

# “Don’t Force My Hand”: Gender and Social Class Variation in Relationship Negotiation

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## ABSTRACT

*Do the relationship processes leading to cohabitation and subsequent outcomes contribute to growing social class disparities in family behaviors? Our paper explores the role played by gender and class in relationship progression, from dating, to cohabiting, to talk of marriage and proposing. Data are from in-depth interviews with 122 service-class and middle-class cohabiting individuals (sixty-one couples). We find that men initiate dating and proposals far more often than do women, though gender equality is more evident in who raises the topic of cohabiting, and women are more likely than men to initiate discussions of marriage. Middle-class women express greater agency in forwarding relationships than their service-class counterparts, as they frequently raise the topic of marriage and establish the general pacing and time frame of relationship progression. Middle-class men’s greater receptivity to marriage also contributes to the diverging outcomes experienced by middle-class and service-class cohabitators.*

## INTRODUCTION

In the United States, cohabitation is now common across the social-class spectrum.<sup>1</sup> Young Americans increasingly defer marriage, though not intimate unions; the majority have cohabited with a romantic partner by their late twenties.<sup>2</sup> Although the likelihood of cohabitation remains greater among those with lower levels of education, growing proportions of the college educated have lived with a romantic partner.<sup>3</sup> Social class disparities have

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1. See Sheela Kennedy & Larry Bumpass, *Cohabitation and Children’s Living Arrangements: New Estimates from the United States*, 19 DEMOGRAPHIC RES. 1663, 1664 (2008).

2. See Paula Y. Goodwin et al., *Marriage and Cohabitation in the United States: A Statistical Portrait Based on Cycle 6 (2002) of the National Survey of Family Growth*, VITAL & HEALTH STAT., Feb. 2010, at 1; see also Wendy D. Manning et al., *Two Decades of Stability and Change in Age at First Union Formation*, 76 J. MARRIAGE & FAM. 247, 257–58 (2014).

3. See Manning et al., *supra* note 2, at 255.

also emerged with regards to marriage. By the time they have reached age 30, college-educated Americans are now more likely to be married than their less educated counterparts.<sup>4</sup> To date, however, little is known about the potential role that cohabitation plays in social class disparities in relationship progression.

Recent studies have suggested that the *process* of entering into and forwarding cohabiting unions, and whether or not they transition into marital unions, differs by social class.<sup>5</sup> Cohabitors with college degrees take longer to move in with their partners, live with their partners for shorter periods of time, on average, than their less educated counterparts, and their unions are more likely to transition to marriage.<sup>6</sup> Over two-thirds of college-educated men in their first cohabiting union married their partners within 3 years of entering into shared living, compared with only 50% of those with only a high school diploma.<sup>7</sup>

Our paper explores some of the reasons for differential progression into marriage, with a particular emphasis on the role played by gender and social class in relationship advancement. Data are from in-depth interviews with 122 cohabiting individuals (61 cohabiting couples), among the middle- and service-classes. The data provide a unique perspective on advancement of relationships prior to co-residence as well as during the period when couples often negotiate discussions of marriage, drawing on information not available in large-scale quantitative surveys. We utilize the couples' stories to help illuminate the diverging destinies experienced by the highly educated and their counterparts in the middle tier of the educational spectrum.

## I. RELATIONSHIP ADVANCEMENT

Socially accepted “scripts” for intimate relationships typically afford men greater power to further intimate unions, assigning the desires of the male partner more weight in relationships but also by naturalizing and

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4. See Daniel Schneider et al., *What Explains the Decline in First Marriage in the United States? Evidence from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, 1969 to 2013*, 80 J. MARRIAGE & FAM. 791, 800–02 (2018); see also Paul Taylor, Richard Fry, Gabriel Velasco & Daniel Dockterman, *The Reversal of the College Marriage Gap*, PEW RESEARCH CENTER (Oct. 7, 2010), <https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2010/11/767-college-marriage-gap.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/3SGY-D2GP>].

5. See SHARON SASSLER & AMANDA JAYNE MILLER, *COHABITATION NATION: GENDER, CLASS, AND THE REMAKING OF RELATIONSHIPS 2* (2017); see also Sharon Sassler et al., *Transitions from Sexual Relationships into Cohabitation and Beyond*, 55 DEMOGRAPHY 511, 514–515 (2018).

6. See Sassler et al., *supra* note 5, at 528–29.

7. See Goodwin et al., *supra* note 2, at 12.

romanticizing male enactment of these transitions (such as first date initiation or proposing marriage).<sup>8</sup> Today’s adults desire egalitarian relationships, and cohabitation attracts those with views regarding appropriate roles for women and men that are more flexible than those expressed by married individuals.<sup>9</sup> Because it is “incompletely institutionalized,”<sup>10</sup> with no shared norms regarding when moving in together should occur, who might propose such a transition, and whether or how it should progress into matrimony, cohabitators may adopt more flexible scripts for other forms of relationship advancement (like talk of marriage or engagement) as well.

Nonetheless, strong social norms are difficult to overcome as individuals struggle to reconcile their personal desires with societal scripts and structural barriers to gender equality.<sup>11</sup> In their work on the service class, for example, Sassler and Miller (2011) found that men played the dominant role in initiating dating as well as advancing unions to a more formal status (i.e., engagement), though women often raised the possibility of shared living and frequently were the first to bring up the topic of marriage (often unsuccessfully).<sup>12</sup> But that study focused on service-class couples, for whom attaining the necessary prerequisites for marriage is increasingly difficult.<sup>13</sup> Things appear to be somewhat different for the middle class. Middle-class cohabiting couples, for example, move in together more slowly than those with less education and are more likely to transition into engagement and marriage.<sup>14</sup>

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8. See Ellen Lamont, *The Limited Construction of an Egalitarian Masculinity: College-Educated Men’s Dating and Relationship Narratives*, 18 *MEN & MASCULINITIES* 271, 272 (2015); see also Janet Lever et al., *Who Pays for Dates? Following Versus Challenging Gender Norms*, SAGE OPEN (2015); Sharon Sassler & Amanda J. Miller, *Waiting To Be Asked: Gender, Power, and Relationship Progression Among Cohabiting Couples*, 32 *J. FAM. ISSUES* 482, 488–90 (2011).

9. See Teresa Ciabattari, *Cohabitation and Housework: The Effects of Marital Intentions*, 66 *J. MARRIAGE & FAM.* 118, 119 (2004); see also KATHLEEN GERSON, *THE UNFINISHED REVOLUTION: COMING OF AGE IN A NEW ERA OF GENDER, WORK, AND FAMILY* (2010).

10. See Andrew J. Cherlin, *The Deinstitutionalization of American Marriage*, 66 *J. MARRIAGE & FAM.* 848, 848 (2004).

11. See Paula England, *Reassessing the Uneven Gender Revolution and Its Slowdown*, 25 *GENDER & SOC’Y* 113, 115–16 (2011); see also GERSON, *supra* note 9.

