulthood (see also Hemez 2018).⁴

The education gradient in experiencing cohabitation in young adulthood is widening. Among Millennial women in 2013, the majority of every education group

⁴ The NSFG supplied weights produce estimates weighted to the midpoint of the data collection years. The midpoint between 2011 and 2015 is 2013. Thus, the weighted estimates reflect the share of women with those experiences in 2013.

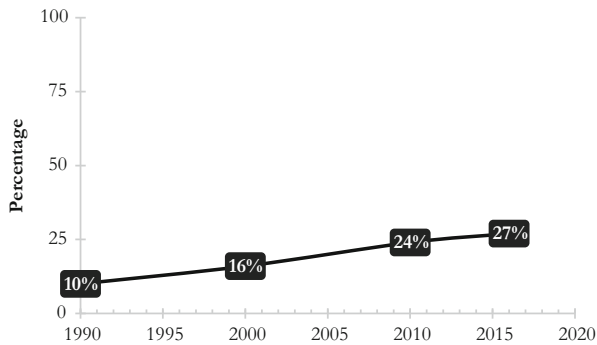


Fig. 3 Percentage cohabiting among women aged 25–29 coresiding in a union. *Sources:* 1990 and 2000 decennial censuses, Lesthaeghe et al. (2016), and 2010 and 2016 ACS one-year estimates.

cohabited by age 30, ranging from 85% among high school graduates to 61% among college graduates (Fig. 5). Among Baby Boomers, just over one-half (54%) of women without a high school diploma cohabited by age 30 in contrast to about 4 in 10 of every other education group. The racial/ethnic differences are less marked across cohorts, with most of the growth occurring among Whites and Hispanics. Among Millennials, two-thirds (66%) of Black, 77% of Hispanic, and 79% of White women reported having ever cohabited in young adulthood (by age 30) (see Fig. 6). Even though there is growth in cohabitation across socioeconomic groups, it certainly does not mean that cohabitation carries the same meaning for all (Sassler and Miller 2017).

Ready, Willing, and Able

In the United States, the social context has shifted and spawned the rise in cohabitation. One way the cohabitation boom has been explained is through the use of Ansley Coale’s “ready, willing, and able” (RWA) framework (Esteve et al. 2016). Coale was PAA President 50 years ago and developed this framework to explain marital fertility transitions in Europe. Drawing on Esteve’s research and Coale’s (1973) framework, I

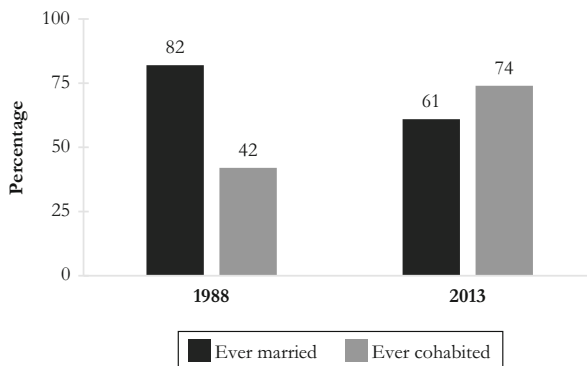


Fig. 4 Percentage of young adult women aged 29–31 who ever married and ever cohabited. *Sources:* 1988 NSFG and 2011–2015 NSFG.

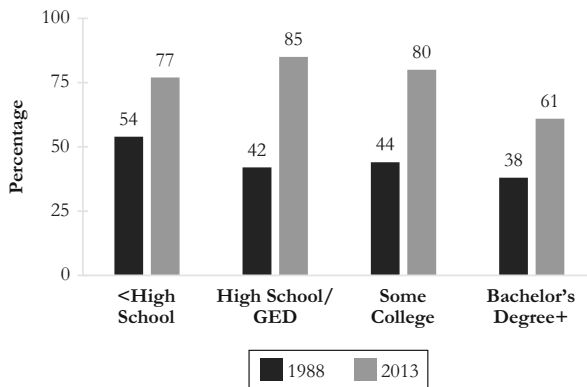


Fig. 5 Percentage of young adult women aged 29–31 who ever cohabited, by education level. *Sources:* 1988 NSFG and 2011–2015 NSFG.

outline how Americans are ready, willing, and able to further support the cohabitation boom. A premise of the RWA framework is that all conditions have to be jointly met to create any behavior change. Another asset of this perspective is that it highlights the importance of demographic, economic, social, and cultural factors.

