

## Cohabiting parents' experience of relationships and separation

More couples are now cohabiting than ever before and many more children are being raised by non-married parents. Yet little is known about the experiences of these parents both during their relationship and when their relationships break down. This study, based on interviews with 40 separated parents, explores why they chose to cohabit rather than marry, their views on marriage, how they raise their children, and how they managed on separation. The findings raise questions about whether cohabiting parents should be treated by policy makers in the same way as married parents.

- f** Most of the parents interviewed were either indifferent to the idea of marrying, or had been unsure about marrying the person with whom they had lived.
- f** The majority of the mothers interviewed had wanted their partners to become more 'marriage-worthy'. This meant settling down, gaining employment, or becoming more involved with the children.
- f** Most of the parents interviewed believed that it was easier to leave a cohabiting relationship than it was to leave a marriage, even though they had children.
- f** Most parents in the study had an imperfect knowledge of their overall legal position and most tried to avoid solicitors and the courts on separation.
- f** A few of the parents in the study were actually opposed to marriage as an institution and saw cohabitation as the route to a more egalitarian form of relating and parenting.
- f** The concept of cohabitation covers a broad range of relationships of different qualities and intensities, which the research team identified on a continuum:
  - Some had chosen to live together in a state of suspended commitment until they were sure that it was safe or sensible to become permanently committed or married. At one end of the continuum, this is described as 'contingent commitment'.
  - Others felt themselves to be just as committed to each other and their children as married couples. At the other end of the continuum, this is described as 'mutual commitment'.

## Introduction

The researchers carried out a small-scale qualitative study among 40 separated parents. It was designed to look in-depth at the nature of non-marital relationships involving couples with children. They found the couples had different, but identifiable, degrees of commitment. It was also found that men and women chose to cohabit for different reasons.

## Mothers' perspectives on cohabitation

Cohabitation was the best option for the majority of the mothers interviewed, when faced with hard choices between abortion, lone motherhood and marriage. Eleven of the 20 women were pregnant before they cohabited with their partner and it was unlikely that the cohabitation would have started if they had not become pregnant. Few of the women in this situation wanted to 'risk' marrying their partner, often because they did not know him well enough or because they felt he was not ready to 'settle down'. They saw cohabitation as a way of testing commitment and as a period when the fathers could change attitude and lifestyle to become prospective husbands. As one mother said:

"That's one of the things that drove us apart. He carried on as he would have done, and regardless of whether the children were there or not. He was the third child so, if anything, life's easier for me now [*we're separated*]."

These mothers were not against marriage, indeed many were engaged to be married for a period, but they gave up on the idea when they realised that things were not going to improve.

A quarter of the women interviewed were opposed to the institution of marriage. Their reasons for cohabiting rather than marrying were therefore quite different to the other mothers. They saw marriage as an unnecessary convention, or as a remnant of a more patriarchal era in which women were subjugated to their husbands. For these women it was enough to make a private commitment in which they felt assured that they were on equal footing with their partners:

"I knew that we got on very well, and we could have a proper sort of egalitarian relationship."

"I raised the subject of getting married, which I didn't want to do and didn't agree with, at that point. And when I sort of talked it through with him and I said I didn't agree with it, and that I felt it was a show thing for other people, and it was never about the two people that wanted to make a commitment, and

it was about Christianity and things like that, [*which*] I didn't agree with. He sort of agreed with me."

## Fathers' perspectives on cohabitation

A third of the fathers had partners who experienced an unplanned pregnancy prior to cohabiting. These men went into cohabitation on the basis of 'standing by' their partner and in this respect these cohabitations were a little like the 'shotgun marriages' of former times, except no one actually forced the fathers to cohabit. Sometimes they hardly knew their partners and sometimes they felt trapped by the pregnancy - although this was also the case for some men who had cohabited for some time:

"It was her who fell pregnant without saying - especially, I think - loads of times, I thought she'd caught me, you know what I mean, so I was just against her having any more - just add more on to me. [*The second child*] wasn't agreed neither. She fell pregnant and she was born."

Other fathers had been fully committed to their relationship and to parenthood. They had had joint plans, invested in a joint home and often shared childcare. Like some of the mothers, they wanted an alternative basis for their relationship and they did not see cohabitation as a way of avoiding commitment or responsibilities.

A further group of fathers simply saw marriage as an irrelevance. They were not strongly opposed to it so much as regarding it as something without any real significance in their lives. Women were less likely to see it as an irrelevance, they were more likely to be 'for' or 'against' it. For these men there seemed to be no point in marrying:

"It is not a thing I have ever considered seriously. I don't imagine it will ever be a significant factor for me unless perhaps in much later life there are good tax or social security reasons why I should get married. I think my reasons for marrying would be first and foremost practical ones, rather than reasons of emotional security or anything like that."

## Types of commitment

The researchers created a continuum based on their findings (see box).