12. See Sassler & Miller, *supra* note 8, at 491, 496–97, 501.

13. See Christina Gibson-Davis et al., *“His” and “Hers”: Meeting the Economic Bar to Marriage*, 55 *DEMOGRAPHY* 2321, 2323–24 (2018); see also Schneider et al., *supra* note 4, at 805–06.

14. See Sassler et al., *supra* note 5, at 515.

A. *Diverging Destinies: Social Class Differences in Relationship Prerequisites*

Living together without marriage has increased rapidly across the social class spectrum since it became an observed phenomenon in the 1970s.<sup>15</sup> Whereas the moderately educated and young adults with college degrees hold similar views regarding the desirability of marriage, the acceptability of premarital cohabitation, and the challenges facing marriage, their relationship processes have diverged.<sup>16</sup> Many have suggested that such changes are due, in part, to the declining economic standing of men with only moderate levels of educational attainment or to transformations in the relative economic contributions of coupled men and women.<sup>17</sup> At the same time that the relatively well-paying, blue-collar career opportunities of moderately educated men dried up in the Great Recession, their female partners' incomes took on greater importance for their households.<sup>18</sup> Transformations in patterns of paid employment and remuneration may upend the way gendered behaviors are manifest within the family. Whereas the economic attributes of men used to be of greatest importance in predicting whether couples wed, for example, that association has weakened over time as more women enter the paid labor force and receive higher returns as a result of educational investment.<sup>19</sup> Faced with difficulties in obtaining the prerequisites considered necessary for marriage—completing school, holding a stable job, accruing some savings—many young adults are deferring marriage.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, although both men and women increasingly express the view that wives as well as husbands should work in the paid labor force, young men continue to adhere to the belief that, since attaining such an egalitarian arrangement seems unlikely, their employment should take precedence.<sup>21</sup> This may be more salient for those with a high school diploma or some college education, as working class men have historically expressed the most traditionally

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15. See Kennedy & Bumpass, *supra* note 1, at 1664; see also Manning et al., *supra* note 2.

16. See Taylor, Fry, Velasco, & Dockterman, *supra* note 4.

17. See Schneider et al., *supra* note 4, at 805–06.

18. See Andrew Sum, Ishwar Khatriwada, Joseph McLaughlin, & Sheila Palma, *No Country for Young Men: Deteriorating Labor Market Prospects for Low-Skilled Men in the United States*, 635 ANNALS AM. ACAD. POL. SOC. SCI. 24, 26 (2011); see also JOAN C. WILLIAMS, *RESHAPING THE WORK-FAMILY DEBATE: WHY MEN AND CLASS MATTER* (2010).

19. See Sharon Sassler & Frances Goldscheider, *Revisiting Jane Austen's Theory of Marriage Timing: Changes in Union Formation Among American Men in the Late 20th Century*, 25 J. FAM. ISSUES 139 (2004); see also Schneider et al., *supra* note 4 at 805–06.

20. See Andrew J. Cherlin, *A Happy Ending to a Half-Century of Family Change?*, 42 POPUL. DEV. REV. 121, 124–25 (2016); see also Gibson-Davis et al., *supra* note 13.

21. See GERSON, *supra* note 9, at 9.

gendered expectations.<sup>22</sup> How both men and women engage in and react to relationship progression may reflect challenges to men's status; these challenges are likely to differ by social class.

Here, we examine the following questions: (1) how do cohabiting relationships form and advance, from dating to cohabiting unions; (2) do men and women adhere to a "gender script," designating the man as the initiator and the woman as the one to respond, and what happens when normative scripts are challenged; and (3) do the ways in which couples advance or negotiate their relationship progression differ by social class? Our results shed light on emerging social class differentiation in the processes that are increasingly precursors to marriage.

## II. METHOD

This research is informed by grounded theory approaches and methods.<sup>23</sup> Data are from in-depth interviews with 30 service-class and 31 middle-class heterosexual couples who were living in the Columbus, Ohio metropolitan area. We conducted interviews simultaneously with both partners, though the interviews were held in different locations; this enables us to assess partner similarities and differences in aspects of relationships that involve couple negotiation. Interviews lasted between one and two-and-a-half hours and were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. We altered names of all respondents to protect confidentiality.

Respondents were between the ages of 18 and 36, the prime family formation years. Eligible couples reported sharing a residence for at least three months. We screened couples primarily on income and education. Couples had to have an income of at least \$18,000 to be eligible for the study. Because many of the respondents are young, however, income is not an optimal measure of social class. We therefore relied upon educational attainment as a proxy for social class location.

We initially pursued our service-class sample by posting fliers at a large community college. Despite our recruiting locale, fewer than half of the service-class individuals were students, with most attending school part-time or sporadically. The 31 middle-class couples were recruited through fliers posted in gourmet grocery stores, coffee shops and restaurants, and a posting on an online community bulletin board. Participants were interviewed between July 2004 and June 2006.

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22. See LILLIAN B. RUBIN, *FAMILIES ON THE FAULT LINE: AMERICA'S WORKING CLASS SPEAKS ABOUT THE FAMILY, THE ECONOMY, RACE, AND ETHNICITY* (1994).

23. See ANSELM STRAUSS & JULIET CORBIN, *BASICS OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: TECHNIQUES AND PROCEDURES FOR DEVELOPING GROUNDED THEORY* (1998).

When both partners had at least a bachelor's degree, they were categorized as middle class; all others were placed in the service-class sample. We utilized occupational status to help determine where to place eight couples in which one partner had a bachelor's degree and one had less than a college education. For example, among four educationally disparate service-class couples, none of the degreed partners were working in occupations that utilized their degrees (e.g., telemarketer or retail).

