

THE RISING INCIDENCE OF COHABITATION AMONG UNIVERSITY UNDERGRADUATES

Nnachi Amos Imo

Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Ebonyi State University Abakaliki, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

Cohabitation is not yet an accepted norm in most traditional Igbo society and parents strive to keep children, especially, female children from such living arrangement. However, on campus children, outside the watchful eyes of parents find expression to repressed drives. The objective of this study was to investigate the rising incidence of cohabitation among undergraduates. The study was carried out in Ebonyi State University. Cross-sectional survey was the research design, multistage cluster, systematic and purposive sampling methods were used in selecting the sample. Questionnaire and interview were the instruments for data collection. Results show that about 11 percent of the respondents were cohabiting and reasons for cohabiting included sexual satisfaction, mutual assistance, guarding against competition, poverty, peer influence and high cost of accommodation. It is therefore suggested that, government intervention, reduction in fees, provision of hostels on campus and exhortation can help in reducing the incidence of cohabitation.

Keywords: Incidence, cohabitation, university, undergraduates

INTRODUCTION

In Nigerian villages, rural communities, and other traditions settings, cohabitation – an unmarried couple living together - is a viewed with disdain and is a cause for condemnation. Even in the towns and cities parents express serious concern over their children cohabiting and take drastic measures to discourage such. Parents whose children cohabit are perceived as having failed in the duty to inculcate into the child the moral values of chastity, self-restraint and shame. To this end, parents apply different strategies to keep their children from cohabiting as cohabitation if not leading to marriage reduces the marriageability of the female partners while having little or no effect on the male partners. In this apart of the world, cohabitation is not yet an acceptable norm as traditional and religion are still strong influences on way of life.

A critical observation of relationship dynamics shows that younger people, even in these traditional settings, are more accepting of cohabitation than older generations. However, the expression of this acceptance is hindered by the traditionality of the social environment. Here everybody knows almost everybody and one's actions affect the entire lineage of the actor. Nevertheless, since repressed drives do escape repression and manifest in different forms and adult defences such as rationalization and denials are readily available, many young people do cohabit. And many desire to cohabit but cannot due to social constraints and so repress the desire, awaiting a convenient time to the satisfaction of such urges.

Such opportunities come with life transitions. Getting admission into colleges and universities offers people the opportunity to leave home away from the watchful and monitoring eyes of parents. When people get admission and leave home they ultimately join new groups. Groups shape people goals, values and behaviours. And since in every real sense, we are different people in different groups, these people who feigned "good girls and boys" at home begin to manifest entirely different characters on campus. These differences in attitude result from the fact that people occupy different statuses and play different roles in different groups. At home they want to be homely, good children and morally sound and likeable fellows. On campus they want to prove that they are also mature and not social misfits. In this article, effort is made to study the incidence of cohabitation among undergraduate students of Ebonyi State University, to determine its pervasiveness, the motivation for cohabitation, and among other thing to suggest ways the incidence of cohabitation among undergraduates can be reduced.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As an alternative family form, cohabitation is the sharing of a household by an unmarried couple (Macionis, 2010). As a long-term form of family life, with or without children, cohabitation is especially common in the Scandinavian countries and gaining popularity in other European nations and in the United States, where the number of cohabiting couples has increased from about 500,000 in 1970 to more than 6.2 million (5.5 heterosexual couples and 750, 000 homosexual couples) in 2010, or about 6 percent of all households (Macionis, 2010). The U.S. Census Bureau (2008) notes that almost half of all people in the U.S. between twenty-five and forty-four years of age have cohabited at some point.

In Nigeria, there is no existing statistics on the incidence of cohabitation. However, even in Nigeria, as in other societies, cohabitation tend to appeal to more independent minded individual as well as those who favour of gender equality (Braines & Joyner, 1999). Morgan (1999) sees cohabitation as part a worrying trend in which marriage is going out of fashion and the family is in serious decline. However, Chester (1985) argued that in most cases cohabitation is only a temporary phase: Most of those who cohabit get married eventually.

