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**Education and Cohabitation in Britain since the  
1970s: An evolving relationship**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Cohabitation is sometimes thought of as being inversely associated with education, but in Britain a more complex picture emerges. Educational group differences in cohabitation vary by age, by time period, by cohort, and by indicator used. Well educated women pioneered cohabitation in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s. Over time, however, the less well educated caught up and have now overtaken the best educated at younger ages. But the principal difference by education currently is largely in timing—that is, the less well educated start cohabiting earlier than the best educated. In Britain, educational differentials in cohabitation appear to be reinstating long standing social patterns in the level and timing of marriage. Taking partnerships as a whole, social differentials have been fairly stable. Following a period of innovation and diffusion, there is much continuity with the past.

## **KEYWORDS**

Education; cohabitation; marriage; partnership; Britain; UK; time trends; educational differentials; educational gradient; family change; union formation.

## **EDITORIAL NOTE**

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**EDUCATION AND COHABITATION IN BRITAIN SINCE THE 1970S:  
AN EVOLVING RELATIONSHIP**

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## **1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND**

The high and rising prevalence of cohabitation in many developed societies has put the phenomenon at the forefront of discussion and debate on family change. In its contemporary form, cohabitation dates primarily from the 1960s and 1970s, and has attracted much attention as a demographic and social innovation.<sup>1</sup> Demographic interest hinges on cohabitation as an informal co-residential union that is less well defined and less completely documented than marriage, its traditional counterpart. In its demographic consequences it is, however, similar to marriage in giving rise to a new household in most instances, and in exposing a couple to the risk of childbearing. The principal sociological focus is on the role of cohabitation in the modern family, including how far it resembles traditional marriage or pre-marital statuses such as dating and formal engagement (Smock 2000; Heuveline and Timberlake 2004). A major policy issue regarding cohabitation is the extent of legal provision that is or should be made for cohabiters and their children (Barlow 2004; Probert 2004; Smock and Manning 2004; Perelli-Harris and Gassen 2012). Further key issues of concern to policy-makers include the impact of cohabitation on marriage and marital stability and the suitability of cohabiting unions for the rearing of children (Bumpass and Lu 2000; Liefbroer and Dourleijn 2006; Goodman and Greaves 2010; Kulu and Boyle 2010; Crawford et al. 2012).

Family change is a politically contentious subject in Britain as in the United States, dividing opinion both between and within political parties and among the public at large (Durham 2001; Skolnick 2004; Cook 2010; Hayton 2010). Lewis (2001) notes that some conservative commentary sees cohabitation as driven by the growth of selfish individualism and a corresponding retreat from traditional family values. Correspondingly, sharp divisions occur among policy makers, commentators and the public at large on the merits and acceptability of cohabitation as a living arrangement by comparison with marriage, and on the justification for government policy promoting marriage (Barlow et al. 2008; Duncan and Phillips 2008; Taylor et al. 2011; Haskins et al. 2012).

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<sup>1</sup> Common law marriage is a precursor phenomenon but appears from historical censuses not to have been widespread in the United States in the 19th century (Casper and Cohen 2000; Fitch et al. 2005). British historical evidence is patchy and subject to debate (Thane 2010; Probert and Callan 2011; Probert 2012).

In this scientific and policy context, the social patterning of cohabitation is of particular interest. The present paper examines the association between education and cohabitation in Britain since the 1970s. Does cohabitation behaviour differ among educational groups? Is cohabitation equally common in all sections of society, or are some groups differentially more likely to adopt unmarried cohabitation as a living arrangement? Beyond its relevance to contemporary policy debates, evidence on how cohabitation varies among social groups is essential for an understanding of its demographic origins and contemporary social significance. Educational differentials are of particular interest since education encapsulates several dimensions of advantage, being closely linked with labour market prospects, earning potential, social status, and cultural outlook.

## **2. EXISTING EVIDENCE**

Previous findings on the relationship between cohabitation and education are not consistent between sources (Carmichael 1995; Kravdal 1999). Several studies have reported an inverse association between cohabitation and education (Bumpass and Sweet 1989; Rindfuss and Vandenheuvél 1990; Thornton et al. 1995; Bumpass and Lu 2000; Smock and Manning 2004; Kennedy and Bumpass 2008; Koytcheva and Philipov 2008; Cherlin 2010).<sup>2</sup> By contrast, other sources, both American and European, find a higher frequency of cohabitation among the better educated (Roussel and Bourguignon 1978; Glick and Spanier 1980; Spanier 1983; Bachrach 1987; de Jong Gierveld and Liefbroer 1995; Kiernan and Lelièvre 1995; Kiernan 2004). In addition, numerous multivariate analyses report a net association between education and cohabitation that is either positive or not significant. Such findings relate both to the US (Lillard et al. 1995; Clarkberg 1999; Sassler and Goldscheider 2004) and to other developed societies (Hoem 1986; Lesthaeghe and Moors 1994; Santow and Bracher 1994; Leridon and Toulemon 1995; Manting 1996; Bracher and Santow 1998; Berrington and Diamond 2000; Billari et al. 2002; Nazio and Blossfeld 2003; Francesconi and Golsch 2005; Kalmijn and Luijkx 2005; Mills 2005; Hango and Le Bourdais 2007; Bradatan and Kulcsar 2008; Gabrielli and Hoem 2010; Gerber and Berman 2010; Kalmijn 2011). The covariates in these multivariate analyses differ from one study to the next; some include time-varying educational enrolment along

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<sup>2</sup> Clayton and Voss (1977), suggest that cohabitation was more frequent among the less well educated as far back as the 1970s in the US, but in this early study education and race appear to be confounded.

with a measure of educational level. Several studies have found that since the 1960s or 1970s, cohabitation was initially more common among the better educated, or young people of higher status backgrounds, but that over time educational/social groups either converged or crossed over (Villeneuve-Gokalp 1991; Manting 1996; Goldscheider and Goldscheider 1999, p. 158-9; Ermisch and Francesconi 2000; Prioux 2009). Finally, some authors conclude that there is either no systematic relationship or a weak one between education and cohabitation (Smock 2000; Kiernan 2004).

Perhaps because of a lack of standardised and comprehensive statistics on cohabitation, previous studies have employed a variety of approaches. It is therefore not altogether surprising that accounts of the link between education and cohabitation differ. Investigations vary in several respects: in the measures used, in methods adopted, in the age groups examined, and in temporal coverage. A wide variety of indicators have been used, including: current cohabitation; ever having cohabited; proportion of first or of current unions that are a cohabitation; proportion of those marrying who cohabit beforehand; coefficient on education, net of a range of covariates, sometimes including enrolment, in models with various specifications of cohabitation as dependent variable.<sup>3</sup> Methods range from descriptive tables or graphs through to regression analysis of various kinds. Some studies examine only young women, and others a single age group, either narrowly or broadly defined.<sup>4</sup> Finally, investigations vary in time reference, some being based on a single cross-section, some relating to a single cohort, and others analysing a range of either cohorts or period cross-sections. All of these issues affect, in distinct ways, the direction and size of the measured association between education and cohabitation. The variation between studies in the treatment of age is, we will see, of crucial importance.

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<sup>3</sup> Specifications include the transition to first cohabitation, with or without marriage as a competing risk, or the probability that a first union is a cohabitation.

<sup>4</sup> Some investigations focus only on younger ages—up to the early or mid- twenties (e.g. Bumpass et al. 1991; Thornton et al. 1995; Schoen et al. 2009) or to 31 (e.g. Clarkberg 1999; Xie et al. 2003)—some focus on a single age group (e.g. Kiernan 2004; and Esteve et al. 2012 examine those aged 25-29 only) and others report differentials for a single broad age range such as 19-44 (e.g. Bumpass and Lu 2000; Kennedy and Bumpass 2008; Smock et al. 2008; Manning 2010).