#### *A. Sample Information*

The middle-class sample is, on average, older than our service-class one. Further, parenthood is far more prevalent in the service-class sample, though it should be noted that some fathers in the sample reported rarely or never seeing their children from past relationships. The median level of education among service-class couples was for both partners to have completed some college; among the middle-class couples, the median was for both partners to have completed a bachelor's degree. Income levels are notably higher among the middle-class sample, with an average couple-level income of \$67,672, compared to \$38,971 for the service-class couples. Occupations for those in the service-class sample included such jobs as telemarketer, wait staff, and computer repair. Middle-class occupations included architect, computer network/systems analyst, teacher, and respiratory therapist. Additional descriptive results are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Characteristics of Cohabiting Couples**

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Measures</b>	<b>Service-Class means/n</b>	<b>Middle-Class means/n</b>
Age	Mean: Men	26.4 years	28.3 years
	Mean: Women	24.4 years	25.2 years
Race	Both White, non-Hispanic	16	24
	Both Black, non-Hispanic	4	1
	Both Hispanic	1	2
	Mixed-race couple	9	4
Cohabitation Duration	3–6 months	8	12
	7–11 months	2	1
	12–23 months	5	12
	24–35 months	7	4
	3 years or more	8	2
Parental Status	Both no children	16	27
	Both share children <sup>a</sup>	5	2
	Man has children (not woman)	6	2
	Woman has children (not man)	2	0
	Each has a child from a prior relationship	1	0
Couple-Level Income <sup>b</sup>	Mean couple income	\$38,971	\$67,672
Initiated Dating	Female Partner	6	7
	Male Partner	19	18
	Other (Don't Know/Don't Agree/Both)	5	6

Initiated Move-in	Female Partner	13	13
	Male Partner	12	8
	Other (Don't Know/Don't Agree/Both)	5	10
Initiated Marriage-talk	Female Partner	12	16
	Male Partner	10	5
	Other (No One/Don't Agree/Both)	8	10
Should Initiate Proposal	Male Partner	13	13
	Either Partner	1	2
	Other (Don't Know/Don't Agree/Both)	11	5
	Already Engaged	5	11
<b>N</b>		<b>30</b>	<b>31</b>

<sup>a</sup> In two service-class couples, the partners share a child and the male partner also has a child from a previous relationship.

<sup>b</sup> Couple level income is determined by summing each partner's reported individual income. One man in the service-class and one man and one woman in the middle-class refused to report their income. Their partners' reports were used to determine their couple-level income. In another instance, neither partner reported a middle-class man's income. It was set to the mean of men's income for his social class.

### B. Analytic Approach

Codes were derived both deductively, based upon past literature, and inductively as they emerged from the data. Data were coded thematically; common patterns of behavior, reasons, and expectations were identified through repeated readings of the transcripts. Open coding was initially used to generate topical themes (how first dates were initiated, which partner initially brought up cohabiting, plans at move-in) and allowed sections of narratives to be classified into distinct categories for each code.<sup>24</sup> For both the service- and middle-class samples, both authors coded the data and reviewed the results for consistency, discussing any differences until consensus was

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24. *Id.* at 160.



reached. The transcripts were entered into ATLAS to facilitate coding. The second stage of analysis involved axial coding or looking at variability and linkages within topics. The third level of analysis involved selective coding, returning to the data to integrate and refine categories and relate them to other concepts.<sup>25</sup> This enabled us to examine particular story lines that the data revealed.

### III. FINDINGS

We focused on several stages of couples' relationships: (a) how they became romantically involved; (b) decisions to move in together; and (c) discussions of the future, which include having general discussions about marriage; and (d) engagement. For each stage, we assessed which partner was given (or took) credit for the outcome, as well as whether and how the process was negotiated. The ways individual partners described their relationship progressions highlights how normative gender roles are accepted, contested, and rearranged.

#### *A. Becoming a Couple*

The majority of the couples in our sample concurred that the man had been the one to initiate their romance, whether during a time where they were hanging out and getting to know one another, or by asking the woman out on a date to signify an interest that was more than just as friends. Women were attributed with initiating the start of the relationship about one-fifth of the time. A handful of couples disagreed regarding who was responsible for forwarding the romantic relationship or felt that it had been a mutual decision (see Table 1). The ways individual partners described the relationship progression highlights how gendered the early stages of romantic relationships tend to be, though these patterns differ by social class.

Male-dominated relationship initiation remains the standard, regardless of social class, consistent with the literature.<sup>26</sup> Among our service-class couples, men were attributed with jump-starting the romantic relationship for 19 of the couples whereas 8 of the middle-class couples indicated that the man had been the instigator. Men were assigned this initiator role in a variety of ways. Among some couples, flirtations transitioned into something more via a conversation about where the relationship was heading, or the man expressed

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25. See Ralph LaRossa, *Grounded Theory Methods and Qualitative Family Research*, 67 J. MARRIAGE & FAM. 837, 850–53 (2005).

26. See Lamont, *supra* note 8, at 274; see also Lever et al., *supra* note 8.

definite sexual interest, with kisses, flowers, and flattery. Other couples attributed the start of the relationship to a more conventional first date, with particular emphasis on the man paying for the date.<sup>27</sup>

Women initiated the romance (or attempted to) in 6 of the service-class couples, and seven of the middle-class ones. This generally took the form of asking the man to do something, from going to a wedding as their date, to coming for a visit (among long-distance couples who met online), to raising the question of whether a “friends with benefits” non-romantic, sexual relationship had changed to something more. While both men and women expressed anxiety about asking their partners out, women more often attempted to initiate relationships in a roundabout way. Aliyah, a 20-year-old administrative assistant, explained her guise for clarifying their relationship status. “I asked him one day, ‘Well, what do you consider me as?’ And he was like, ‘Well, you’re my girlfriend.’ I was like, ‘Well, you never asked me, so how do you know?’ He said, ‘Because I just told you that you’re my girlfriend.’” Adam, a 28-year-old unemployed sometime college student, explained how his partner indirectly invited him to attend a mutual friend’s wedding with her. He explained, “When I talked to her about it later, she said that she was joking about it, but not really. Like she was throwing hints or something out there, so that’s kind of how it happened.” Women’s discomfort with flipping the conventional social script highlights normative acceptance of how relationships “should” proceed, and concern with transgressing these social boundaries.

Conventional gender scripts assign men to do the asking, while women wait to be asked, as most women in this sample did. But they did not necessarily appreciate waiting. Quite a few women expressed frustration with waiting for men to make a move. Middle-class women, in particular, were quite clear in letting men know they were receptive to greater involvement. A number of women approached their partners first (at a bar or party, for example), then hinted they were amenable to being asked out. Natasha, a college-educated small-business owner, remembered that after spending weeks flirting with her current fiancé at the gym, her membership was about to expire, and he still had not asked her out. “So that last week I’m like, ‘Hey, are you going to miss me? This is my last week.’ ‘Cause we still hadn’t exchanged numbers or anything. [I was] trying to get [him to do] something.” He gave her his card and later asked her out for drinks; both partners note that as the relationship’s start.

Another pattern noted more among the middle class than among the service class was a greater incidence of men doggedly pursuing the women

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27. See generally Lever et al., *supra* note 8.

they wanted to date. Our results suggest that women utilized a strategy of resistance as a means to slow down relationships. Nine middle-class and four service-class couples engaged in this "dance." These middle-class women were not yet ready to be serious or were unwilling to become exclusive with one person. Justin, a landscaper said about his current girlfriend that "there was a part of her that didn't want to get involved with anybody." Lauren, his 23-year-old partner, empathized with Justin's discomfort during this period: "Needless to say, the first three months of our relationship did not go very well because I was dating a couple other people and I made it strictly clear to him that we were just dating, we were not together. But he wanted to be with me."