Ready

Ready suggests that young adults view advantages to cohabitation. As Valerie Oppenheimer (2003:131) summarized in her work on Baby Boomers, “cohabiting may now partly represent an adaptive strategy for those whose life is still somewhat on hold in other ways.” This statement applies today: cohabitation is a relationship that permits flexibility and avoids long-term commitments. In fact, this might be a smart or savvy strategy for young couples to do relationships.

Young adults want to be financially secure before they get married, and marriage is a signal of economic independence (Smock et al. 2005). Based on analysis of the NSFG (1987/1988) and the Families and Relationships Study (FRS) (2010), both Baby Boomer and Millennial unmarried young adults reported that it is important to have enough money (61% of Baby Boomers vs. 57% of Millennials) as well as be

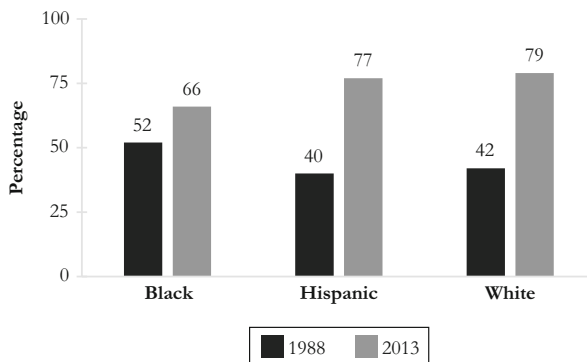


Fig. 6 Percentage of young adult women aged 29–31 who ever cohabited, by race/ethnicity. *Sources:* 1988 NSFG and 2011–2015 NSFG.

established in their job and finish schooling before marriage. To put it another way, young adults cannot get married, but they may be able to cohabit if they have not achieved financial independence and are relying on parents or loans for car payments, rent, insurance, or cellphone service. Mills and Blossfeld (2005) showed that in Europe, globalization generated more uncertain labor markets and thereby created opportunities for more flexible relationships, such as cohabitation. Oppenheimer and Kalmijn (1995) argued 25 years ago that the reliance on stop-gap jobs—in today's terms, a *gig economy*—sets the stage for cohabitation both in terms of social and economic factors.

Cohabitation has emerged against a backdrop in which the economic circumstances of Millennials are not bright. Young adults today fare worse than their Baby Boomer counterparts at the same age. For example, men have higher unemployment rates and have been slow to move into the gold standard of adulthood: a full-time job with benefits (Sum and Khatiwada 2010). About three in five Millennials have student debt, and their level of student debt is higher than prior generations, which represents an important barrier to moving up the economic ladder (Arnett 2015; Kantrowitz 2015). Even though there has been an expansion in college education, it is not an option for all, largely because of affordability concerns. Homeownership rates are lower among Millennials than Baby Boomers, and housing costs are higher in general for both purchasing or renting (Fry 2013). As a result, Millennials are not acquiring wealth at the same pace as did Baby Boomers. With regard to intergenerational processes, Chetty and colleagues (2017) argued that Millennials are unique in that they have only a 50-50 shot of doing as well as their parents. The majority of young adults (70%) state that they will go back for more education and training in their 30s or 40s, and they expect to change career paths, with two of three reporting that their current job is not in the field in which they hope to work in 10 years (Arnett 2015). The Great Recession casts a long shadow, and the new reality for young adults is an uncertain economic future. These unsettled economic circumstances have had implications for relationship trajectories of young adults.

Beyond affecting jobs, these uncertain futures may mean that Millennials are not yet reaching a more settled lifestyle that would align with marriage, such as moving away from substance use and delinquent behaviors (Copp et al. 2019). Young adults view cohabitation as a way to figure out whether they are compatible and reference relatively mundane albeit important issues: it is a way to determine whether their partner will pick up their socks (Smock et al. 2005). Cohabitation can serve a practical need to share housing or save money (e.g., two can live more cheaply than one) or a way to take their relationship to the next level and make some form of a commitment. Even though cohabitation appears to have several advantages, it seems young adults do not want to lock into a long-term relationship (such as marriage) until they feel they are ready.