### **3. OBJECTIVES**

The disparities between studies regarding the link between cohabitation and education are the primary motivation for the present paper. In an attempt to identify the underlying reasons for the inconsistent findings on the association, we take a systematic approach. We look at three of the indicators routinely employed in the literature, and examine data covering several decades of British experience. We address in this paper only the straightforward, gross relationship between education and cohabitation, rather than the net association adjusting for other factors. It is this that is of primary interest in a policy context and that most often features in social commentary. We draw on our results also to highlight some methodological issues that have received little attention thus far.

The questions we address are, then, as follows:

1. How are education and cohabitation related?
2. Does the relationship vary according to how cohabitation is measured?
3. Does the relationship vary by age?
4. Does the relationship change over time, and if so how?

### **4. DATA AND METHODS**

The data we use are from a combined file of annual rounds of the British General Household Survey (GHS) for the years 2000-2007 (Beaujouan and Ní Bhrolcháin 2011). The information collected on cohabitation histories was incomplete before the 2000/01 GHS round, and so our study is confined to GHS rounds from 2000/1 onwards, when near-complete histories of both marriage and cohabitation were collected.<sup>5</sup> The sample at each annual round is of women aged 16-59, resident in private households in Great Britain. The partnership histories have been validated both internally and against external sources (Berrington et al. 2011). The marriage histories correspond well with vital registration statistics. Cohabitation histories too were found to be of good quality, giving retrospective estimates just slightly above those implied by cross-sectional GHS figures. Our estimates of the prevalence of cohabitation are consistent with indirect estimates based on vital registration sources,

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<sup>5</sup>From 2000/1, the GHS collected the dates of the start and end of up to seven marriages, the start date of any premarital cohabitation spell preceding each one, the start and end date of up to three cohabitation spells that had not ended in marriage, and the start date of any partnership, whether marriage or cohabitation, current at interview.



and somewhat below those given by the British Household Panel Survey. All analyses use a new set of weights constructed specifically for analysing the Family Information section of the GHS from 1979-2007 (Beaujouan et al. 2011).

We classify educational level using the age at which respondents first completed continuous education. The indicator has the advantage that it measures attainment while remaining fixed through the life course. People who initially leave and subsequently return to education continue to be classified by the age at which they originally left continuous education, thus removing a potential source of endogeneity (Kravdal 2004; Hoem and Kreyenfeld 2006). This is of particular importance in relation to cohabitation at younger ages. Age at completing continuous education is, at the same time, closely linked with educational level, and so is an excellent indicator of the educational attainment of the very large majority of the sample throughout their lifetime. The age at completing continuous education reported in GHS rounds from 2000 on corresponds well with national figures on full-time education or training (Ní Bhrolcháin and Beaujouan 2012); for economy we refer throughout to the age at completing education.<sup>6</sup>

We use three measures of cohabitation that are widely employed in the literature: current cohabitation, ever cohabitation, and the proportion cohabiting among those currently in a union. In each case, data are presented specific by age. We use several indicators both because results differ according to the measure used, and because choice of indicator accounts for some of the disparity between existing studies.

Methods used in this paper are primarily descriptive and graphical. To simplify a complex set of relationships, we focus mainly on the lowest and highest education groups—women who left continuous education at ages under 18, and those completing their continuous education at age 21+. Of those completing their education in 1980-84 65% left at ages 13-17 and 14% at 21+. The figures in 2000-04 are 37% and 38%, respectively. Analysis is confined to women whose partnership and fertility histories were valid and who reported a valid age at leaving education. Of an

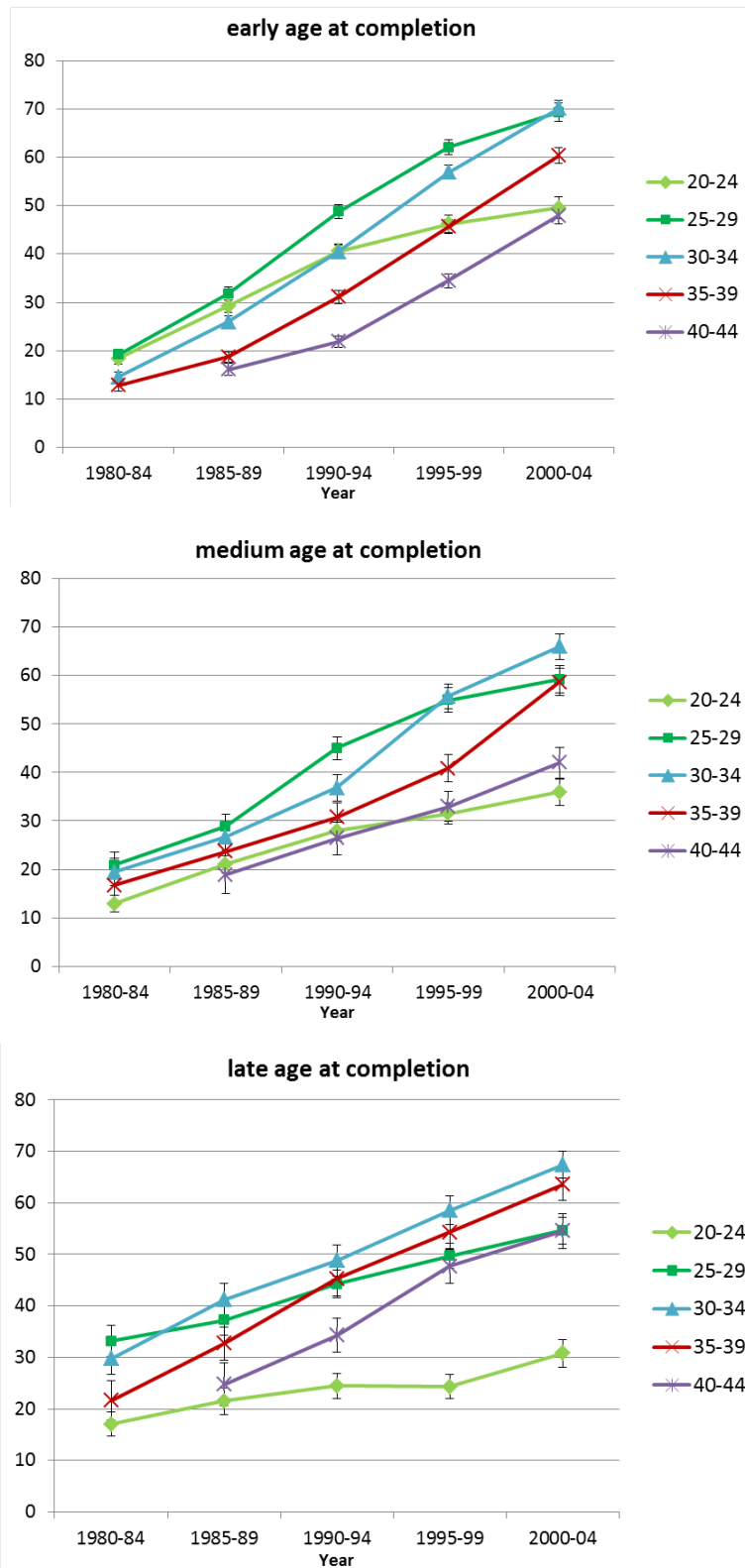
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<sup>6</sup> The GHS questions asked on education are not detailed enough to establish how people responded who took a gap year between leaving secondary education and starting college or university. However, the data suggest that those with such a history are more likely to have reported the age at which they left third level education rather than secondary school. This is because the estimates of age-specific educational participation are somewhat above official estimates of full-time education throughout the period examined (see Ní Bhrolcháin and Beaujouan 2012).

initial sample of 58,155 women aged under 60, 8.2% were proxy respondents or refused to answer the Family Information section and were therefore omitted as no demographic history data is available for them; a further 3.7% were omitted due to irrecoverable errors in the partnership or fertility histories, and 1.6% due to missing information on the age at completing education. The term “partnership” is used throughout to refer to cohabitation and marriage together, that is to formal or informal co-residential unions.

## **5. FINDINGS**

Time trends are shown in Figure 1, which plots the proportions who had ever cohabited across five calendar periods, 1980-84 to 2000-04, by age and educational level. The cumulative incidence of cohabitation rose throughout this period at all levels of education . In each age group, the best educated had had more experience of cohabitation at the start of the period than the least well educated. The rate of increase was, however, more rapid in the low education group across the two decades to 2000-04 and decidedly slower among the best educated in their early twenties.