Pursuit of a partner not yet ready to become involved was not only limited to men. Several middle-class women also eventually convinced their male partners to enter into a relationship. Friends of 33-year-old yoga studio owner Janelle tried to set her up with Jonathan, an IT professional, but he was not initially receptive. On their third meeting, however, she broke down his defenses and brought him home with her, where, as both explained, they remained in bed for a solid week. That sealed the deal. Current studies of relationship progression that focus only on final outcomes clearly miss this dance, where one partner is initially more interested in pursuing the relationship while the other paces the union to their liking. The middle-class (and middle-class men, in particular) in our sample were more likely to have utilized their powers of persuasion (or persistence) to win over a partner than their service-class counterparts. This may be due to the middle-class women's more expansive options. Many were dating other men, or had a particular dating timetable in mind.

### *B. The Move Towards Shared Living*

The process of moving in together provides an opportunity to challenge normative gender roles to a greater extent than does relationship initiation. Women took a much more active role in initiating the move to shared living than they did in dating. Even though no one pattern predominated, the most common arrangement was where the female partners suggested moving in together; over 40% of both the service-class and middle-class couples indicated that the female partner had been the one to initially bring up the idea of cohabiting. Similar proportions of service-class men broached the subject initially, but among middle-class couples this was less often the case, raised by only 8 men. Middle-class couples were more likely than their service-class counterparts to say the decision to move in together was mutual.

The remaining couples disagreed on, or were unable to determine, which partner first suggested moving in together.

Whereas the script for dating is widely known and accepted, there are fewer rules designating how a move in with a partner is supposed to occur. That might explain why women in our sample were more comfortable raising the issue of cohabiting than in initiating dating. And because sexual relationships are already established, and couples are often spending many nights together, discussions of entering into a shared living arrangement may naturally arise. Audrey, a 22-year-old graduate student who had dated her partner all through college before they decided to live together said that they had been “skating around the issue” of moving in together when she decided to bring it up explicitly. She told her partner that she needed to decide whether to get a one- or two-bedroom apartment. She said, “If I am living with you, I’ll start looking for two bedrooms . . . but I need an answer, ‘Do you want to live with me?’” Similarly, Stan, a 31-year-old hospital orderly, explained that he had been having financial difficulties and his living situation was unstable. He described how his partner Keisha raised the idea, “because she already had an apartment, she was established, she came up with the suggestion of me moving and coming to stay with her.”

Although the majority of men agreed that living together was a good idea, quite a few men were unwilling to accept their partners’ offers to live together right away. Instead, these men temporarily put the brakes on any such decision. Five middle-class men and three men in our service-class sample expressed some hesitation about taking their female partners up on their suggestions. Jonathan, an author, whose partner Janelle had also been the one to initiate the relationship, recalled the initial discussion, and when asked how he responded said, “I told her that I wanted to wait a little while.” Most of the women were quite aware of these delays as was the case of Sophie and Caleb, two recent college graduates. Sophie revealed, “I needed a roommate and Caleb was a little bit hesitant at first ‘cause he didn’t want to move in for the wrong reasons. His way of thinking is more level headed.” In Caleb’s words, however, “I just didn’t know if I wanted to step into that type of whole world where you live with your girlfriend and you share space and share everything, like being married, basically.” Kirsten, a 24-year-old Research Assistant, attributed her partner’s hesitation about what he called her “standing offer” to similar concerns, explaining, “He was kind of reluctant at first and I can understand why. It’s a commitment thing. It’s kind of scary.”

The service-class men who sought time to decide on their living arrangements differed somewhat from their middle-class counterparts. Stan was, in the words of his partner, “rather leery” about moving in because he was reluctant to move away from his child, and Jorge was concerned because

he was from a very religious family that would not approve of their cohabiting. The final service-class man who sought to slow down the process expressed uncertainty about the relationship, saying he told his partner, "We're not ready to move in together." Any delay, however, was relatively short-lived. All 3 of the service-class men who hesitated moved in with their partner within 6 months of the relationship's start, as did 2 of the middle-class men. The fiscal situations of the service-class couples may have expedited transitions into female-initiated shared living, even in the face of men's ambivalence. It is a less satisfactory explanation for the middle-class men, as both the men and their romantic partners were better off economically. Men's ability to defer their decisions highlights how even when women do initiate relationship progression, their male partners frequently continue to have the final deciding power by controlling the timing of moving in together.

Men were somewhat less likely to raise the idea of cohabiting than were women. Several of the service-class men who did ask their partners about living together were looking for an apartment, and in lieu of seeking out new roommates suggested to partners that they cohabit. Of note is that in nearly half of the service-class couples where the man initiated the topic, the relationship would have likely ended had the couple not moved in together, either because it was initially long-distance or because one partner was moving away. Maria, who met her partner online, explained that Bill asked her to move in together, "because he didn't want the long-distance relationship. So I think it was him anyways bringing it up and saying, 'Why don't you just move in, we'll have this and work it out as best as we can.'" Eight middle-class couples also agreed that the men asked their partners to live with them. As was true in the reverse situation (when women raised the possibility of cohabiting), the partners of 2 middle-class men who broached the subject of living together also expressed reservations about living together. But the men took quite different tacks in persuading them that the decision was the right one. Kevin, after raising the possibility of living together, also assured Amy about his intentions. "I told her, I said, 'I don't want to push you into anything. I don't want you to do anything you're not comfortable with. I want you to do it if you want to do it.'" He then intimated that a proposal was imminent. But gentle persuasion was not the tactic used by Martin; though his girlfriend, Jessica, wanted to take things a little slower, in his words, "I just laid it out. 'This is the deal. If I'm coming there [to your town], I'm not going to live down the street, and you need to decide for yourself if you can handle that.'" Few of the women in these couples expressed reservations that moving in might signify a higher level of commitment than they were ready for, in contrast to the response of several middle-class women during the dating stage of the relationship.

Among the middle class, decisions to move in together were more often made mutually, as well as gradually, than they were for the service class. The greater level of joint decision making among the middle-class may result from the fact that they moved in more slowly, and therefore had more time to get to know each other and discuss their plans for the future. Because the process was gradual, it seemed, for these couples, almost “natural.” When asked who brought up living together, Tara, a computer programmer, explained, “I don’t think we ever made a conscious decision. I mean gradually stuff started, you know, I think he started bringing stuff over.” Her partner, Drew, who worked in cybersecurity, concurred. Also asked who initiated moving in, he said, “Yeah we, well, again it’s like one of those things you just kinda do. You know, next thing I know I’m sleeping in her bed every night.”