A sense of whether as a society we are ready for cohabitation is reflected in the behavior of both older and young adults. The older generation is cohabiting at historically high levels: about one in seven unmarried men and women over age 50 are cohabiting (Brown and Wright 2016). Older Americans tend to cohabit to avoid legal entanglements, which serves as a way to protect financial assets (Brown et al. 2012). Although most young adults have not built financial assets or possess inheritances, older adults may feel the need to protect pensions or Social Security benefits and may also view cohabitation as a way to avoid legal entanglements (such as divorce) (Manning and Smock 2009; Miller et al. 2011). Cohabitation seems to offer an easier

way out of a relationship that is not working; on this front, marriage seems risky for the young. Many of the legal benefits of marriage are not as salient for young adults until they are close to the end of life, or these benefits may appear during moments of crisis, such as death or a sudden health trauma. In fact, several research teams using longitudinal data (e.g., Amato 2014; Musick and Bumpass 2012) have shown that cohabitators accrue many of the same psychological and health benefits as their married counterparts.

There are not just financial issues at stake but caretaking responsibilities. An unsettled feature of cohabitation for older adults is potentially intense caretaking that will certainly arise in old age. It is not clear whether cohabiting partners are obligated to stick around during times of intense need (Noel-Miller 2011). In contrast, the primary caretaking responsibility in young adulthood is parenting. Young adults who cohabit with children feel that they are making a commitment to their children by living together and co-parenting, and they see themselves as a family (Manning et al. 2009). Powell et al. (2010) found that in the United States, there is strong consensus that cohabiting parents with children are viewed as a family. Taken together, older Americans along with young adults may be providing a strong case for cohabitation and indicate a readiness for even higher levels.

Willing

Willing indicates that there is some legitimacy of cohabitation and/or willingness to overcome potential moral objections. The social norms supporting cohabitation have rapidly increased. In terms of religion, young adults today are certainly less religious than their counterparts in prior generations (Pew Research Center 2018), so the barriers to cohabitation on moral ground may not be as high. Also, many religions now embrace all couples and families regardless of marital status.

All generations are reporting growing approval of cohabitation. High school seniors' acceptance of cohabitation as "a testing ground for marriage" moved from less than one-half in the 1970s to approaching three-quarters today (Allred 2019a). Among young adults in the General Social Survey, supportive attitudes toward cohabitation increased from 50% in 1994 to nearly three-quarters in 2012. Brown and Wright (2016) showed a change in support among older Americans, increasing from 31% in 1994 to more than one-half in 2012 among 50- to 59-year-olds. Thus, growth in support for cohabitation has not been limited to the young and suggests that complex processes may be driving change. Indeed, Larry Bumpass (1990) argued in his 1990 PAA presidential address that there are important feedback mechanisms across generations, with shifting attitudes supporting cohabitation and growth in cohabitation experience. Despite pockets of Americans who oppose cohabitation, levels of willingness to cohabit generally appear to be high.

Able

The third part of the RWA framework is *able*. Young adults' ability to cohabit is determined in part by the costs of housing to live together as well as legal issues. The norm for cohabitation and marriage is to live independently. Based on analysis of the Current Population Survey (CPS), today most young adult cohabitators live on their own

(72%), but some live with their parents (8%) or other adults (20%) (Payne 2019). Growing housing costs make it difficult for couples to launch on their own. Thus, housing is certainly a constraint but can be overcome by living with others.

In terms of legal matters, cohabiting without the benefit of marriage was once illegal, and such laws are still on the books in a few states albeit not enforced. The legal protections offered for cohabitation in the United States are minimal. Comparatively, Canada has legal processes for splitting assets for couples ending cohabiting unions (Laplane and Fostik 2016). Such a process does not exist in the United States, which experienced an expansion of legal recognition of domestic partnerships at different levels of government and among some employers, based largely on an effort to support same-gender couples who could not legally marry. These partnerships offered many benefits on par with marriage to same-gender and different-gender cohabiting couples. Yet, some domestic partnership policies have been retracted because marriage is available to all. In addition, government policies and programs regarding support for cohabiting couples are uneven and inconsistent: some policies base benefits, such as SNAP, on the consuming unit (including cohabitators), and others ignore cohabiting partners altogether. The United States differs from many other countries in the lack of legal recognition and treatment of cohabitation in the policy realm.