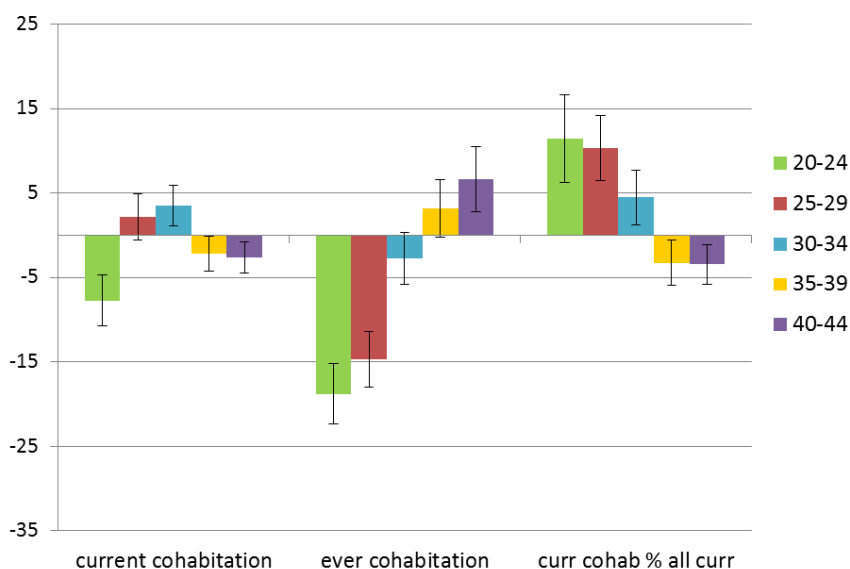
**Figure 1** Per cent of women ever having cohabited by education, age and period, with 95% confidence intervals. GB, 1980-84 to 2000-04.

**Sample:** women answering the Family Information section of the GHS 2000-07, who had a valid partnership and fertility history.

**Source:** CPC GHS time series data file.

## 5.1. DIFFERENTIALS IN COHABITATION

Studies of the education-cohabitation link are often based on cross-sectional data, using a variety of indicators (Chandra et al. 2005; Kennedy and Bumpass 2008; Esteve et al. 2012). We therefore begin with some period data.



**Figure 2** Educational differentials in cohabitation by age, using three measures: current cohabitation, ever cohabited, and cohabitation as a percentage of current unions. GB: 2000-04.

**Note:** plotted here are the differences between late leavers and early leavers; positive figures thus reflect a higher frequency among late leavers and negative figures a higher frequency among early leavers; 95% confidence intervals are shown.

**Source:** CPC GHS time series data file.

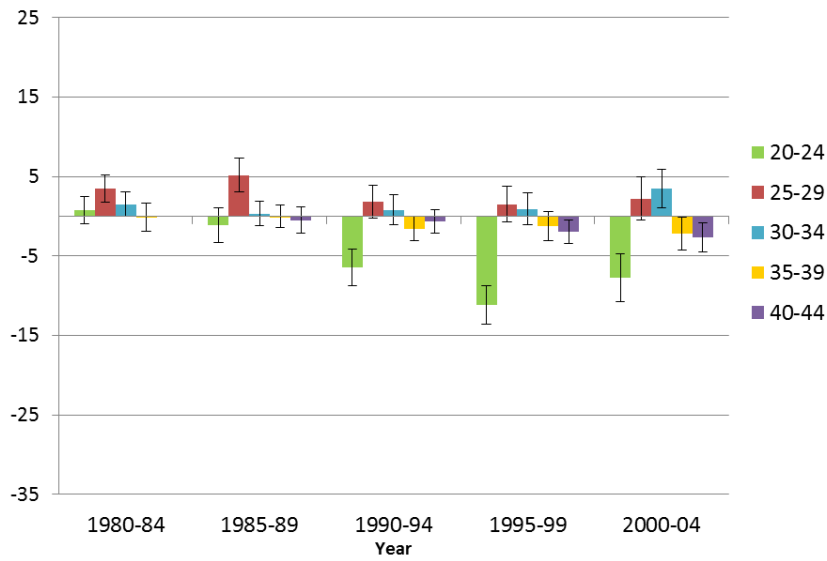
Figure 2 shows educational differentials (late leavers-early leavers) by age in 2000-04, assessed by three indicators: the proportion cohabiting at survey, ever having cohabited, and the proportion cohabiting among those in a union at survey. Among women in their early twenties, the difference between the best and least educated in the proportions currently cohabiting (first set of bars) reaches 7.7 ( $\pm 3.0$ ) percentage points in favour of the early leavers, but at ages 25+ the gap is much smaller.<sup>7</sup> Differentials in cumulative experience of cohabitation (middle plot) are decidedly larger, and again differ by age. Among women in their twenties, more of the early leavers had ever cohabited—a sizeable difference of 18.8% ( $\pm 3.6$ ) in the 20-24 age group and of 14.7% ( $\pm 3.2$ ) among 25-29 year olds. At ages 40-44, by contrast, it is the

<sup>7</sup> In both text and diagrams, 95% confidence intervals are shown.

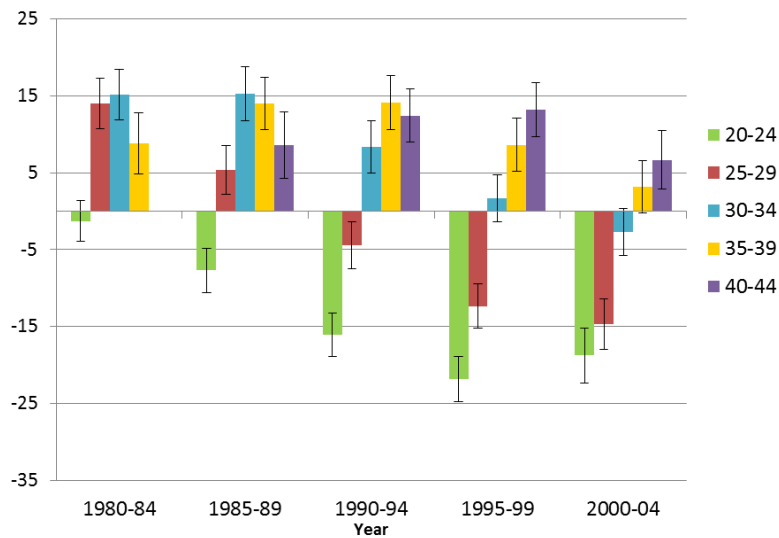
best educated, late leavers who have a higher cumulative incidence of cohabitation, by a margin of 6.6% ( $\pm 3.8$ ). Finally, our third measure, the proportion cohabiting among those currently in a union, presents a different picture again. In contrast with the two other indicators, it is the best educated group that has the higher conditional frequency of cohabitation at younger ages. The gap among women in their twenties is 10-11 percentage points, and narrows at ages 30-34. That is, among women living with a spouse or partner at ages 20-34, the late leavers are more likely to be cohabiting than are the early school leavers, in 2000-2004.

We see, then, that both the size and direction of educational differentials vary with the indicator used, and that, for each measure, these differ also by age. On some indicators and in some age groups, an inverse relationship is found in these British data, but on other measures or in other age groups, the association is positive. The link between the two is not straightforward when viewed cross-sectionally. We caution, however, against coming to even a partial conclusion about the relationship between education and cohabitation on the basis of cross-sectional figures for a single period. We will see presently that the patterns of Figure 2 are the product of an underlying reality that requires a more nuanced assessment of the link between education and cohabitation. We will show also that apparently complex patterns are clarified and simplified by being viewed in a historical context.