Though Chandler sees cohabitation as increasingly popular, she points out that cohabitation is nothing new. Unofficial self-marriage (where people simply declare themselves to be married—sometimes called ‘living over the brush’) was very common in past centuries. The author quoted research in consensual union in Britain in the eighteenth century. Also, changing public attitude towards cohabitation has been studied by Barlow, Duncan, James and Park (2001), using data from Britain and European social attitudes survey. They found clear evidence of changing public attitudes. More people were beginning to see it as acceptable to have children without getting married. Barlow *et al.*, (2001) argue: over time there is a strong likelihood that society will become more liberal still on this matter, although particular groups, such as the religious, are likely to remain more traditional than the rest. Lindsey and Beach (2004) contribute that incentives such as social security benefits, companionship, and a sense of security without the legal entanglements of marriage propel elderly people to choose cohabitation rather than marriage.

THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

The following theories will help lay foundation for the understanding of the phenomenon of cohabitation among undergraduates. The first theory is the social exchange theory developed by George Homans and Peter Blau. The social exchange theory posits that social interaction is guided by what each person stands to gain or lose from the interaction. From this point of analysis, in the ritual of cohabitation, people seek mates who offer at least as much. In terms of physical attractiveness, intelligence, wealth and protection as they offer in return. According to the theory dating allows each person to assess the advantages and disadvantages of a potential spouse. In the short run, the theory also enables us to appreciate the reason why some students also shun such practices when they gauge that what they may lose from their parents if they have a hint that they live such life will be much than what they stand to gain from cohabitation.

The next theory is the social learning theory of which the key idea is that behaviour is shaped by experience. Once behaviour is learned, it becomes habitual. Social learning is considered in terms of reinforcing appropriate behaviour or extinguishing inappropriate behaviour through the use of rewards and punishments. It is concerned with how people model the behaviour they view in other. At first, initiation and modeling are spontaneous but patterns of behaviour develop through reinforcement. This theory enables understanding of how young boys and girls acquire sexual behaviour as they view other in their social environment. Cohabitation is sustained by the mutual benefits which act as reinforcers. Cohabitation and other sexual behaviours are strongly associated with social approval which cohabiting and sexualized students get on campus.

METHODS

The design for the research was the survey design, specifically, cross-sectional survey design. Survey was expedient since the university has over 32,000 undergraduates scattered in four different campuses of the university. A sample size of 2300 was gotten from the population of 32,000 using the Yaro Yamenis statistical formula for sample size determination. Four different types of sampling techniques were employed in the sampling procedure. The first technique was multi-stage cluster sampling technique. In using this technique, each of the campuses formed a naturally occurring cluster. Thus, we had Isieke Campus, Presco campu, CAS campus and permanent site campus. Systematic sampling technique was employed in selecting the samples in such a way that each population element had the chance of being selected for the study. The next technique was purposive sampling technique, a non-probability sampling technique. This procedure was used in selecting participant who were adjudged to have in-depth knowledge of the phenomenon under discussion. It was also used to purposively select cohabiting students because of their first hand knowledge of the issue under discussion. Furthermore, purposive and availability, non-probability sampling methods, were used to select participants for in-dept interviews. Hostel presidents and cohabiting undergraduates were selected using these techniques.

The instruments used for data collection were questionnaires and interviews. The questionnaires were made up of two sections. Section one contained questions on the socio-demographic characteristics of respondents, while section two continued questionnaire items on the thematic issues. The thematic questions contained questions that enabled us to appreciate the degree of cohabitation, types, reasons for, and effect of cohabitation on cohabiting undergraduates. Concerning interview technique, 32 key informants and cohabiting students who were selected through purposive and availability sampling methods were interviewed. The interview was used to elicit deeper information, verify issues and to further explain issues raised in the questionnaires. One month was spend in the field in the data collection process.

The quantitative data were subjected to computer analysis using the statistical package for the social sciences. (SPSS). This was able us bring out the percents, averages and other figures needed for data interpretation. Content analysis was used in the analysis of the qualitative data gotten from interviews.