The ability to cohabit has grown with delays in marriage. Lower shares of Millennials have married in young adulthood than have Baby Boomers. In 1990, most (62%) marriages occurred among young adults, compared with only (42%) today. The age at marriage is postponed, and the nation as a whole has reached a historic highpoint of the median age at first marriage: 29.8 for men and 28.0 for women (U.S. Census Bureau 2019). Baby Boomers experienced marriage during the midpoint of their young adult years (median ages of 26.1 for men and 23.9 for women in 1990), whereas Millennials experienced marriage at the end of young adulthood, leaving more space in the life course for cohabitation during young adulthood.

It seems that all the elements are in place for the cohabitation boom to continue in the United States, which despite some constraints has probably not reached its maximum cohabitation levels. It seems that for young adults, cohabitation may be an adaptive strategy to the shifting economic reality, the delay or drift away from marriage, and changes in social norms fueled in part by intergenerational support. The experience in the United States is quite distinct from that of other countries.

Decoupling of Marriage and Cohabitation in Young Adulthood

Although the growth in cohabitation is clear, it remains uncertain what this means for the future of marriage. Our field is often confronted with the question of whether marriage is obsolete for young adults today. However, this specific question about the retreat from marriage has been on the minds of demographers for more than 35 years, dating back to when marriage rates were much higher, marriages started at younger ages, and divorce rates were higher (Davis 1983). Americans are unique in their enthusiasm for marriage: if the first marriage does not work out, they often marry again. Cherlin (2009) termed this American experience the “marriage-go-round.”

Many in our society (as well as the wedding industry complex) breathe a collective sigh of relief when they learn that teenagers and young adults still want to get married. The Monitoring the Future survey data for 1976–2017 indicate that a steady and high

share of high school seniors expect to marry over time (Allred 2019b). These levels have remained high for Baby Boomers and Millennials, with about three-quarters expecting to marry (Allred 2019b). Similarly, the prominence of marriage over cohabitation is supported, with young adult single women expressing greater expectations to marry than cohabit (Manning et al. 2019b). Further, expectations to marry remain high across education and racial/ethnic groups (Manning et al. 2019b). Given actual differences in patterns of marriage showing lower levels of marriage among the more-disadvantaged and African Americans, marriage expectations have been classified as only “hopes” (Waller 2001). These hopes appear to persist through young adulthood even when their relationships are tested by the harsh realities of everyday life. A clear gap remains between our marriage idealism and reality.

The value of marriage became quite apparent during the recent battle for marriage equality, which brought to the forefront the worth of the powerful institution of marriage. In the United States, marriage ensures many benefits related to multiple domains of life, including immigration, health care, inheritance, taxes, social security, adoption, and parenthood. Based on Gallup data, support for marriages to same-gender couples shifted from only 27% in 1990 to 67% in 2018 (McCarthy 2018). Despite the landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision in 2016 to support marriage for all, in 2018 there were still counties in the United States where marriage for gay men and lesbian women was denied, including in Alabama, Oklahoma, Indiana, Kentucky, Montana, and Missouri.

The marriage rates of young adult gay men and lesbian women have been slow to catch up with those of different-sex couples (Jones 2016). These Gallup Poll data indicate that older gay men and lesbian women, most often in longer-term relationships, have experienced greater increases in marriage levels than their younger counterparts—a trend that may shift as the marriage equality becomes more firmly established. These young gay men and lesbian women did not grow up with marriage as a relationship option and may eventually experience marriage levels on par with different-gender young adults as they move into parenting roles. This does not mean that gay men and lesbian women are avoiding relationships: the age at union formation for LGB young adults is roughly on par with that for different-gender couples (Prince et al. 2020). In a new climate of growing acceptance and support of sexual minorities and improved legal protections, young adult sexual minorities will most likely cohabit at levels similar to those of their sexual majority counterparts.

Growing shares of Millennials will not reach the traditional adulthood marker of marriage until their 30s, and many may never marry. Analysis of American Community Survey (ACS) data indicates that by age 40, about 90% of Baby Boomers had married, and this level declined among Gen Xers (birth cohort 1965–1979) to only 80% of women and 75% of men. Martin et al. (2014) projected that if the post–Great Recession marriage rates continued, only 69% of Millennial women and 65% of Millennial men will marry by age 40. Despite delays in marriage across the board, a growing share of Blacks, Hispanics, and adults without a college degree are projected to never marry (Martin et al. 2014). Thus, new opportunities for cohabitation may arise during some of the never-married years not only in young adulthood but also during middle age and older ages.