A first look at change over time is given in Figure 3 which plots group differences in the proportions currently cohabiting by age in each period from 1980-84 to 2000-04. We see that the age pattern of educational differentials in current cohabitation has changed somewhat over time, with the greatest change occurring in the youngest age-group. While in 1980-84 there was no difference between education groups at ages 20-24, by 2000-04 the prevalence of cohabitation was 7.7% ( $\pm 3.0\%$ ) higher among the less well educated than the best educated of this age. By contrast, however, in 2000-04, a small differential of 3.5% ( $\pm 2.4\%$ ) remained in favour of the late leaving group at ages 30-34—in the 1980s this had been true, with a gap of 3% - 5%, at ages 25-29. Except at age 20-24, these differences are small. It could be argued that it is this cross-sectional picture that matters from a practical and policy perspective, since it reflects how groups differences are at any point in time.



**Figure 3** Educational differentials in current cohabitation by period and age. GB, 1980-84 to 2000-04.  
**Note:** Differential plotted = late leavers – early leavers; 95% confidence intervals are shown  
**Source:** CPC GHS time series data file.



**Figure 4** Educational differentials in cumulative incidence of cohabitation by period and age. GB, 1980-84 to 2000-04.  
**Note:** Differential plotted = late leavers – early leavers ; 95% confidence intervals are shown  
**Source:** CPC GHS time series data file.

The variation by age and through time evident in Figure 3 are a good deal more pronounced in Figure 4, showing educational differentials in the proportion ever having cohabited. Differentials in cumulative incidence are more substantial than in current cohabitation, not only in 2000-04, as we saw earlier, but throughout the period.

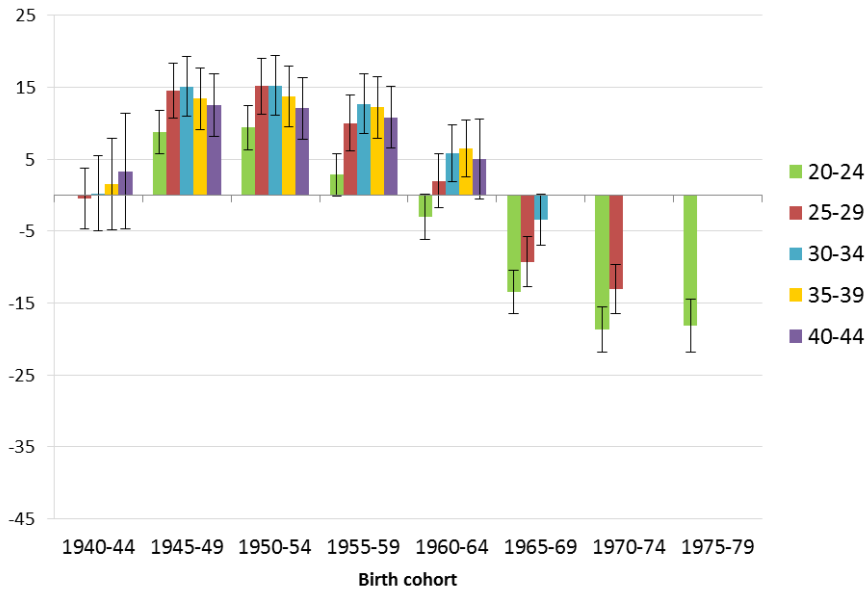
Two conspicuous features of Figure 4 are noteworthy. First is the sizeable gap in favour of the best educated women at ages 25+ in the 1980s.<sup>8</sup> In 1980-84, between 8.8% ( $\pm 4.0\%$ ) and 15.2% ( $\pm 3.3\%$ ) more of the best than of the least well educated women had experience of cohabitation at ages 25+. In 2000-04, a difference in favour of late leavers is found only in the 40-44 age group. The second prominent aspect of Figure 4 is that, over time, the gradient becomes increasingly negative at ages under 30. In 1985-89, 7.7% ( $\pm 2.9\%$ ) more early leavers than late leavers aged 20-24 had experience of cohabitation; by 2000-04, this had extended to 18.8% ( $\pm 3.6\%$ ). At ages 25-29, a differential in favour of the early leavers appears and, as at 20-24, appears to widen over time (though confidence intervals overlap in some cases). In sum, we again see sizeable age differences in education-cohabitation differentials and a substantial change in the age patterns through time.

The shifts over time in the age pattern of differentials in Figure 4 are such as to suggest that a cohort perspective may clarify the underlying dynamic. Cohort differentials by age are therefore shown in Figure 5. They reveal two key features of historical change in cohabitation, one across and the other within cohorts. Across cohorts, the differential in cumulative experience of cohabitation shifts dramatically; initially, among women born in the mid 1940s to the mid 1960s, cumulative incidence is higher among the best educated, but the differential then changes direction and favours the least well educated in the cohorts of 1965-69 and after. Within cohorts, we see another transformation. In earlier generations, the gap in favour of the best educated remains relatively fixed with rising age. By contrast, in the more recent cohorts, the education differential narrows with rising age, though confidence intervals overlap.

A relatively straightforward historical transformation in the link between education and cohabitation is suggested by Figure 5. On this evidence, educated women led the trend to non-marital cohabitation in Britain. In a first phase, the best

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<sup>8</sup>It may seem that the positive educational differential is anomalous, given the general supposition that in the past, common law marriage was essentially a working class phenomenon. However, estimates of the prevalence of common law marriage in the 1960s and before put it at between 0.5% and about 2.2% of couple households in the US (Fitch et al. 2005). British sources are less robust but also suggest rarity (see note 1). Because they were infrequent, it seems likely that such unions would have been of minor importance relative to the surge in cohabitation that took place from the 1970s onwards.



**Figure 5** Educational differentials in cumulative incidence of cohabitation by cohort and age. GB, cohorts 1940-44 to 1975-79.  
**Note:** Differential plotted = late leavers – early leavers; 95% confidence intervals are shown  
**Source:** CPC GHS time series data file.

educated women of earlier cohorts accumulated a greater frequency of cohabitation than the less well educated at young ages, and maintained a relatively fixed lead up to ages 40-44. In the second phase, the early leavers of more recent cohorts progressively caught up with the late leavers, and overtook them at younger ages, increasingly choosing cohabitation instead of marriage as a first partnership. The data suggest that the education gap at younger ages has been widening in recent cohorts, the likely reason being both the earlier age of the less well educated at first partnership as well as longer delays to first partnership among the better educated.

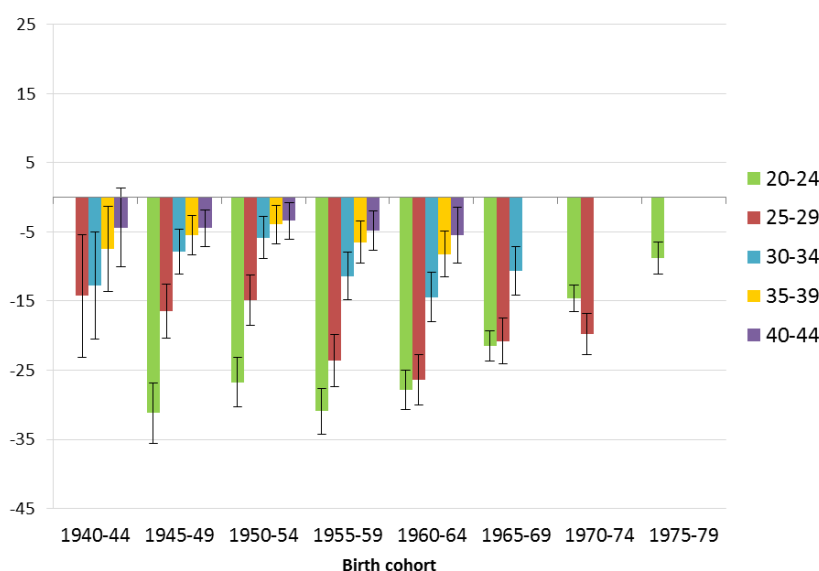
Finally, Figure 5 suggests that in recent cohorts the education gap in cumulative incidence diminishes with rising age, rather than remaining fixed as in the earlier cohorts. This suggests, in turn, that in the latest cohorts educational differentials in cumulative cohabitation will ultimately reflect largely a timing effect: that the less well educated now cohabit in greater proportions at younger ages, but that the better educated catch up by the early 40s as they enter partnerships at older ages. Whether timing is a complete explanation for the most recent differentials can only be established when these cohorts reach their 40s and above. At this juncture, however, the difference by education at ages 40-44 in the cumulative incidence of



cohabitation is not statistically significant in the most recent British cohort for which data are currently available to these ages (Figure 5).