STUDY AREA

The research was conducted in Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki, Ebonyi State Nigeria. Abakaliki is in Ebonyi North senatorial zone of Ebonyi State. Abakaliki is the administrative capital of Ebonyi State created on 1st October 1996. Abakaliki and Afikpo in Ebonyi South

Senatorial zone are the only urban cities in Ebonyi state. The state is mainly rural but plays host to about five tertiary institution including two degree awarding universities.

Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki, started in 1987 as an Agricultural Campus of the Anambra State University of Science and Technology (ASUTECH). Following the creation of Enugu State of which Abakaliki was a component region, the institution became a campus of Enugu State University of Technology. The creation of Ebonyi State in 1996 resulted in the elevation of the institution to a university college. Finally in 1999 the institution became a full-fledged and autonomous university. The university now has about 9 faculties scattered in four different campuses: Faculties of Agriculture and Law in Waterworks, Abakaliki; Faculties of Medicine, Health Sciences, Biological Sciences, and Physical Sciences Presco, Abakaliki; Faculty of Education in Ishieke; and Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities at Ezzangbo, Ohaukwu Local Government Area. The university also runs an impressive postgraduate programme, a predegree programme, and a Work and Study Programm.

There is no viable accommodation structure for both students and staff. Consequently, students whose parents reside in Abakaliki or its environs come to campus from home or have to live in one of the clusters of private commercial buildings they call hostels. Students from outside Abakaliki and other state of the federation must live in one of these private hostels or among the people in the commercial residential houses in Abakaliki or in any of the villages in the peripheries of Abakaliki. Unfortunately, the cost of accommodation is very high in Abakaliki whereas the state is very low income state with a graduate employee earning about N28,000 month or N336,000 annually, equivalent to \$1680 annually. The cost of 3-bedroom flat is between N180,000 and 360,000 annually, a self contained room is between 36,000, 120,000, and a single public room is between 36,000, and 60,000 a room. Fees for undergraduates range between 120,000 and 200,000 a session, and here is no standard library in any of the campuses although there is an electronic library at CAS. Because the lecture halls are distant from the hostels, students must have to spend between N60 and 160 and sometimes double that amount during the many period of fuel scarcity in Nigeria.

Behaviour in this public hostels are not regulated although a hostel president exists who acts as caretaker of the hostels. Because there is no formal regulatory agency students of both sexes live together in different rooms of the same hostel. Undergraduates also cohabit in these hostels and in the commercial residential houses in town and the surrounding villages.

RESULTS

The first objective of the study was to find out the incidence of cohabitation in Ebonyi State University. The study shows that about II percent of the undergraduates cohabit. This includes

these who cohabit with fellow undergraduates and those who cohabit with non undergraduates in town. The fact that more female students cohabit with non-colleagues makes cohabitation among undergraduates not even in occurrence. Female cohabit more than males.

The second objective was to find out the reasons why undergraduates cohabit. Findings show that the most recurring reason for cohabitation among undergraduates in EBSU is sexual satisfaction. This was also referred to as love. A respondent in in-dept interview put it like those 'I love him and he loves me, and we derive sexual satisfaction from each other.' The next reason for cohabitation was mutual assistance. 17% of the respondents gave this reason as a factor for their cohabitation. A respondent in an in-dept interview said "*cost of living in this place is very high and since we are friends, there is no point in double expenses, he brings his own I bring my own and we manage. We get more mutual assistance if we live together.* To guard against competition was the third reason given by 14% of the respondents. This percent said that their major reason for cohabiting with their lover was to guard against competition from other males or females. A female participant said '*the boy is intelligent and many girls like him, if I do not live with him those girls will dispossess me of my possession.*' 15 percent of the respondents said that the major reason for cohabiting was accommodation difficulties in the university. A participant in the research told the interviewer '*Cost of accommodation in this university environment is high and many of us cannot afford it. Cohabitation is just a way of overrunning the problem.*'

Other reasons given by respondents for cohabitation were peer influence (11%), relationship prior to admission (13%), poverty (15%). 2 percent of the respondents said they were forced into such relation which they never imagined they would engage in.