Young adult Millennials who do marry are marrying in different ways than their Baby Boomer counterparts; today, very few marriages occur without the benefit of cohabitation. In other words, there are few *direct* marriages—marriages to couples who did not live

together before they walked down the aisle. Evidence from analyses of the 1985 and 2011–2015 NSFG data indicates that among those who got married, most Baby Boomers did not cohabit before they got married, but the majority (70%) of Millennials have done so. Further, a growing share of all women have lived with someone besides their husband before marriage. In the early 1980s, about 13% of women who cohabited prior to marriage lived with someone else, compared with one-third in 2013.

Even though most Millennials are not marrying in young adulthood, they are not giving up on all relationships. Today, nearly all single young adults have had sexual relationships, and most have lived with a cohabiting partner (Hemez et al. 2018). Millennials have had more sexual relationships than Baby Boomers. The definition of the exact context of sexual relationships is not always clear, given that some are short- or long term, others are romantic or dating with boyfriends or girlfriends or cohabiting partners, and others are casual sexual relationships often with friends (i.e., “friends with benefits,” “hooking up,” or someone they were talking to).

Millennials continue to enter coresidential relationships, and there has been nearly no change in the age at which they enter unions. Millennials are forming their relationships at the same age as Baby Boomers did, at around age 22 or 23 (Manning et al. 2014). The mean age of cohabitation is consistently about 22, while the age at marriage has continued to rise. Today, for four of five (81%) women, the first coresidential relationship is cohabitation and not marriage. Although the vast majority of Baby Boomers (89%) and Millennials (90%) had married or cohabited in young adulthood, the first person Millennials live with is now a cohabiting partner, whereas for Baby Boomers, it was a husband or wife. Cohabitation has accounted for virtually all the decline in marriage in young adulthood. These findings are consistent with the cohabitation boom described earlier. Although there is a retreat from marriage in young adulthood, there does not appear to be an equivalent retreat from living together.

Evidence of the decoupling of cohabitation and marriage is that cohabiting unions are no longer only a pathway to marriage. Bumpass et al. (1991) reported in the late 1980s that about three-quarters of cohabitators expected to marry their partner, but this percentage declined substantially about 20 years later, with a minority (approximately 40%) expecting to marry (Guzzo 2014; Vespa 2014). The marital expectations today do not vary by social class: the college-educated and more modestly educated cohabitators share similar expectations to marry (Kuo and Raley 2016). Further, fewer cohabitators are transitioning into marriage (Guzzo 2014; Lamidi et al. 2019). Lamidi et al. (2019) showed that for the Baby Boomer cohabitation cohort, marriage was the most common outcome, and today it is the least common pathway out of cohabitation. Among more recent cohabitation cohorts, the way out of cohabiting unions is more often a breakup than marriage. The college-educated have not experienced this same decline, and they are the group that still more often marry; notably, though, only 40% did so by the third year of cohabitation (Lamidi et al. 2019). Taken together, declining shares of cohabiting couples report expecting to marry, fewer actually marry, and those who marry seem to be in no big hurry to do so.

Cohabitation and Relationship Instability

How does cohabitation influence marital stability among the minority of cohabiting couples that marry? One argument against cohabitation for Baby Boomers was that it

was associated with lower levels of subsequent marital stability (Smock 2000). However, most evidence suggests that this is no longer the case: cohabitation does not seem to hurt or help. If marriage is the way out of a cohabiting union, it no longer appears to be linked to lower levels of marital stability (Kuperberg 2014; Manning and Cohen 2012; Manning et al. *forthcoming*; Reinhold 2010). Even among couples with children, Musick and Micheltore (2018) showed that those cohabiting at birth who subsequently marry are no more likely to end their marriages than parents who married without cohabitation. In the future, it is possible that as cohabitation becomes more widespread, brides and grooms who do not cohabit are increasingly select (traditional couples with strong religious convictions). As a result, lower levels of marital instability may be observed among those who do not cohabit. Further, researchers have called for better assessments of how and when different types of relationships are associated with relationship stability (Kuperberg 2014; Rosenfeld and Roesler 2019; Sassler et al. 2018).