## 5.2. DIFFERENTIALS IN COHABITATION, MARRIAGE AND PARTNERSHIP COMPARED

Educational differentials in ever marriage, by cohort and age, are shown in Figure 6. Throughout, the less well educated have married in greater proportions than the best educated. Among women born up to 1960-64, ever marriage at ages 20-24 among the less well educated exceeded the best educated by at least 25 percentage points, and at ages 25-29, by 15 percentage points and above in all cohorts. Within each cohort, the differential declines with rising age: the gap in favour of the early leavers narrows and the best educated have almost caught up by their early 40s (this is modified somewhat in the most recent cohorts). The feature is a classic reflection of a difference in timing, is of very long standing, and continues to be true of recent cohorts. The narrowing with age of the education differential in cohabitation experience in the most recent cohorts in Figure 5 above strongly resembles the traditional social group differential in ever marriage by age seen in Figure 6.

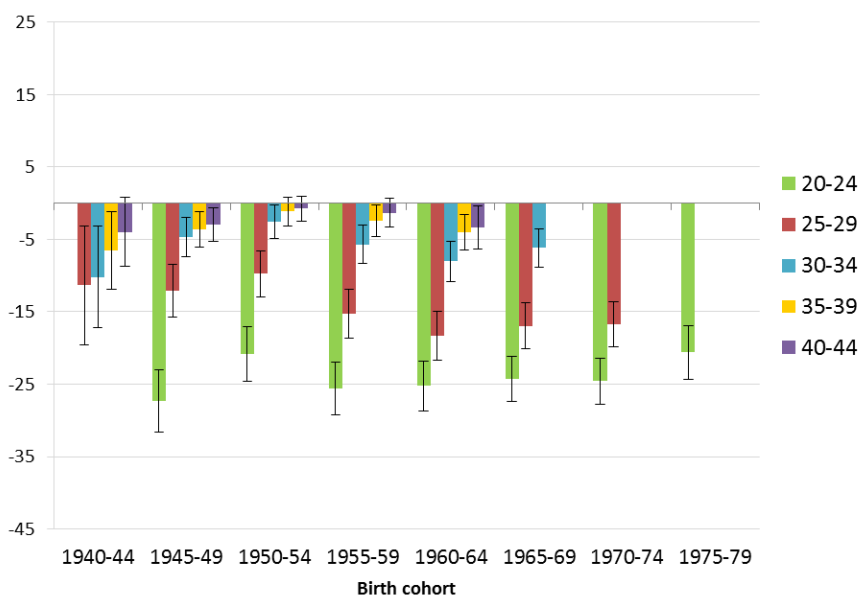


**Figure 6** Educational differentials in ever marriage by cohort and age. GB, cohorts 1940-44 to 1975-79.

**Note:** Differential plotted = late leavers – early leavers ; 95% confidence intervals are shown

**Source:** CPC GHS time series data file.

Marriage and cohabitation are combined in Figure 7 to reveal that educational differentials in partnership as a whole also resemble long-established social patterns of marriage. Again, the phenomenon is largely a differential in timing. However, the outstanding feature of Figure 7 is in the remarkable stability it reveals in social differentials in partnership as a whole, in contrast to the transformation seen in Figure 5 and the reduction in differentials in recent cohorts in Figure 6.



**Figure 7** Educational differentials in cumulative incidence of partnership by cohort and age. GB, cohorts 1940-44 to 1975-79.

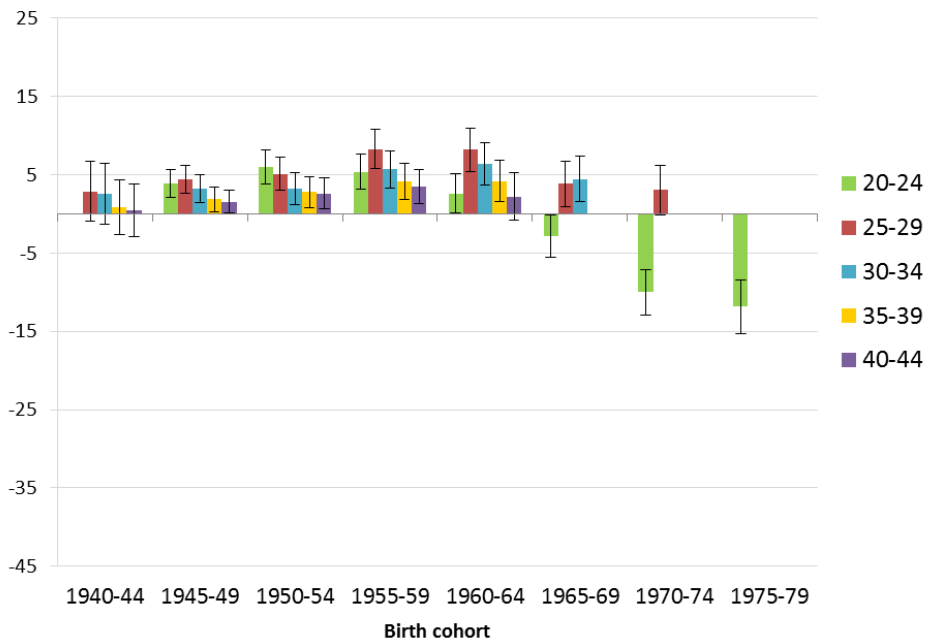
**Note:** Differential plotted = late leavers – early leavers; 95% confidence intervals are shown

**Source:** CPC GHS time series data file.

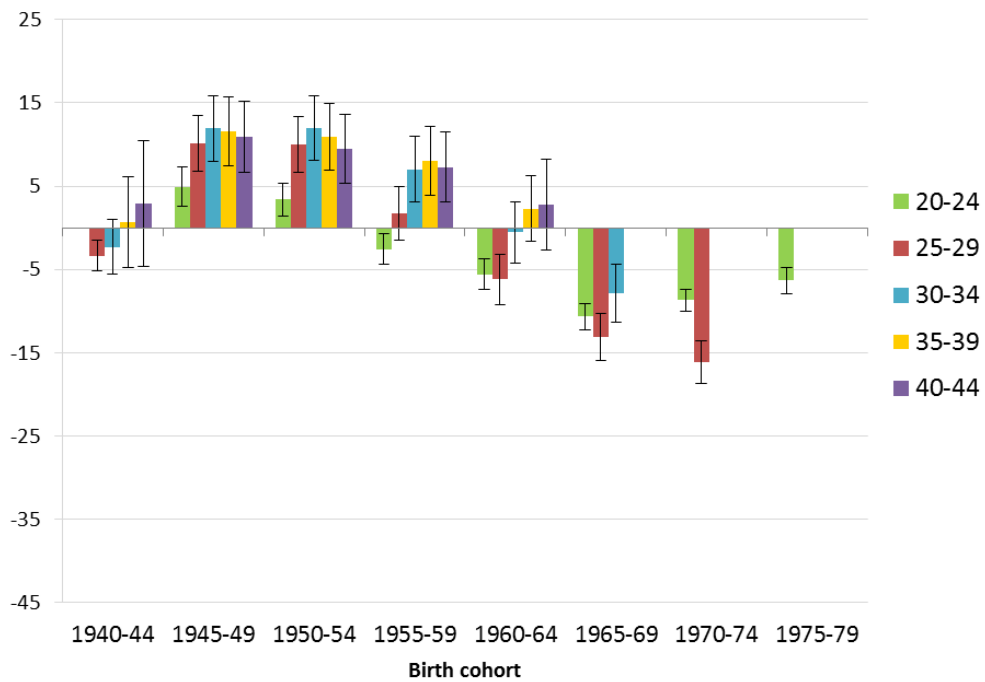
Importantly, cohabitation and marriage are not either/or experiences in the life course. Cohabitors often marry, and most of those marrying in recent generations have previously cohabited (Beaujouan and Ní Bhrolcháin 2011). In the GHS 2005-2009, over four in five women aged 40+ who had ever cohabited had also married, and a similar proportion of the ever married of this age group had also cohabited at some stage.