Concerning which of the sexes that benefit more from cohabitation, 56 percent of the respondents answered that girls benefit more that boys in the relationship while 42 percent said it was boys who benefit more from the relationship, while 2 percent were undecided about who benefits more than the other.

The fourth objective was to know whether parents or guardians knew about the living arrangement of their cohabiting wards. 77% of the cohabiting respondents said that the living arrangement was concealed from their parents or guardians and they did not know about it. 13% said their parents especially their mother knew about it. A female interviewee put it thus '*No my parents do not know about it, not even my siblings, and that is why I have another room. If I have a hint that they were coming I would rush to my other room and receive them. If they know about it they will withdraw me from school.*' In some cases siblings who know about it are begged not to reveal it to parents or guardians.

The fifth objective was to find out the consequences of cohabitation on cohabiting students. Findings show that it has consequence on academic performance but there was no statistically significant difference between the negative effect and the positive effect ($t = 1$, $P = .001$, $x^2 = 10.756$, critical $x^2 = 10.827$). In other aspects cohabitation also has both positive and negative consequences. One positive effect is that in the area of mutual assistance even in payment of fees, but it may lead to pregnancy and ultimately withdrawal from the university. Cohabitors may also be prone to engage in antisocial activities in order to measure up to the financial demand of such relationship.

The sixth objective was to find out how cohabiting undergraduates are perceived. The findings show that cohabitation is perceived by cohabitors and others as an antisocial act. 73 percent of non-cohabiting students said they viewed it with disclaim. 43 percent of the cohabiting undergraduates said they felt it was not the best way of life. 43 percent view it as prostitution.

The last objective was to suggest how the incidence of cohabitation can be reduced in Ebonyi State University. The most recurring suggestion was the construction of university owned hostels where behaviour will be regulated. The next most recurring suggestion was institution of government programmes to assist undergraduates experience less suffering on campus. Government intervention on cost of accommodation in the hostel was also recommended. The respondents also suggested reduction of the tuition fees as such will make students pay less and have more money to live on their own without seeking alternative source of survival. Exhortation and enlightenment on the dangers of cohabitation was also suggested as a means of reducing cohabitation on campus.

DISCUSSION

The first finding is that 11 percent of the undergraduates of Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki, cohabit. Most of these cohabiting undergraduates cohabit with fellow undergraduates. Some also cohabit with non-undergraduates who live in town. Most of those cohabiting with non-undergraduates are females. Interview revealed two types of cohabitation. The first is *full cohabitation* in which the couple live together just like husband and wife. The second type is *partial cohabitation* in which the girl partner may have her own apartment but lives with the boy and may occasionally reside in her own apartment especially, when parents and guardians visit. The interview also shows that undergraduates who engaged in full cohabitation actively resist any effort by parents or guardians to visit. It is the girls who joining the boys in their hostels, as masculine norms restrain the boys from joining the girls.

Concerning why undergraduates cohabit, sexual satisfaction was the most recurring reason. Interviews show that some engage in sexual relations for some time and then immerse

themselves wholly into the relationship by cohabiting. The effect of sexual satisfaction was found to be so pervasive as to be predominantly responsible for partial cohabitation. Sexual satisfaction was also found to be the reason for children from affluent homes cohabiting. The next reason for cohabitation was mutual assistance. This was found to be a very important reason. The high rate of poverty in the state necessitates undergraduates to find ways of surviving. Cohabitation is one of those ways. Instead of paying for two apartments friends contributes and pay for one. They do every other thing jointly and that costs less. Where one is more affluent, the other one makes up by providing sexual gratification. To guard against competition with colleagues for mates was another reason given by respondents for cohabiting, *'I live with him in order to keep other girls competitor from edging me out, when they see me, they know he is not available.'* This was how a female cohabiting student summed up this reason.

An accommodation difficulty was another important reason given by respondents for cohabiting. Indeed, cost of accommodation is very high in the area. Most of those hostels are owned by politicians who enriched themselves with public funds. Businessmen also own some hostels. All of them are for profit making. Many, especially females, who find it difficult to pay for accommodations are forced into cohabiting with their boyfriends. Boys who find themselves in such circumstances may lure the girls into contribution or simply live with fellow boys. Enquiry reveals that the cost of accommodation in those off-campus hostels ranges from as low as thirty six thousand to as high as one hundred and twenty thousand naira per self-contained room. This does not include electricity bills, water bills and sanitation fees. Cohabitation is a way of reducing the effect of high cost of accommodation to some undergraduates.