A final set of service-class and middle-class couples did not agree regarding who initially broached the possibility of living together. Many of these disagreements appear to be the result of communication issues or the initial reluctance that one partner felt about cohabiting. These respondents’ misunderstandings intimate how struggles over power and resources operate to advantage men. In one example, Natasha, a translator, told her partner Soliman, an investor, that she did not want to cohabit, only to give up after several months of his staying at her apartment every night; she finally determined to ask him to at least help pay the rent, as her financial situation was precarious. Juliana, who wanted to move into her boyfriend’s apartment, was taken aback by his reaction to her discussing the possibility. He told her, “Well, you can’t just decide, you have to be invited.” Disagreements among the service-class couples less often took the form of such power exertions, instead resulting more frequently from basic communication glitches.

Sex differences appeared in the way in which living together was initially broached. Women often brought up the possibility of living together indirectly. Service-class women, in particular, expressed anxiety about financial or housing woes, hoping that their partners would suggest that they move in with them. Other women suggested to men that they live together only as platonic “roommates,” though both knew that they would share a bed. Service-class men were nearly as likely as their female counterparts to suggest the couple live together and more receptive to the women’s initiation of cohabitation, in part because they are also in need of roommates and have less in the way of a financial cushion to allow them to live alone. Notwithstanding these women’s upturning of conventional gender norms through the initiation of a move-in, middle-class men in particular often acted to wrest control of the situation from their female partners.

*C. Marriage Talk*

The decision to live together often elevates societal expectations that marriage is being considered. Yet few of the couples in either the service-class or middle-class had explicitly discussed marriage plans prior to moving in together. Talk of the future, and whether marriage is in the cards, becomes more frequent once couples are sharing a home. Our results suggest that such discussions range widely in both content and seriousness. Some individuals are strongly opposed to marriage, but others are not yet sure their current partner is the one or are not ready to broach the issue. How these talks progress, the roles played by men and women in forwarding or impeding these discussions, and what ensues over time suggest that women in cohabiting couples are challenging conventional roles. This is particularly the case for the women in our middle-class couples, who are most likely to raise the topic of marriage as well as describe a particular desired time frame for relationship progression.

Cohabitators are a diverse group, and a considerable number have no interest in ever marrying anyone.<sup>28</sup> Our results suggest that "marriage rejecters" often raise their opposition to marriage at the relationship's start to ensure that both partners are on the same page. Four couples in the service-class sample and one in the middle-class sample agreed marriage is not ever in their futures. The service-class couples agreed about their non-inclination for marriage during the initial dates. Andre, a mortgage processor, mentioned, for example, that both he and Stacey, an assistant manager at a call center, found marriage distasteful, referencing the fiascos that their parents' marriages had been. The one middle-class couple that firmly rejected the idea of marriage arrived at their decision more gradually. "I honestly can't remember when we decided we weren't," Dean, a lawyer, commented, "but it's [marriage] never been something we seriously considered." His partner, Lindsey, a professor, laughed, "We usually describe ourselves as the permanent non-married." Agreement that marriage was not in the cards seemed to ensure that such relationships persisted.

A great deal of negotiation over the prospect of marriage is evident among the remaining couples in our sample. The majority of respondents indicated that the topic of marriage had been mentioned, though with varying levels of seriousness. The most common pattern was for women to raise the topic. Men were less often the ones to bring up marriage, though nearly a quarter of the service-class men did so (or were attributed with taking that step by their female partners). Among middle-class couples, there was often disagreement

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28. See generally Vivienne Elizabeth, *Cohabitation, Marriage, and the Unruly Consequences of Difference*, 14 *GENDER & SOC.* 87 (2000).

regarding who raised the topic of marriage initially. Three common themes emerged among these discussions. The first relates to the context in which the discussion of marriage occurred. The second reveals how power is manifest in individual's responses to partners' attempts to discuss marriage. The third highlights normative concepts of relationship progression, centered around how long couples should know each other before becoming engaged to the necessary prerequisites that must be in place prior to taking such a step.

Often the topic of marriage is raised as a result of attending the wedding of a friend or family member. As recent news stories attest, weddings have become more likely (as well as more lasting) among the college educated.<sup>29</sup> A total of 19 middle-class and 9 service-class respondents mentioned that hearing about or attending weddings of members within their social circle had spurred them to talk about the future with their partners. As Matthew, a 30-year-old architect, attested, "Being around all of these newly-wedded couples, it just keeps that kind of discussion going. She had a friend that just got married, and I had a friend that got married last year, and I have another friend who's getting married in September, and so I think it's kind of constantly spinning around us. I think all the relatives are standing around going, 'When's this going to happen?'" The context encouraging additional weddings, in terms of social networks as well as economic stability and parental support (for wedding costs) appears stronger among the middle-class respondents in our sample.

Women raised the topic of marriage far more frequently than did their male counterparts. This is particularly the case among the middle class, where nearly half of the women in our sample (15 of 31) attempted to forward discussions of marriage. Service-class women, too, often initiated marriage talk; 12 women were credited with being the one to raise the topic of marriage with their partners. Sometimes these talks proceeded smoothly. Jared, a 24-year-old engineer, revealed how his partner Alisha introduced the subject. "She started the conversation," he recalled, "the 'where's the relationship going?' conversation." Then he says, "We pretty much both inched into 'Yes, I want to marry you one of these days.'" Shortly after, they decided that living together was the next step, and after receiving his first professional job, he proposed.

Despite some conversations that progressed seamlessly, navigating relationship progression is an often bumpy process, as our respondents' stories of how their romances progressed made clear. Discussions about marriage seem especially fraught. Most often, men resisted when women

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29. See Taylor, Fry, Velasco, & Dockterman, *supra* note 4; see also Steven P. Martin, *Trends in Marital Dissolution by Women's Education in the United States*, 15 DEMOGRAPHIC RES. 537, 537-60 (2006).



attempted to begin a discussion about marriage. Over two-thirds of the middle-class men whose partners initiated talk of marriage (11 of 15) expressed some recalcitrance in the face of these probes, as did half of the service-class men. Sometimes this took the form of refusing to talk about the subject. Edward, whose girlfriend wanted to talk about marriage after they attended his brother's elaborate wedding, commented, "I don't like doing all that stuff. That's stress. Marriage is not for guys." His service-class counterpart, Terrell, concurred, saying "I think marriage is overrated, and she thinks marriage is everything." Most men, though not expressing such antipathy towards marriage, preferred to avoid the conversation if at all possible. Paul, a 26-year-old political lobbyist, said, "You've got to understand, I try not to talk about this stuff at all." Anthony, whose partner Diana had been dropping hints about getting engaged, remained uninterested in discussing marriage, saying, "I don't know, I'm just comfortable with the way things are right now and I don't see any reason to change them. I mean we share a joint bank account; everything is in both of our names. I don't know, maybe someday." These evasion attempts are noted by their female partners, sometimes wryly but often with an air of frustration. Carrie, whose architect partner was 5 years older than her, commented, "I've been kind of poking him about getting engaged for quite some time now."