Do educational differentials appear when we view the two types of union separately and jointly? Answers to this question are given in Figures 8a-c. Among women born before 1970, cohabiting without marrying was more common among the

**(a) Cohabitation only**



**(b) Cohabitation and marriage (including both premarital and other cohabitation spells)**

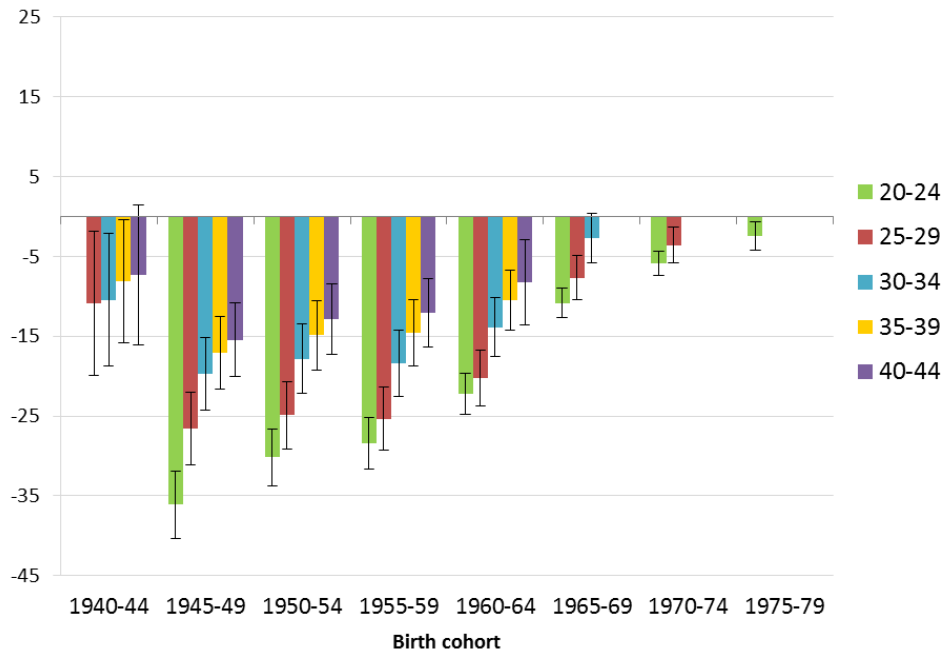


**Figure 8** Educational differentials in cumulative incidence of cohabitation and marriage by cohort and age, with 95% confidence intervals: (a) those who have experience only of cohabitation, (b) those who have both cohabited and married, and (c) those who have married only. GB, cohorts 1940-44 to 1975-79.

**Note:** Differential plotted = late leavers – early leavers; 95% confidence intervals are shown

**Source:** CPC GHS time series data file.

(c) Marriage only



**Figure 8 (continued)** Educational differentials in cumulative incidence of cohabitation and marriage by cohort and age, with 95% confidence intervals: (a) those who have experience only of cohabitation, (b) those who have both cohabited and married, and (c) those who have married only. GB, cohorts 1940-44 to 1975-79.

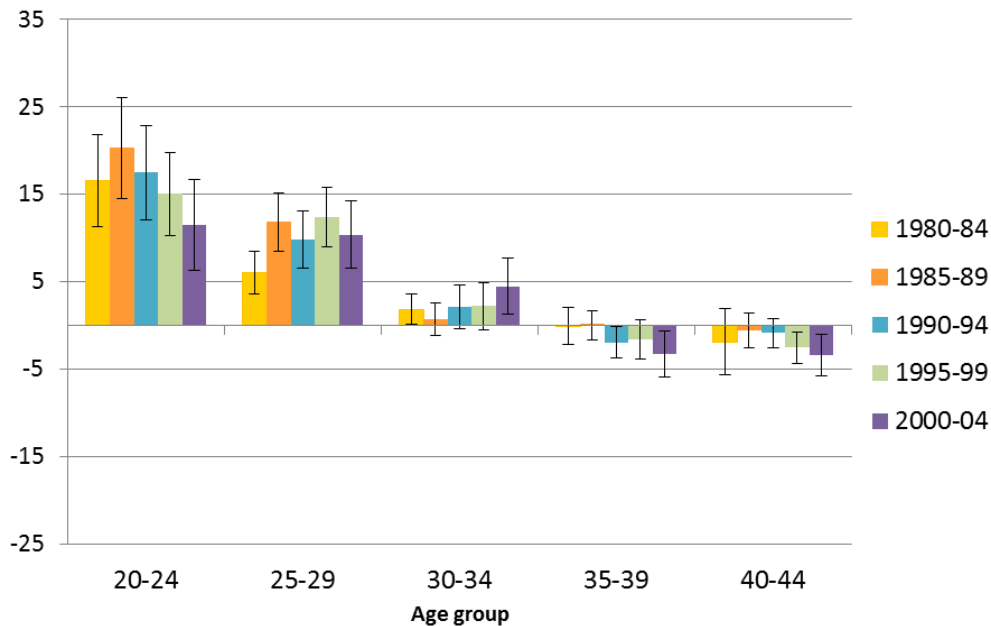
**Note:** Differential plotted = late leavers – early leavers; 95% confidence intervals are shown

**Source:** CPC GHS time series data file.

best educated, though that differential has reversed at ages 20-24 among those born in the 1970s (Figure 8a). The experience of both cohabitating and marrying was also, in earlier cohorts, more frequent among the best educated. But, as in the case of cohabitation per se, the least well educated gradually caught up and in recent cohorts the cumulative frequency of both cohabitation and marriage is higher among the early leavers (Figure 8b). Finally, at all ages and in all cohorts to the present, the least well educated were more likely to have married without cohabiting (Figure 8c). Once again, our findings reveal on the one hand the early adoption of cohabitation by the best educated, whether exclusively or combined with marriage, and on the other, adherence to more traditional patterns by the less well educated (marriage alone or combined with cohabitation).

Finally, we return to the cross sectional proportions cohabiting among those currently in a union. We saw in Figure 2 above that in 2000-04 this conditional probability was higher among the best educated at ages under 35. Figure 9 reveals that

the same has been true of women in their 20s since the early 1980s: among those in a union at these ages, more of the best educated were cohabiting than of the least well educated. At ages 20-24 the difference has been diminishing over time, though it remained sizeable in 2000-04 at 11.5% ( $\pm 5.2\%$ ). Otherwise, there is little change in this phenomenon over time.



**Figure 9** Educational differentials in the proportion cohabiting among those currently in union, by age and period. GB, 1980-84 to 2000-04.

**Note:** Differential plotted = late leavers – early leavers; 95% confidence intervals are shown

**Source:** CPC GHS time series data file.

## 6. SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

We noted above that existing studies present a disparate set of findings on the relationship between education and cohabitation. Several have reported or cited an inverse association between education and cohabitation. In three respects this does not hold in the British case. First, retrospective GHS partnership histories reveal that it was the best rather than the least well educated who pioneered unmarried cohabitation in the 1970s and 1980s in Britain.<sup>9</sup> In the cohorts of 1945-49 to 1955-59 women leaving education at later ages had the highest cumulative incidence of cohabitation in virtually all age groups. Second, starting with the cohorts of the early 1960s the less well educated began to catch up; in the most recent cohorts they have overtaken the best educated in ever cohabitation at young ages. Importantly, however, differentials

by age in the latest cohorts look very much as if they will ultimately represent mainly a timing effect. That is, current trends suggest that the proportions ever cohabiting in each education group will be very similar by age 40-44, but that the less well educated simply start cohabiting earlier than the better educated. Third, among those in a union in their twenties, the best educated are more likely than the less well educated to be in a cohabiting union.