Although cohabitation is common, it typically does not last long and is consistently shorter in duration than marriages. This is why simple snapshots of cross-sectional data on cohabitation provide a biased portrait. Analysis of the 2011–2015 NSFG data indicates that about one-half of young adult first cohabiting relationships last just over two years—a duration that is eight months or at least 50% longer than cohabitations in the late 1970s and early 1980s (median duration = 1.3) across all ages in the NSFH (Bumpass and Sweet 1989). It appears that longer-term cohabitations may be on the rise.

About one-half of Millennial young adults who have been in a coresidential relationship will experience the dissolution of at least one relationship, compared with only 40% of Baby Boomers (Fig. 7). This finding is not surprising given the declining divorce rates among young adults (Allred 2019c), but the growth in cohabitation means that the likelihood of experiencing the dissolution of a coresidential union has increased. Kennedy and Ruggles (2014:596) stated that “the rapid rise of cohabitation among the young will neutralize any decline of divorce.” In fact, this is supported by empirical evidence showing that young adults’ higher rates of union dissolution are due to cohabitation (Eickmeyer 2019). The majority of union dissolutions among Millennials are cohabiting dissolutions, but the majority among Baby Boomers were marital dissolutions. Analyses of the 2011–2015 NSFG indicate that the rates of coresidential dissolution in young adulthood are highest for women with a high school diploma (70%) and much lower for the college-educated (28%). Among those in coresidential relationships, 70% of Black women, 50% of White women, and 44% of Hispanic women experienced dissolution. Not only are young adults more likely to experience a relationship ending, but they experience multiple

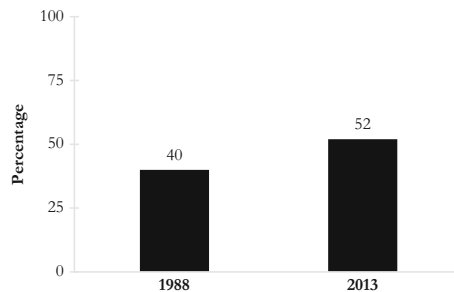


Fig. 7 Percentage of young adult women aged 29–31 who experienced union dissolution among women ever in a coresidential union. Sources: 1988 NSFG and 2011–2015 NSFG.

endings. Nearly 1 in 10 Millennials who were in a coresidential relationship (marriage or cohabitation) experienced two or more breakups (Eickmeyer and Manning 2018). The implications of these breakups are likely important in terms of economic well-being, emotional health, subsequent family formation, and responsibilities for children. These questions about the implications of relationship instability—not just divorces—need to be fully explored in the new relationship context.

Breakups are not always final because a substantial share of cohabiting couples break up and get back together. *Churning*, or cyclical cohabitation, is fairly common in young adulthood. Halpern-Meekin et al. (2013) reported that two in five cohabiting young adults reported churning. On one hand, this indicates some optimism and desire for couples to stay together as they work through issues. These types of churning make it complicated to study relationship endings and are associated with a potentially troubled relationship. Notably, a parallel issue exists when studying marriage. Divorce is a legal status, but there are varying lengths of time spent in a separated status. Tumin et al. (2015) found that 11% of separated individuals reconcile within five years, and 22% remain separated without a legal divorce five years after separation. Just as it is hard to capture relationship beginnings (Manning and Smock 2005), it is challenging to measure the end of a relationship even when studying marriage.

If Millennials break up, they often try again to live with someone new. Three-quarters of cohabiting breakups result in a new cohabiting relationship (Eickmeyer and Manning 2018). Millennials more often go on to form a second cohabiting relationship than did Baby Boomers (Eickmeyer and Manning 2018). Millennials also form a second cohabiting partnership faster than their older counterparts (on average, two years rather than four years). This means that Millennials have more often experienced a series of relationships by the time they reach their 30th birthday than their Baby Boomer counterparts.

These increasingly complex relationship biographies may have both positive and negative implications. A positive spin is that Millennials have more relationship experience and may become better at doing relationships as they learn critical skills about what works and what does not work as well as how to best navigate the starting and ending of partnerships. In essence, there is a relationship learning curve (Giordano et al. 2012), and Millennials may be gaining relationship competencies that are carrying forward to contribute to positive relationship habits and functioning. A negative spin is that young adults are bringing forward potentially poor relational practices and behaviors from prior relationships, which present challenges as they move into new partnerships. Further, children from prior relationships may present challenges as couples have to work out relationships with ex-partners in efforts to co-parent. Both positive and negative processes are likely to be operating, and both warrant research attention.