Peer influence was another reason given by cohabiting respondents for their living arrangement. Some respondents, about 11 percent reported being led into cohabitation by their peers who were already into it. A respondent in an interview said, regrettably, *'My course mate talked me into it and now when I look at myself I feel ashamed that I live a life my parents do not imagine I am into.'* As for why she could not quit, she responded that her partner had been very good to her and she had no reason to quit. Some male partners also reported feeling burdened, ashamed, and tied to a relationship they know could not last beyond campus.

Poverty was also another important reason given by respondents. Over 70 percent of Nigerians live below the poverty line. Ebonyi State, the study area is also a low income state with a graduate employee in government ministry receiving about twenty-eight thousand naira (equivalent of \$70 dollars) a month. Many of the parents are poor rural subsistent farmers or artisans. Poverty is indeed pervasive not only in Ebonyi State but also in Nigeria generally. Poverty leads people into engaging in acts hitherto unimagined.

About 15 percent said that cohabitation was an unintended consequence their love affair on campus, some of these people said it was not even clear how and when they actually began to cohabit, *'it is just campus life but I can't say I consciously began to cohabit with her.'* The 2 percent of the respondents who said they were forced into it attributed their cohabitation to activities of campus cultists. They said they were forced into cohabitation although they also confessed enjoying the living arrangement. The remaining 7 percent of the cohabiting respondents reported that the cohabitation was only a continuation a relationship before admission into the university. In an interview, a cohabiting participant triumphantly reported *'We were friends before now, but our parents never allowed to express our desires, but now we are outside the monitoring eyes of our parents and we are happy we are living together.'* Others told similar stories of how their cohabitation is just an expression of a hitherto repressed sexual urge.

The third objective of the study which was to find out which of the sexes benefitted more from the relationship, showed that 56 percent of the respondents said girls benefitted more in terms of the protection they get by virtue of the relationship, material gains, academic assistance, financial assistance, and sexual satisfaction. On the other hand, boys gain in terms of the prestige that derives from having a beautiful girl, sexual satisfaction, material gains, financial benefits, and relief from domestic chores. They mutually benefit.

Most parents or guardians do not know that their children or ward cohabit on campus. And many of the cohabiting undergraduates do know that their parents or guardian strongly disapprove of extra-martial sexual relation, not to mention cohabitation. When they know, it is always the mother that knows and she conceals from her husband for fear of the child being withdrawn from campus. The most effective method of concealing this living arrangement was the couple having two rooms - one for the girls, the other for the couple.

There is no statistically significant difference between the positive effect and negative effect on cohabiting undergraduates. The ultimate negative consequence is premarital pregnancy, which most of the time results in the girls being withdraw from school or delayed graduation while having little effect on the male partner. Boys also experience negative effects in the form of low academic performance, delayed graduation, always travelling to look for money, and in many cases engaging in antisocial behaviours in order to measure up to the expectation of the girl partner. Where the couples are serious students, the positive consequences outweigh the negative consequences. Concerning how cohabiting undergraduates are perceived, both cohabiting non-cohabiting undergraduates perceive cohabitation an aberration which is why many view cohabiters with disclaim. Members of campus fellowships see them as sinners. Such living arrangement is not yet an accepted norm in traditional communities like Ebonyi communities.