We saw also that the less well educated have been marrying in greater proportions than have the best educated, as in the past.<sup>10</sup> Again this is largely though not wholly a matter of timing. More and earlier marriage among less educated women has characterised western societies for at least a century (Hajnal 1954; Tietze and Lauriat 1955; Grebenik and Rowntree 1963; Isen and Stevenson 2010). The indications are that this traditional differential is now reappearing in relation to cohabitation. While the best educated were early adopters of unmarried cohabitation in Britain, the underlying drivers of social marriage patterns seem to have been reasserting themselves and restoring age-old partnership differentials. In times past, as now, women of low levels of education married earlier than the better educated. Now, as then, the less well educated enter partnerships of all kinds—cohabitation and marriage—earlier than the better educated. This traditional pattern is often forgotten in commentary on social differentials in cohabitation. There is a great deal more continuity with the past than may be apparent when the focus is exclusively on cohabitation, and when data are limited to a single cohort or time period (Santow and Bracher 1994; Bracher and Santow 1998).

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<sup>9</sup>For related evidence from the British Household Panel Survey, see Ermisch and Francesconi (2000).

<sup>10</sup> These figures run counter to the concern expressed in recent years in conservative policy circles that marriage is becoming the preserve of the middle class in Britain (Watt and Wintour 2009; Wintour and Watt 2009; Centre for Social Justice 2012). In the US, although it has been forecast that college educated women would soon exceed the less well educated in proportions ever marrying (Goldstein and Kenney 2001), that reversal of historical patterns has not yet occurred. Fewer white college educated than non-college women currently in their 50s in the US have married, though the gap appears to have closed among white women in their mid-30s. Among Black women, however, the college educated are more likely ultimately to marry (Fry 2010; Isen and Stevenson 2010).



## 6.1 COMPARATIVE EVIDENCE

How far the three key findings of this paper—early adoption of cohabitation by the better educated in Britain, the subsequent reversal in differentials, and the current appearance of mainly a timing difference in cohabitation between education groups—apply in other developed countries needs further investigation. Evidence on reversal is patchy. One Swedish study concludes that modern cohabitation originated both with the working class and with the social elite (Blom 1994). Several European sources suggest that an initial differential in the 1970s in favour of women who were either well educated or from advantaged backgrounds diminished or reversed in later years (Roussel and Bourguignon 1978; Villeneuve-Gokalp 1991; Manting 1996; Ermisch and Francesconi 2000; Prioux 2009). A handful of American studies suggest that cohabitation was more common among the best educated in the US in the 1970s and early 1980s (Glick and Spanier 1980; Bachrach 1987; Goldscheider and Goldscheider 1999: 158-9). But, as more recent US sources (cited above) generally report an inverse association between education and cohabitation, this raises the possibility that a reversal of differentials of the kind documented here for Britain may have occurred in the US also (see also Sassler and Goldscheider 2004). However, American data on cohabitation in the early 1980s and before are of uncertain quality (Casper and Cohen 2000; Fitch et al. 2005; Hayford and Morgan 2008), and so definitive evidence on the subject is not currently available.

Comparable evidence on the role that timing may play in group differences in education is not yet available for other countries. The reasons for this gap in the literature are largely methodological. Descriptive data on education differentials in cohabitation are often presented either for a broad age group such as 19-44, or for a single age group such as 25-29 (see e.g. Kennedy and Bumpass 2008; Esteve et al. 2012). A timing difference between groups cannot be identified with such data. To see a timing effect, differentials in the cumulative incidence of cohabitation at successive ages need to be examined; it will be most readily apparent in cohort format. In analytical studies of e.g. entry into cohabitation, an interaction term between education and age would be required in order to detect a timing effect, but this is rarely if ever employed.



## 6.2. TWO SUBSTANTIVE ISSUES EXPLORED FURTHER

Several questions, both substantive and methodological, are raised by our findings on the changing relationship between education and cohabitation. A first issue is why it was the better educated in Britain who pioneered modern cohabitation. The explanation often offered is that the well-educated were in the vanguard of value change, embracing nonconformist and anti-authoritarian attitudes, and rejecting traditional marriage as outmoded—in short, an explanation rooted in the cultural change associated with second demographic transition theory (Lesthaeghe 1995; Manting 1996; Surkyn and Lesthaeghe 2004).

Another explanation for the early adoption of cohabitation by the better educated is differential exposure: that the better educated had more opportunity to take up unmarried cohabitation, we suggest, for two main reasons. First, as we saw above, well educated women have traditionally married at older ages than the less well educated. As a result, they will have spent more time single in early adulthood. And so, when the winds of change brought a relaxation of norms about partnership in the 1960s and 1970s, proportionately more of the well educated than of the less well educated were single in young adulthood. They were, thus, freer to cohabit than their less well educated counterparts who, having married at young ages, had taken themselves out of the population at risk of cohabitation. Second, the British higher education system is such that more of the well-educated will, as students, have lived away from the parental home at young ages. They will thus have been freer of parental supervision and community norms in young adulthood.<sup>11</sup> Finally, the best educated may have had more access to efficient contraception in the form of the pill, and thus have been more secure in their capacity to avoid pregnancy, if living together unmarried.

We have a little data relevant to the first hypothesis. In the GHS sample, many more of those completing their education at a later age in 1980-2004 had been in at least one co-residential union before the end of their studies—16% of those completing their education at age 21-25, compared with 5% of those finishing at 18-20 and just 1% of those completing at ages under 17. While the direction of these

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<sup>11</sup> A study of the UK (Berrington and Diamond 2000) and two studies of the Netherlands, (Liebfroer 1991 and Manting 1996) found that young people living at home were much less likely to enter cohabitation than were those living elsewhere. This is also true of marriage but the effect appears to be much greater for cohabitation than for marriage in earlier cohorts.

differences is unsurprising, it is noteworthy that a sizeable minority, one in six, of the best educated entered their first union before completing their education.

Of course, the opportunity and cultural/attitudinal hypotheses may be complementary. If the educated young were to respond to changing attitudes and values by embarking on unmarried partnerships, they needed two kinds of freedom: to be unmarried and also to be free of parental expectations by living away from their community of origin, as students do. Much more detailed investigation would be needed to evaluate these hypotheses.

A second substantive question is to explain why it is that among those in a union in their 20s the better educated are more likely to be cohabiting than are the less well educated (for similar findings see e.g. de Jong Gierveld and Liefbroer 1995; Prioux 2009) . We saw in Figure 9 that this feature persists more or less unaltered throughout the two and a half decades examined. One explanation is that it is another reflection of timing. Because the best educated complete their education and training at a later age, they are, at any given time in their twenties, at an earlier stage of the life course than people who left school early (Skirbekk et al. 2004; Ní Bhrolcháin and Beaujouan 2012). They are thus, less advanced in their partnership trajectory than early school leavers, and so less likely to have made the transition from cohabitation to marriage. Evidence of such an underlying process is given in Table 1, showing the current union together with previous union experience of women aged 20-24 in the two education groups. While in 2000-04 the prevalence of cohabitation was higher among the early leavers at age 20-24, as we saw above, twice the proportion of early leavers who had ever cohabited were married at this age than of the late leavers: 20% (8%/39% ) vs 9% (2%/25%). The late leavers at 20-24 appear thus to be at an earlier stage than the early leavers, as we would expect if educational participation places a brake on entering full adult roles. In all, those in a union are more likely to be cohabiting because they have not yet converted their unions into marriage (see also Schoen et al. 2009: Table 5).

Age at completing education	% Cohabiting and..		% Married and..		% Neither married nor cohabiting
	never married	previously married	never cohabited	previously cohabited	
Early leavers	30%	0%	6%	8%	56%
Late leavers	23%	0%	3%	2%	72%

**Table 1** Current union status and previous union history of women aged 20-24, by educational level. GB, 2000-04.

### 6.3. INTERPRETATION AND METHODS

Our investigation also raises some points of method and measurement that we note briefly here. Educational differentials may differ in size and direction according to the measure of cohabitation or partnership used. In particular, educational group differences in current cohabitation are much smaller than in ever cohabitation, and it could be argued that it is this current state measure that is of most relevance for practical and policy purposes. In addition, educational differentials vary by age, in some cases substantially. Analysing a single age group, as is sometimes done, is insufficient and gives only a partial picture. Also, the use of a broad age group such as, e.g. 19-44 (Bumpass and Lu 2000; Kennedy and Bumpass 2008) is biased wherever, as in the present study, differentials vary in direction or size by age. In addition, studies based on young samples, on a single age group, or on a broad age group, may interpret what is either partly or wholly a timing effect as a difference in overall propensity to cohabit. Many multivariate analyses do not test for an interaction between education and age and are subject to the same potential bias.