Several men indicated that they viewed such attempts to forward discussion of relationship futures as a challenge to their masculine prerogatives. "Call me a jerk," said Jack, a 24-year-old financial planner in describing his response to Audrey's attempts to advance the relationship, "but you know, 'You can walk,' that's what I say. I mean, like, don't force my hand. So, if you really want a decision, the decision is going to be you are walking." The negotiation in relationship progression so evident in many of the middle-class couples indicates that these women are not passively waiting for men to propose. What differentiates the middle-class women who raise the topic from their service-class counterparts, however, is that they are far less likely to accept their partner's admonition to, in the words of numerous service class men, "wait and be patient" and were willing to proceed even if these negotiations might not lead to a desired outcome. Bree, a confident 25-year-old auditor, talked about how she gave her boyfriend several ultimatums about becoming exclusive, and then about getting engaged. Taylor, her fiancé, recalled the second one. "She just simply stated that, 'You know, after this lease is up, if we're not engaged then it's time to live on my own and then we'll still date and that sort of thing but I just feel if you're not ready then I don't know when you're going to be ready.'" Asked if she was prepared to actually follow through with her implied threat, Bree replied, "Yeah, I think so. I mean, I didn't want to think about it, but I was pretty sure that he

would. I was just trying to kick him in the butt a little bit, you know? And I really didn't think it would come down to moving out, but I think I would have followed through with it." Bree appeared to have the convincing power needed to get Taylor to advance the relationship. As he said, "I was all right with it, I mean it was fair enough, honestly and a lot happened between then and now." Similarly, Katherine, a research coordinator, explained that she had to continue pushing the issue. She said, "He wouldn't answer the question [of marriage] seriously for at least two years and then I finally got a little upset and was like, 'Seriously, I want a real discussion about this.' So we had one. He gives a joke answer a lot about serious issues like that that I always bring up and it takes some forcefulness on my part to usually get a straight answer out of him, but when I do it's usually a great one." None of the women in our service-class sample (or their male partners) mentioned giving their partners an ultimatum or even a broad time frame for when they would like to get engaged.

Men's manifest power in determining whether couples ultimately marry is evidenced most concretely in the example of one middle-class couple where the man is opposed to marriage. Derek, a 28-year-old computer programmer, said that his partner of nearly 10 years had initially wanted to get married, noting, "Kathleen was of a different opinion for a while and probably would still be open to getting married. But we've discussed why we're not going to." This was not a one-time conversation, as he indicated. "I mean, it's certainly been an on-going discussion over the course of the relationship up until a couple years ago." Couples where the woman either expressed qualms about raising marriage or has stopped enquiring as to when it might happen (as Kathleen has) are, however, more prevalent in our service-class sample than in the middle-class one. How covert power operates to advantage men and suppress discussion of important issues is underestimated in studies that do not examine how relationships unfold.

The third theme that stands out as cohabitators discuss future plans relates to their notions of appropriate relationship tempos. Among the middle class, this more often takes the form of discussions about how long couples should be involved before becoming engaged or getting married. Discussing their relationship pacing, middle-class Paul, a lobbyist, said, "It's part of the deal, as far as I'm concerned. If this works out, if we can cohabit more or less peacefully for a year and a half, I'll give it a shot." Many other middle-class respondents also expressed the belief that after about a year of cohabiting (on top of a year or so of dating) couples should be ready for the next step. Both service-class and middle-class couples have views regarding the arc of relationships, including how long couples should know each other and live together before taking "the next step." But middle-class women had more

specific time frames regarding the appropriate pace of relationship progression. Andrea, a 25-year-old social worker who had dated Nathan since high school, had lived with him a year. "I think I am the one who initiated it (talking about marriage)," she said, "probably because we've been together almost four years and I just was needing some kind of acknowledgement that this was going somewhere."

Concerns about having the necessary prerequisites in place for marriage, rather than specific time frames, are more often expressed by our service-class respondents, in part because those requirements are increasingly hard for those without a college degree to attain. Natalie, a secretary at a manufacturing firm, had long talked to her partner about marriage, and was confident it was in the cards. "We know it's going to happen, it's just a matter of when we're stable, and everything's working for both of us," she said. Eric, a security guard, expressed similar confidence that he and Dawn, with whom he had already lived for two and one-half years, would wed, asserting, "We know we're going to get married someday, we're just waiting to get our careers going, I guess." Other service-class men concur that such concerns are holding them back. Max was working as a school secretary while getting an associate's degree in education. After nearly a decade on and off with his girlfriend Tameka, he said, "Now we're at the point where it's like, okay, I know that's what I want to do. So, I'm just working on my financial situation and schooling and things like that." But employment instability and career concerns can also prevent relationships from advancing.

Waiting for specific milestones or a certain amount of time to pass within a union before discussing marriage is not the only reason that some women are not bringing up marriage. Although a few service-class women mentioned that they avoided the topic because societal norms make it clear that men do not like to discuss the topic, a somewhat larger number of middle-class women shared this sentiment. Brad, a graduate student, said of his partner Carrie, "Well, not like she doesn't bring it [marriage] up at all. She told me she doesn't bring it up 'cause she doesn't like want to like put pressure on me and stuff." Asked about whether they had discussed the future yet, Carrie, a teacher, stated, "I've always been the type of person that doesn't like to push that. I don't like to talk about it because I don't want to say it like that, but girls who talk about it a lot or try to push it on their boyfriends, I see them as being very pushy." Although middle-class women are more likely to bring up marriage eventually, they may initially be more aware of social norms

stemming from popular sources like “The Rules”<sup>30</sup> that discourage women from initiating such discussions.

#### *D. Proposals and Engagement*

Perhaps nowhere do normative gendered expectations appear more strongly than in expectations for the marriage proposal. Among this sample, men are overwhelmingly expected to be the ones to propose marriage. Even when individuals believe that either partner could propose, they often still prefer the male proposal or indicate that their partners would be dissatisfied with a non-standard approach. Although service-class women are more likely to hold non-conventional views about the possibility of female proposals than their middle-class counterparts, middle-class women are more likely to deviate within the normative proposal script, by hinting—often quite directly—about their desires to be engaged or setting a time frame during which they expect their partners to propose.