This also explains why as much as 43 percent of the respondents view cohabiting undergraduates as prostitutes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Cohabitation is not yet an accepted norm in many Nigerian societies. Parents frown at it and those who cohabit on campus are characterized by denials and rationalization. Consequently, the following are suggestions on how to reduce the incidence of cohabitation on campus:

- i. Construction of university owned or university managed hostels that would cost less and life and behaviour of inhabitants regulated by the university management.
- ii. Government should evolve programmes aimed at reducing difficulties on campus. Such programmes may include soft loans for undergraduates, providing water for the undergraduates, and ensuring security of life and property within the hostel area.
- iii. The university visitor should intervene in the issue of cost of accommodation. Government should dialogue with the land lords to reduce the cost of accommodation and urge them to make the hostels more comfortable by providing water for inhabitants.
- iv. Another effective means of reducing the incidence of cohabitation among undergraduates of Ebonyi State University is by alleviating the financial burden occasioned by exorbitant tuition fees paid by the students. If the students can effectively pay their fees, the probabilities of cohabiting in order get financial assistance will be reduce.
- v. Exhortation and enlightenment on the dangers of cohabitation should be carried out by the clergy, orientation officers and the university management. Cohabitation is not an accepted norm in this part of the sword. Cohabitation, if not leading to marriage, has far reaching implications on the marriageability of the female partner.

CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of cohabitation has been an issue of concern to student, parents, guardians and the University management. The present study was an effort to make an inquiry into the phenomenon of cohabitation among undergraduate students of Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki. Questionnaires and interviews were the instruments for data collection. The findings show that 11 percent of the students cohabit. Reasons for cohabitation include: sexual gratification, mutual assistance, to guard against competition, accommodation difficulties, peer influence, relationship prior to admission, poverty, and bad association. Girls benefit more than boys in the relationship and most of the cohabiting students keep it from their parents or guardians awareness. The study also shows that cohabitation has both positive and negative

consequences on the cohabiting couples and many students regard cohabitation with disdain. Construction of university managed hostels, alleviation of financial stress, and other recommendations have been put forward as means of reducing the incidence of cohabitation in the University. If the recommendations consisted in the study guide policy formulation and implementation, cohabitation will be significantly reduced not only in Ebonyi State University but also in other higher institutions of learning.

LIMITATIONS

One obvious limitation of the study is that cohabitation is still not an accepted norm in the study area. Many cohabiting undergraduates still conceal their living arrangement from whoever they think is not aware of their cohabitation. We cannot infer, then, that the 11 percent from this research is very accurate. It may be more than that percent. It must also be noted that all the participants resided in the neighbourhoods of the campuses of Ebonyi State University. We cannot, therefore, generalize the findings to other universities that have elaborately organized university managed hostel accommodation. Nor can it be generalized to other cultures, even in Nigeria, where cohabitation is a more accepted norm. Another limitation stems from the economic circumstances of the time. The study was conducted at a **Area for Further Studies**

As the number of cohabiting undergraduates increases, even as parents, guardians and lecturers still perceive such living arrangement as a deviation from family norm, there is need for research into their family of birth to find out family factors that predispose young people to cohabitation. For example, did they experience deprivation or over indulgence at home and so were fixated at the pleasures of sexual satisfaction? As the study was conducted in Ebonyi State University that has no organized hostels system for undergraduates, there is need to replicate such study in other universities that have elaborate hostel accommodation system where behavior of residents is regulated. There is also need for this research to be replicated in other cultures outside Igboland such as among the Hausa/Fulani, Nigeria Deltans, Yorubas and among the minorities of the Middle Belt and North Eastern Nigeria.

REFERENCES

- Brines, J. & Joyner, K (1999). The ties that binds: principles of Cohesion in cohabitation and marriage. *American Sociological review*, 64(3), 333 – 55.
- Lindsey, L.L. & Beach, S. (2004). *Sociology*. Upper Saddle River. Pearson Education Inc.
- Macionis, J. J. (2010). *Sociology*. Upper Saddle River: Pearson Education Inc.

Morgan, D. H. J. (1999). Risk and Family Practices: accounting for change and fluidity in family life. In E. B. Silva and C. Smart (Eds).

Barlow, A., Duncan, S., James. G. & Park .A. (2001). Just a piece of paper? Marriage and Cohabitation. In A. Park, J. Curtis, K. Thompson, L. Jarvis & C. Bromley. *British Social Attitudes: the 18th Report, Public Policy, Social Ties*, London: sage.

U. S. Census (2008). *Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement* Retrieved October 2008.