We saw in Figure 1 that in Britain in the most recent period considered, the large majority of women of all education groups in their early thirties had cohabited at some stage, and the upward trend was continuing (Figure 1). Most women now cohabit at some stage of the life course, the majority for a short spell. And most cohabiters—four in five in the UK—still go on to marry either their cohabiting partner or another partner. Two important points flow from this. First, a binary classification of women as cohabiters and non-cohabiters is inaccurate and potentially misleading. Cohabitation is not currently, for most, a lifetime alternative to marriage—the vast majority both cohabit and marry. Second, it is well wide of the mark to label cohabitation as the “poor man’s marriage”, as is sometimes suggested

(Oppenheimer 2003; Smock and Manning 2004; Kalmijn 2011). If the term marriage is to be used, it would be more accurate to describe cohabitation as a young man's marriage, and a young woman's too, or alternatively the union of people with uncertain economic prospects, regardless of occupational level (Landale and Forste 1991). In the GHS, for example, people who were cohabiting at the time of the survey were on average 10 years younger than those married at survey—a sizeable gap, and an unsurprising one, given the predominant role of cohabitation as an early stage in the life course.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, we question whether it is informative, where there is a sizeable timing effect, to refer to a negative educational gradient in cohabitation in younger age groups without drawing attention to its role as a component of a timing difference. We suggest also that any inverse association between education and cohabitation needs, for completeness, to be put in the context of the negative educational gradient in marriage at younger ages.

## **7. CONCLUDING COMMENTS**

Cohabitation is a dynamic process, both in the individual life course and in historical time. The social acceptability, frequency, place in the life course, and social patterning of cohabitation have been changing through time (Manning 1996; Smock 2000; Raley 2001; Seltzer 2004). A full understanding of its historical, demographic, and policy significance may not be possible until the transformation in the status of cohabitation from innovation to normal part of the life course is complete. That transformation is still under way in Britain; in all probability, the speed of change and stage reached in this historical process varies cross nationally. Analysis of the subject in any particular context should, for validity and accuracy, take into account that such a process may be under way. For example, cross national differences in the link between cohabitation and individual characteristics such as education may be due in part to different countries being at different stages of a historical change similar to that seen in Britain. Links between partnership behaviour and social and economic characteristics are often treated in a static framework. Our findings show that a steady state cannot be assumed. If and when the new partnership system has settled into a

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<sup>12</sup> The 10-year difference relates separately to men and to women. It is based on people aged 16-59 who answered the Family Information section of the GHS 1986-2007. The gap is close to constant over

steady state, micro-level relationships will be more readily interpretable.<sup>13</sup> Following a transitional period of innovation and diffusion, contemporary cohabitation and partnership are reproducing long-standing social patterns of marriage. As England et al (2012) suggest in relation to non-marital births, any explanation of more frequent and earlier partnership among the less well educated needs to account for historical as well as contemporary patterns.

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that period for each sex. In the adult population as a whole, the difference would be larger.

<sup>13</sup> Another example of a change over time in micro-level associations is the relationship between premarital cohabitation and marital stability: see e.g. Liefbroer and Dourleijn (2006), Hewitt and De Vaus (2009), and Reinhold (2010).

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## ANNEX

Age	Early leavers					Late leavers				
	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44
1980-84	18.3 (±1.1)	19.1 (±1.2)	14.6 (±1)	12.8 (±1.1)		17 (±2.4)	33.1 (±3.1)	29.8 (±3.1)	21.6 (±3.8)	
1985-89	29.2 (±1.3)	31.8 (±1.4)	25.9 (±1.3)	18.7 (±1.1)	16.1 (±1.2)	21.5 (±2.6)	37.2 (±2.9)	41.2 (±3.2)	32.7 (±3.2)	24.7 (±4.1)
1990-94	40.6 (±1.4)	48.7 (±1.4)	40.5 (±1.5)	31.1 (±1.4)	21.9 (±1.2)	24.4 (±2.5)	44.3 (±2.7)	48.8 (±3.1)	45.2 (±3.2)	34.3 (±3.2)
1995-99	46.2 (±1.8)	62 (±1.5)	56.9 (±1.5)	45.7 (±1.5)	34.5 (±1.4)	24.3 (±2.3)	49.7 (±2.4)	58.6 (±2.7)	54.3 (±3.1)	47.7 (±3.2)
2000-04	49.6 (±2.3)	69.3 (±1.9)	70.1 (±1.6)	60.3 (±1.6)	47.9 (±1.7)	30.8 (±2.7)	54.6 (±2.6)	67.4 (±2.6)	63.5 (±3)	54.5 (±3.4)

**Table A1** Percent who had ever cohabited, by age, period and age at completing education, GB 1980-84 to 2000-04.

Age	Early leavers					Late leavers				
	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44
1980-84	8.6 (±0.7)	6 (±0.6)	3.7 (±0.5)	3.5 (±0.6)		9.3 (±1.6)	9.5 (±1.6)	5.2 (±1.4)	3.4 (±1.7)	
1985-89	15.4 (±0.9)	10.5 (±0.8)	6.8 (±0.7)	4.5 (±0.5)	3.9 (±0.6)	14.3 (±2)	15.7 (±2)	7.1 (±1.3)	4.5 (±1.3)	3.4 (±1.6)
1990-94	24.3 (±1.1)	17.8 (±1)	11.1 (±0.8)	7.6 (±0.7)	5.1 (±0.6)	17.9 (±2)	19.6 (±1.8)	11.9 (±1.7)	6 (±1.3)	4.5 (±1.3)
1995-99	29.2 (±1.5)	24.7 (±1.2)	15.7 (±1)	10.6 (±0.9)	7.5 (±0.7)	18 (±1.9)	26.3 (±1.9)	16.6 (±1.8)	9.4 (±1.6)	5.6 (±1.3)
2000-04	30.7 (±1.9)	29 (±1.7)	19.1 (±1.2)	13.9 (±1.1)	10.3 (±1)	23 (±2.3)	31.2 (±2.1)	22.6 (±2.1)	11.7 (±1.8)	7.6 (±1.6)

**Table A2** Percent who were currently cohabiting, by age, period and age at completing education, GB 1980-84 to 2000-04.

Age	Early leavers					Late leavers				
	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44
1980-84	16 (±1.3)	7.6 (±0.8)	4.2 (±0.5)	4 (±0.6)		32.6 (±5.1)	13.7 (±2.2)	6.1 (±1.7)	4 (±2)	
1985-89	31.1 (±1.7)	14.1 (±1)	8.2 (±0.8)	5.3 (±0.6)	4.6 (±0.7)	51.4 (±5.5)	25.9 (±3.1)	8.9 (±1.7)	5.3 (±1.5)	4 (±1.8)
1990-94	51 (±1.9)	24.6 (±1.3)	13.8 (±1)	9.1 (±0.9)	6.1 (±0.7)	68.6 (±5.1)	34.4 (±3)	16 (±2.3)	7.2 (±1.6)	5.2 (±1.5)
1995-99	63.3 (±2.4)	36.9 (±1.6)	20.5 (±1.2)	13.4 (±1.1)	9.1 (±0.9)	78.3 (±4.1)	49.2 (±3)	22.7 (±2.4)	11.8 (±2)	6.6 (±1.5)
2000-04	68.8 (±3.1)	45.5 (±2.4)	26.7 (±1.6)	18.2 (±1.4)	13.1 (±1.2)	80.3 (±4.2)	55.8 (±3.1)	31.2 (±2.8)	15 (±2.3)	9.7 (±2)

**Table A3** Percent cohabiting of those currently in union, by age, period and age at completing education, GB 1980-84 to 2000-04.

**Note:** 1.96 \* standard error is given in parentheses.

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