Sixteen of the sixty-one couples in this sample were engaged at the time of their interviews. The vast majority of their proposal stories follow a normative script, with the male partners asking for the woman’s hand and the female partners accepting. Few proposals came as total surprises to the women; in only three cases had the men not discussed marriage prior to proposing. More commonly, couples discussed their mutual desires to become engaged, with some discussing proposal details or picking out rings together before the man got down on one knee. Although men were expected to do the asking, their female partners often “helped things along” quite directly. Seven women (six of whom were middle-class) explained that they strongly encouraged their boyfriends to pop the question. Juliana, who had recently finished her master’s degree in kinesiology, explained that she was initially accepting of Evan’s extended timetable for the relationship, but eventually decided she was ready for the next step. “All of our friends started getting married and engaged,” she explained, “and I was kind of getting antsy. I was like ‘I want to get engaged!’” Evan, a salesman, proposed shortly thereafter. Middle-class men, in particular, did not seem overly bothered by these hints when they felt they were ready for that step, and also indicated that a partner’s expression of being ready let them know that their proposal would be received positively. Sean, an artist, recalled about his partner Emily, a chef, “One thing that she had said a long time ago was, ‘No pressure.’ I think the first time she said ‘No pressure’ it was, ‘but if you ever do want to

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30. ELLEN FEIN & SHERRIE SCHNEIDER, *THE RULES (TM): TIME-TESTED SECRETS FOR CAPTURING THE HEART OF MR. RIGHT* (1995).

ask me the answer would be yes.” Knowing they could expect an ecstatic answer to their question made the somewhat daunting proposal easier to manage.

As for the actual proposals, they ranged from the grand—proposing during a surprise trip to a vacation destination—to the mundane (proposing during dinner at home). Regardless of how the proposal took place, most couples enjoyed elaborating on the details. Evan and Julianna, for example, recalled a surprise trip to Las Vegas where Julianna was met by a limousine and her favorite flowers before Evan proposed in the lobby of their hotel. Two couples, though, both in the service-class sample, were less happy to discuss their proposal, in part because the woman had been the one to “pop the question.” Vic, a library intern, explained how Carly, a clerk, had “accidentally” proposed: “We were just sort of discussing it [marriage] in general terms and she didn’t say ‘Will you marry me?’ but it was close. And I looked at her and I was like, ‘Did you just ask me to marry you?’ and she, she said, ‘Uhhh . . . no. Did you want me to?’ and I was like, ‘You can, you know?’ So I said ‘Yes,’ and then she was like, ‘That’s not how I wanted it to be or anything like that!’ So then I asked her right after that but she was like, ‘No, you have to do it for real. *You* have to do it.’” Although the other woman who proposed was happy that she had acted, her fiancé was less so, and refused to wear the ring that she gave him, stating, “I don’t know of guys having engagement rings or anything.” Quite a few service-class women commented that they would propose, but that their partner has said he would not accept them.

Many other couples are not yet engaged, but say a proposal is imminent (3 service-class and 1 middle-class couple), or have seriously discussed marriage (14 service-class and 11 middle-class couples). These respondents, as well as those who have not yet begun to discuss marriage, have strong feelings about how proposals should occur. Few individuals voluntarily say that the woman could propose, or that couples could decide jointly. In fact, the prerogative of male proposals is firmly entrenched among both the men and women in our sample. Of those who are not yet engaged and not opposed to marriage, most couples concur that only men should propose. Hidden power norms frame the act of proposal as a male prerogative; male proposals are therefore viewed as “natural.” Justin explained what he would want, saying, “I go traditional on that and think I should propose.” Asked why, he replied, “I just think that weddings, proposals, engagements, all that, it just goes so far back. It’s in hundreds of movies and just everything we’ve ever learned is that the man asked the woman to marry him.” Karen says she has “threatened” to propose to her partner if he doesn’t hurry up, but she wouldn’t actually do so. “Well, I did tell him, I said ‘If you don’t do it by a certain

time, I'm just going to do it.' But I don't mean that because I don't want to do it, because then I'll feel masculine, and I don't want to feel masculine." Asked to elaborate, Karen replied,

Because society tells you that the guy is supposed to ask the girl to marry him. Even though I've definitely been the initiator in some of our other circumstances that are traditionally, I think, male roles, this is just a big one. And because everyone will ask, "How did it happen?" And I don't want to say, "Well, I did it." I can't, it would kill me.

By adhering to conventional social scripts that assign to men the responsibility of proposing, men are given the power to forward the relationship on their own timetables. As a result, women are afforded the position of, in the words of service-class Jerry who thought that his partner Natalie has long desired his proposal, "waiting for the day I ask."

#### *E. Race and Ethnic Variation in Relationship Progression*

Of course, we would be remiss not to also examine the impact of ethnicity on relationship progression as well. While our sample is quite diverse (it is analogous to the ethnic composition of Columbus, Ohio, at the time we completed our interviews), relatively few couples were racial minorities or were interracial (e.g., he is white and she identifies as white and Asian American or he is black and she is white). Asian-Americans are very underrepresented in our sample, both due to the small proportion of Asians in Ohio (in 2010, Asians accounted for only 1.7% of the state's population, compared with 4.8% nationwide)<sup>31</sup> and Asian-Americans' lesser likelihood of cohabiting.<sup>32</sup> We can, however, examine couples where at least one partner is Black or Hispanic, though we urge extreme caution in extrapolating such findings to the broader population of minority cohabitators.

Nationally representative data show that Black women progress more slowly into cohabiting unions than do White or Hispanic women.<sup>33</sup> Among interracial couples, those consisting of White men partnered with Black women progress more rapidly into sexual involvement and cohabitation than do couples where both partners are White or Black, or where White women

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31. U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, *Profile of General Population and Housing Characteristics: Ohio 2010*, in 2010 CENSUS, <https://factfinder.census.gov/> [<https://perma.cc/G4UG-EQRW>]; U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, *Profile of General Population and Housing Characteristics: United States*, in 2010 CENSUS, <https://factfinder.census.gov/> [<https://perma.cc/G4UG-EQRW>].

32. See Manning et al., *supra* note 2, at 252.

33. See Sassler et al., *supra* note 5, at 521; see also Sharon Sassler et. al., *The Progression of Sexual Relationships*, 78 J. MARRIAGE & FAM. 587, 588 (2016).

are partnered with Black men.<sup>34</sup> Results from our qualitative data suggests one possibility for why relationships involving Black respondents may progress more slowly, at least into dating and cohabitation. Among the few couples in our sample where both partners were Black (n = 6) or where the female partner identifies as Black or multiracial (in this case, Black and White, n = 3), female initiation of dating is more common; women initiated a third of the time, compared with about a fifth in the total sample. When at least one partner identifies as Hispanic (n = 4 couples in which one partner is White and one is Hispanic and n = 2 Hispanic couples), male partners more often initiated dating.

We find a similar pattern when it comes to initiating discussions of moving in together. Among couples where at least one partner identifies as Black, all 9 describe the experience of moving in together as having been initiated by the woman; women were attributed with initiating the move-in for only 42% of the overall sample, in contrast. The reverse pattern is found among couples where one partner is Hispanic, paralleling the findings regarding dating initiation. While men in our sample initiated discussions of moving in together about a third of the time (32%), male initiation was considerably higher for the six couples where at least one partner was Hispanic (66%). In conjunction with the quantitative data, our results suggest that female initiation may result in slower progression into relationships and shared living; additional research is required to determine whether this influences relationship quality or stability.

