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The Effects of Cohabitation on Subsequent Marital Satisfaction

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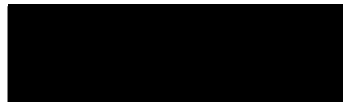
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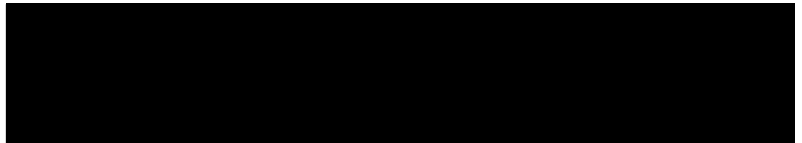
Thesis Approval

The abstract and thesis of Brenda Fague for the Master of Science in Sociology were presented June 2, 1998, and accepted by the thesis committee and the department.

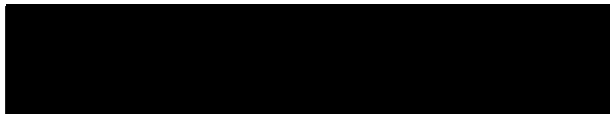
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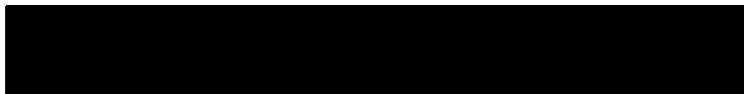
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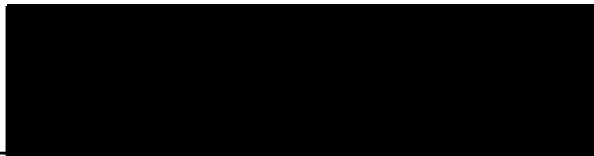
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Abstract

An abstract of the thesis of Brenda Fague for the Master of Science in Sociology presented June 2, 1998.

Title: The Effects of Cohabitation on Subsequent Marital Satisfaction

Most research on cohabitation has focused on the subsequent marital instability of cohabitators. However, these findings are inconsistent and, considering the great number of stable unhappy marriages, marital stability is not an accurate measure of relationship success.

The purpose of this research is to compare the relationship satisfaction reported by married couples who cohabited prior to their marriage with the satisfaction of married couples who did not cohabit premaritally. This research uses respondents' self-reported relationship satisfaction as a measure of relationship success.

General Social Survey data collected in 1988 and 1994 were analyzed to determine the relationship between premarital cohabitation and one's marital and life satisfaction. The sample was limited to white couples who were in first marriages of seven years duration or less. Analysis of

variance, factor analysis and crosstabulations were used to test two hypotheses: that cohabitators will report greater marital happiness, and that attitudes toward marriage will differ by cohabitation history.

Among couples married for seven or fewer years, there were few differences between respondents who had cohabited before marriage and those who did not. There was no difference in reports of marital happiness. However, noncohabitators reported higher levels of general happiness, which is puzzling. When examining domains of life satisfaction, cohabitators reported having much greater satisfaction with hobbies and nonworking activities than did noncohabitators. Of seventeen items measuring attitudes toward marriage and divorce, only one differed by cohabitation status. Cohabitators were much more likely to agree that personal freedom was more important than the companionship of marriage.

These findings provide support for previous research which indicates that cohabitators have different feelings about marriage than do noncohabitators, but are not necessarily less committed. Additional research is recommended to learn more about the processes that link cohabitation and marriage as stages in the development of intimate relationships.

THE EFFECTS OF COHABITATION
ON SUBSEQUENT MARITAL SATISFACTION

by

BRENDA FAGUE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

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Chapter One

Overview

This thesis compares marital satisfaction for couples who cohabited prior to marriage with couples who did not cohabit. Chapter One discusses trends in premarital cohabitation in the United States and social implications. Chapter Two provides a brief discussion of recent research on cohabitation. Chapter Three outlines the hypotheses, variables, data selected and samples used. Chapter Four presents statistical findings. Chapter Five discusses the findings, offers possible explanations and provides recommendations for future work.

Introduction

Prior research on cohabitation has tended to focus on relationship stability. However, due to the existence of stable unhappy marriages, relationship stability, or “staying married” may not be the best measure of relationship success. This research will instead use respondents’ self-reported relationship satisfaction as a measure of relationship success.

So, what exactly is cohabitation? “Cohabitation is generally defined as nonmarried heterosexual persons who share intimacy, sexual relations, and who coreside.” (Seccombe 1995, p. 58). Cohabitation may include the children of one or both partners. As this definition is necessarily broad, the variety of couples is not to be underestimated.