Cohabitation and Intergenerational Ties

In young adulthood, intergenerational ties are significant because there are two sets of key processes operating: moving out of parental homes and becoming parents themselves. As Bumpass (1990) and Smock (2000) argued, there are feedback loops as new generations of youth as well as parents are socialized in contexts with increasing levels of cohabitation.

The process of moving out has blurred: increasing shares of young adults are living with their parents, and more are boomeranging back to their parent's home (Payne

2011). In terms of cohabitation, it is not very common for cohabiting couples to live with parents. According to the CPS, only 9% of young cohabitators (aged 18–24) in 2018 were living with their parents, and a slightly greater share (14%) of married young adults were living with their parents (Payne 2019). It is relatively rare for young adult cohabiting couples to live with their parents, but we may observe growth in the future if it becomes more challenging for couples to live on their own.

As described earlier, older and younger cohorts of Americans are increasingly accepting of cohabitation. The process of attitudes supporting cohabitation occurs within families with parents reporting more positive views toward cohabitation in response to their adult children's cohabitation. This was evident among Baby Boomer cohorts (Axinn and Thornton 1993) and has been confirmed in my ongoing research with a cohort of Millennials in the 2011/2012 Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study. Intergenerational processes in cohabiting behavior are also empirically supported. Children who spent time with cohabiting parents experience greater odds of cohabiting in young adulthood (Sassler et al. 2009; Smock et al. 2013). Further, McClain (2011) showed that parents have even followed in their children's footsteps, with greater odds of parental cohabitation among those who have adult children who have cohabited. Thus, the diffusion of cohabitation flows across generations in multiple ways. These patterns suggest a great potential for future high levels of cohabitation.

Cohabitation is increasingly a family form in which to have and raise children. In terms of attitudes, nearly three-quarters of young adults report that it is acceptable to have children in a cohabiting union (Stykes 2015), a view that is consistent across education and racial/ethnic groups. The growth in nonmarital childbearing has been driven largely by increases in cohabitation (Manning et al. 2015). As of 2013, 60% of nonmarital births are to cohabiting mothers. In fact, the share of children born into two-parent families has not changed, remaining stable at about 82% to 85% (Manning et al. 2015). Further, pregnant single women are more likely to cohabit (18%) than to get married (5%) before the birth of their child (Lichter et al. 2014). There is little pressure to marry in response to becoming pregnant while cohabiting. For example, Lichter et al. (2014) reported that nearly four in five women who were pregnant while cohabiting were still cohabiting at the time of birth. Taken together, these findings clearly indicate the growing acceptability of cohabitation as a family context in which to raise children.

In terms of overall child experience in cohabitation, increasing shares of children have spent some of their life with a cohabiting parent. In 1995, 28% of children had experienced parental cohabitation, compared with 40% about 20 years later (Brown et al. 2016). About one-half of children to mothers without a college degree lived in a cohabiting parent family, and nearly one in five (16%) children who had a college-educated mother did so in 2013. Many of these cohabiting families are stepfamilies, and children often live with their mother and her cohabiting partner (Manning 2015). Our field needs to continue to ask important questions about the well-being of children raised in cohabiting-parent families while accounting for biological relationships of children and parents, age at family formation and dissolution, and family complexity.

Measuring Cohabitation

Demographers' knowledge base about young adult relationships is dependent on accurate measurement. Many have made arguments for new and improved data on

cohabitation, and most major surveys include measures of cohabitation. There is wide variation in how we ask about cohabitation. The good news is that we are collecting new data on cohabitation, as evidenced by the new relationship options in the 2020 census. Same-gender and different-gender relationships can now be established with direct questions. On the census, cohabitation has been upgraded from the second to the bottom of the roster of relationship options (just above roomers and boarders) to second from the top on the roster for different-gender couples and fourth for same-gender couples. The bad news is that social media outlets, such as Facebook, do not include cohabitation as a relationship category. Facebook includes the terms *domestic partnership* and *civil union*, but I doubt that those terms resonate with very many cohabiting Millennials.