This 'snapshot' of people's relationships produces a rather static picture of how commitment works. However, as the interviewees described their lives in full, it became clear that their relationship could change and move along the continuum. Some had had fairly insecure relationships in the past which

| contingent commitment   | ←————→ | mutual commitment   |
|---|--------|---|
| <p><b>Characteristics of contingent commitment</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the couple have not known each other for long</li> <li>• legal and/or financial agreements are absent</li> <li>• the children are not planned (although they may be wanted)</li> <li>• pregnancy predates the cohabitation</li> <li>• there is a requirement for significant personal change if the relationship is to work</li> <li>• there is no presumption that the relationship will last - only a hope</li> </ul> |        | <p><b>Characteristics of mutual commitment</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the relationship is established before cohabiting</li> <li>• there are some legal and financial agreements</li> <li>• children are planned and/or wanted by both parents</li> <li>• both parents are involved in childcare</li> <li>• there are mutually agreed expectations of the relationship</li> <li>• there is a presumption that the relationship will last</li> </ul> |

they did not expect to last but had later moved into committed relationships with a new partner. Others had started to cohabit in a contingent way, but their relationships had gone on to last for so long that when the separation came it was as traumatic as any divorce might be. Some of these couples had started to cohabit when they were very young, sometimes only 17 or 18 years old, and this seemed to be an important factor in whether or not they were ready to commit themselves to a permanent relationship:

"I was only 16 or 17 and he's only a couple of years older than me, and we never ever considered marriage. I'm glad I didn't now because I don't like him."

### Cohabitation and parenting

The majority of parents in the study (33 out of 40) jointly registered the births of their children and most gave the children the family name of the father. When it came to joint registration it was widely felt that it was a simple, ethical duty on the part of parents/fathers to participate in the formal procedure. Mothers were often very keen for fathers to be involved because they saw it as a way of 'binding' the men to their children. Most saw it simply as a way of giving a child a father, even if the act was likely to be more symbolic than actual. As one father stated:

"I didn't think it would give me any say. I guess the bottom line was...is that Billy would always have a birth certificate with my name on. More to give him the right to always know who I was regardless of anything that ever happened between Claire and I, he would always know who I was even if, for whatever reason, I'd have to disappear off..."

When it came to surnames, most parents thought that a child should more or less automatically take the father's name. However, there were instances where they were given the mother's name, and the

father did not appear to object. This was often seen as being in the best interests of the child, who would stay a member of the mother's family regardless of what might happen to the father.

There were some instances where parents 'double-barrelled' their names or used one surname as a middle name. In these cases the parents were demonstrating their equality in the job of parenting and rejecting the tradition of attaching children to the father's line.

### Post-separation parenting

When it came to post-separation parenting, the problems faced by these parents were very similar to those faced by divorced parents. Some of the parents in the sample were co-parenting - that is to say they were sharing the responsibilities of the children and the children were spending almost equal time with both parents. However, this was not the most common pattern. Fathers complained that they found it hard to sustain contact, especially where they had few resources, or in some cases were homeless. Mothers complained that some fathers were unreliable and let the children down. In some cases, mothers had ended contact altogether, and in one case a father admitted that he had never tried to maintain a relationship with his two children.

In general, however, parents clearly felt that children had a right to see their fathers and to have a relationship with them, no matter how bad the parents' relationship had been (the only exception to this was when the mothers remained in fear of the father's violence). As one mother remarked:

"At the end of the day he is the kids' dad. Me personally, I couldn't care less whether they see him or not, but for the kids' sake I think it's only fair...he is their dad and they know Ian's not their dad. They know my boyfriend's not their dad."

## Cohabitees and the law

Few of the parents in the study understood their legal position. One mother who had cohabited for 18 years had a very nasty shock when she discovered that she had no entitlement to a share in the family home when her relationship broke down.

Equally, fathers were often surprised to learn that they had no automatic entitlement to parental authority in relation to their children. However, although most of the fathers were surprised at this, the men in this sample were not particularly angry about it. They tended to be cynical about the law and thought that going to a solicitor or to court would often just make relationships worse. The majority who wanted to see their children were able to anyway. The difficulties they faced were often material rather than legal, for example fathers without their own homes said they wanted proper accommodation where they could take their children, rather than more rights.

The parents were asked whether, with the benefit of hindsight, they wished they had married. Some thought that their legal position would have been better (which is probably true) but they often mistakenly assumed that divorce was straightforward, with clear rules about property and residence/contact. Others were glad that they had not married, because they thought it had been easier to end a bad relationship cleanly.

There was certainly no consensus amongst the parents interviewed that marriage would have been better than cohabitation, and this undoubtedly links with the reasons they gave for cohabiting rather than marrying in the first place. Broadly speaking, the women who wanted their partners to become more 'marriage-worthy' were relieved that they had not married them, either because they had met someone more 'suitable' or because they felt they were better off alone. The pattern for the men was more complicated because a small group of them who did not regret never having married, nonetheless were living in very poor conditions or were homeless and abusing drugs or alcohol. These men had become detached from family life altogether and were finding it hard to re-establish themselves in new relationships or in employment.

## Conclusions

The study raises a number of questions that policy makers need to address. In particular, there needs to be further discussion about whether cohabitation should be treated more like marriage in policy terms,

and whether unmarried fathers should have automatic parental authority on the joint registration of a child's birth.

The survey suggests that it may be misguided to imagine that encouraging some couples to marry would solve the perceived problem of instability that is associated with cohabiting relationships. In addition, the researchers suggest that if the emphasis of policy is on marriage rather than the broader picture of parenthood, the welfare of children could be overlooked.

## About the study

The research was undertaken by Carol Smart and Pippa Stevens at the Centre for Research on Family, Kinship and Childhood at the University of Leeds. The project was a qualitative, interview-based study with 20 mothers and 20 fathers from different relationships. All the parents had separated at the time of the interview but had cohabited for at least a year (and sometimes much longer), and had raised a child together during that time. The sample reflected a wide range of social class backgrounds and living conditions.

### How to get further information

The full report, **Cohabitation breakdown** by Carol Smart and Pippa Stevens, is published for the Foundation by the Family Policy Studies Centre (price £12.95, ISBN 1 901455 38 6).