When it comes to discussing marriage or actually proposing, however, gender clearly trumps race and ethnicity. We observed no ethnic differences in initiation of marriage talk. Regardless of race or ethnicity, women are more likely than men to bring up the topic of marriage. Despite being more in favor of marriage than were men, however, women were far less inclined to mention an interest in proposing. As a sign that proposals are strongly gendered, there are no observable differences in preferences for who pops the question by ethnic group. As with White women, minority women are also waiting to be asked, and the men in these couples are quite aware of the power they hold over this desired objective.

#### IV. DISCUSSION

Our study clarifies why cohabitation is more likely to result in marriage among the college educated. We explored whether and how cohabiting

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34. See Sharon Sassler & Kara Joyner, *Social Exchange and the Progression of Sexual Relationships in Emerging Adulthood*, 90 *SOCIAL FORCES* 223, 235 (2011).

couples attempted to challenge normative expectations that male partners assume primary responsibility for relationship progression. Our findings suggest that cohabitation serves as an arena where normative gender roles are challenged but that contesting gender roles is often a protracted process. Conventional expectations regarding male progression of intimate unions are most frequently overturned when it comes to initiating discussions of living together and raising the subject of marriage. Cohabiting women, then, seem to take advantage of the less-institutionalized nature of cohabitation to take a firmer hand in the advancement of their intimate unions, but men often resist such attempts.

We find important social class distinctions in how relationships advance. College-educated women appear to assume a less conventional role in relationship progression than do their service-class counterparts. Although they are no more likely to initiate relationships or raise the topic of moving in together, they assume a more direct role in expressing interest. Their greater assertiveness is perhaps most visible when it comes to advancing talk of marriage. Middle-class women, in particular, more often bring up marriage than their service-class counterparts and persist in their conversations even if their male partners are less than amenable. It is not, then, that men have lost their power in this arena, but rather that college-educated women are asserting more of their own. Perhaps most importantly, middle-class men are either more receptive to the suggestions of their partners, better established in terms of careers and finances, or more acquiescent to the idea of marriage. Middle-class couples therefore more often transition to engagement, and the engaged middle-class couples have far more of the trappings that demonstrate a wedding will ensue (set a wedding date, purchased a wedding dress, rented a hall, pruned a guest list) than their service-class counterparts. This occurs despite their having been together, on average, for shorter lengths of time.

Men's responses to women's attempts to "undo gender" highlight the importance of couple-level analysis for studies of relationship power. Even as some men tacitly welcomed female partner's assertiveness, male partners were often not accepting of women's attempts to take a stronger hand in the progression of intimate relationships. Men's recalcitrance to cede power when it comes to advancing relationships is more visible when it comes to discussing marriage. The male prerogative of proposing, though not always seen in a positive light, endows men with considerable outcome power. Quite a few of the men in our sample reveled in their ability to control the pace of relationship progression, demanding that their partners drop topics related to advancing their unions or ignoring these trial balloons. But this increasingly appears to be a vestige of the service class. Middle-class women in our sample often challenged the norm that they were to simply wait until their



male partner was ready. Their greater willingness to push the pace of the relationship can be seen as a particular middle-class form of agency.

Although service-class women also attempted to forward their relationships, they did not also mention a willingness to accept the alternative should their forced choice not go the way they wanted it to. But both middle-class women and men commented on the belief that the women would not wait around forever, and that a decision would have to be made to, in the words of one respondent, go either “up or out.” Whether this difference results from middle-class women’s better prospects, in both the partner and employment market, requires additional exploration. Nonetheless, it does suggest yet another front where the family behaviors among more and less educated women are deviating.<sup>35</sup>

The middle-class couples in our study more often demonstrated a clear relationship script and the “dance” of courtship through protracted negotiations about relationship advancement. College-educated cohabitators, for example, more frequently began their unions with a “traditional” first date such as dinner and a movie—which enabled the man to highlight his provider abilities—rather than “hanging out” with a large group of friends. Middle-class couples, too, demonstrated the most pursuit and resistance in their relationships. These couples, for example, often mentioned that the female partners initially turned down their male partners’ attempts at dating or slowed the pace of the relationship in its early stages, but their male partners persisted in their pursuit of romance. In the next stages of their unions (moving in together and discussing marriage) the female partners often did the pursuing while the men resisted. In contrast, among the service class less dialogue took place; once a male partner shut down a conversation about advancing the relationship, the “negotiation” typically came to an end. Middle-class women in our sample were less willing to, in the words of many of our service-class men, “wait and be patient.” Furthermore, both the men and women in middle-class couples frequently mention time frames they hold for when relationships should progress to the next step. That is, their scripts for how and when a relationship should progress were often much clearer than those of the service-class.

One reason the script for advancing their relationships may have been less clear for the service-class couples is that many lived with other household members. Nearly half (14 of 30) of the service-class couples also shared a residence with another adult (a parent, friend, or sibling). Although economic concerns often led to their choices to cohabit,<sup>36</sup> doing so while living with

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35. See Sara McLanahan, *Diverging Destinies: How Children Are Faring Under the Second Demographic Transition*, 41 *DEMOGRAPHY* 607, 617–19 (2004).

36. See Sassler & Miller, *supra* note 8, at 493.

additional roommates may have additionally impacted their relationship trajectories. Couples who lived together with additional roommates may have felt more like roommates themselves than a couple. Others mentioned that progressing to marriage required them to be able to live as a couple on their own, without the additional roommates they needed to make ends meet. Until that time, they did not deem themselves marriage ready.

Of course, our findings are not representative of all cohabitators. We interviewed our sample when occupational and educational opportunities in Columbus, Ohio, were plentiful for high school graduates. What we capture from our data, however, picks up what would be missed in quantitative surveys. We demonstrate both the “dance” of romantic relationship progression as the ways in which power is expressed as unions advance. Our findings suggest that both sex and social class play a role in whether or how relationships advance.

Cohabitation is an arena where normative gender roles are often contested, if not necessarily changed. Because cohabitation is “incompletely institutionalized,”<sup>37</sup> women can (and do) assume a more assertive role with regards to suggesting couples move in together and discuss marriage. This occurs more among the middle class, where women’s educational status and economic contributions give them more bargaining rights within the family. Nonetheless, acceding long-accepted power is a difficult task and change can be a protracted and messy process. Our findings in no way imply “the end of men,” but rather suggest that although egalitarianism is a long way away from characterizing the state of most contemporary relationships, an important subset of women increasingly feel empowered enough to act on their own romantic desires.

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37. See Cherlin, *supra* note 10, 849–50.