In our field, we consistently ask about marital status and marital history, but we are inconsistent in asking about cohabitation status and cohabitation history. My colleagues and I (Manning et al. 2019a) compared how cohabitation was measured across a number of national data sets for young adults of a similar age and cohort. We discovered wide-ranging measurement techniques, resulting in significant differences in levels of cohabitation. Cohabitation estimates based on household roster techniques (employed in the CPS, ACS, and Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP)) with the term *unmarried partner* result in substantially lower estimates of cohabitation than do direct questions about cohabitation (NSFG, NLSY97, National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health)). Further, some key data collections (SIPP, Add Health Wave 5, Health and Retirement Survey) exclude full cohabitation histories, so it is impossible to locate cohabitation experiences in the life course and detect the long-range implications of cohabitation on health and well-being at older ages. The wording of questions about cohabitation differs across surveys and does result in differing estimates of cohabitation (Manning et al. 2019a). Some large-scale surveys, such as the NLSY97, Early Childhood Longitudinal Survey, Birth Cohort, and Panel Study of Income Dynamics, still rely on a dated approach by asking about “marriage-like” relationships. Finally, some surveys, such as the NSFG, limit their questions to “opposite-sex” cohabiting couples, thereby eliminating same-gender cohabiting couples. I hope we can come up with greater consensus and consistency in our measurement of cohabitation. These constraints mean that we cannot assess the implications of cohabitation using some of our most prized and valued data.

These measurement constraints are consequential as we attempt to understand the implications of cohabitation for children’s lives. As stated earlier, cohabitation is a family context that is experienced by growing shares of children. However, data requirements to determine whether children are born and raised by biological parents outside of marriage are high. As Guzzo and colleagues (Guzzo and Dorius 2016; Stykes and Guzzo 2019) have effectively argued in their work on multiple-partner fertility, we often focus on the start and end dates of relationships and do not incorporate the biological relationships of children and parents. Rather than linking children based on dates alone, it is critical to ask about children’s biological parents so that we track whether mothers marry the fathers of their children or cohabit with the fathers of the children. In most data sets, it is challenging to trace whether children born outside of relationships are born to the same father. For example, we use dates to establish whether a pregnant mother moves in with the presumed father of her child before the birth of the child. If our goal is to study family stability, it is imperative to know who is in the family.

One idea is to even follow the lead of many other countries by including on birth certificates the cohabitation status of parents, and not just marital status.

Discussion

Young adulthood remains demographically dense, and we need to work hard to capture these experiences and acknowledge the diversity of experience and the many ways to move through young adulthood. The challenge is that we continue to study relationships as if we are in a Baby Boomer reality. Marriage is no longer the only or primary relationship context in young adulthood. Taken together, my rationale for sharing these findings here is to make a case for cohabitation. We have spent most of our energy focusing on how it compares with marriage, but as Casper and Sayer (2000) reported, cohabitation can be conceptualized in many ways. It made sense at the time, but the marriage blueprint has limitations in our current era of uncertainty. It might be alright to not know where the relationship is headed for those facing uncertainty on multiple fronts. The United States is part of a worldwide cohabitation boom, but may never become a worldwide leader in cohabitation given the legal benefits of marriage.

Cohabitation experiences are not similar across all social and economic groups, with quite uneven levels of cohabitation experience. There is some convergence in cohabitation demonstrated by an increase for all groups, but the most rapid growth occurs among the modestly educated. Thus, a simple explanation of disadvantage may no longer apply, given that the highest levels of cohabitation in young adulthood are experienced by young adults with high school diplomas and among Whites. Certainly, the college-educated cohabit at the lowest levels, but the most advantaged are increasingly cohabiting.

It is important to know when people live together and when they live part. American society supports a legal status—marriage—that measures the beginnings (wedding) and endings (divorce). Yet in reality, some relationship statuses do not map neatly on the legal definitions. Most young adults start coresidential relationships outside of marriage and end relationships outside of marriage, clearly indicating that most young adults want to be in an intimate coresidential relationship and that most often start out cohabiting. There is more than one way to be living together in the United States. They all deserve to be studied and measured.

As I stated at the outset of this article, an issue for future research to consider is the long-term ramifications of young adults' decisions in terms of how they will navigate their middle and older years. I suspect that cohabitation will play a pivotal role and may have broad demographic implications. We will not know the answer to such questions unless we extend our relationship scope in all surveys to include cohabitation histories.

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