In the past 30 years there has been a great increase in the practice and acceptance of cohabitation. Bumpass (1990) estimates that only about 8% of couples cohabited prior to marriage in the late 1960s, but things changed quickly. Cohabitation rates increased 90% during the 1970s. Glick and Spanier (1980) were astounded to discover a 19% increase in unmarried cohabitation rates between 1977 and 1978 when analyzing the March 1978 Current Population Survey. Their response is as follows: “Rarely does social change occur with such rapidity. Indeed, there have been few developments relating to marriage and family life which have been as dramatic as the rapid increase in unmarried cohabitation” (1980, p. 20). In 1986, 49% of couples cohabited prior to marriage (Bumpass, 1990).

The dramatic growth in cohabitation can be attributed to several factors. First, and perhaps most significant, changing attitudes toward premarital sex have made cohabitation a more acceptable choice (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989; Sweet & Bumpass, 1987). The acceptance of premarital

sex and cohabitation has doubtless been affected by the availability of effective birth control (Gwartney-Gibbs, 1986). A couple can have more control over the timing of pregnancy and childbirth than ever before, and can choose to delay childbirth until marriage if they prefer. As cohabiting couples with at least one highly educated partner tend to postpone childbearing longer than couples with two equally less educated partners, it is possible for couples to delay childbearing until education can be completed or careers are established (Corijn et al, 1996).

Second, concerned about the rising probability of divorce, many couples indicate that they live together before marriage out of a desire to “make sure they are compatible” before marrying (Bumpass, 1990). In fact, it has been suggested that cohabitation is a device used for “screening out a risky marriage” (Willis & Michael, 1988).

Third, marriage is often postponed until the mid-twenties, possibly due in part to a greater number of years spent in school to meet increasing educational demands. As a temporary, and often more affordable alternative to marriage, many couples choose to live together before marrying (Gwartney-Gibbs, 1986; Spanier, 1983).

Finally, there has been a great change in women’s social roles. Women today have more opportunities than thirty years ago to be

independent and self-supporting outside of marriage, and may choose to delay marriage in favor of other alternatives. Women with higher educational levels than their husbands are more likely to divorce than women with less education than their husbands, probably because they are financially more able to leave an unsatisfying marriage (Bumpass et al, 1991). Glick & Spanier (1980) indicate that the trend toward smaller families and the increase in women's childbearing ages have also contributed to the growth in cohabitation rates.

Social Implications

Cherlin, Bumpass & Sweet (1989, 1991) address some implications that this increase in cohabitation rates has for social life. First, the decline in marriage rates has been partially offset by the rise in cohabitation rates. Although people are marrying later, they are not necessarily single and living alone. In fact, Bumpass et al found that nearly half of all cohabiting couples have children living in their home. Bumpass writes that today "sex, living arrangements and parenting depend less on marriage" than in the past (1990). This makes it difficult to determine when a union actually begins, at marriage or when a couple moves in together.

Although most people do marry eventually, the rise in cohabitation rates and the high levels of divorce contribute to the impression that marriage is an optional arrangement. In fact, most of the traditional benefits of marriage, such as sex, children and a shared household can be experienced without the legal obligation and relative permanence of marriage, and without public censure (Blanc, 1987). Thus cohabitation has flourished, and will likely continue to do so.

Cohabitors

Who chooses to cohabit? Many researchers maintain that cohabitation is a nontraditional lifestyle that tends to be selected by nontraditional people (Booth & Johnson, 1988). However, it seems this is beginning to change as cohabitation is becoming common and is now considered to be more socially acceptable than for previous cohorts.

Social scientists began researching cohabitation patterns among white college students in the late 1960s and early 1970s. However, racial minorities and persons with lower levels of education have been cohabiting in this country since long before the 1960s and still tend to be overrepresented among cohabitators (Bumpass, Sweet & Cherlin, 1991).

Although there are many varieties of cohabitators, social research has found some general trends that are useful in creating a composite. Cohabitators tend to delay first marriages about one year longer than noncohabitators (Gwartney-Gibbs, 1986). They tend to have lower levels of certainty about their relationship than married couples (Bennett, Blanc & Bloom, 1988; Booth & Johnson, 1988) and generally indicate that they cohabit to ensure compatibility with a potential partner prior to marriage (Bumpass, Sweet & Cherlin, 1991).

Cohabitators report less conservative attitudes about sex than noncohabitators (DeMaris & MacDonald, 1993), tend to have lower levels of church attendance, and reported engaging in premarital sexual activity at earlier ages than noncohabitators (Clayton & Voss, 1977). Cohabitators tend to live in urban rather than rural areas (Balakrishnan et al, 1987).

Cohabitation brings to mind a picture of a young couple, perhaps in their twenties, living together for a few months before they get married. However, about forty percent of cohabiting couples have children in the home, and a great number of remarriages are preceded by cohabitation (Bumpass, Sweet & Cherlin, 1991). In fact, it has been suggested that many remarriages are significantly delayed or avoided altogether in preference to cohabitation (Wineberg 1994).

Some researchers report that cohabitators are more approving of divorce and generally less committed to marriage as an institution (Axinn & Thornton, 1992; Bennett, et al, 1988; Bumpass, 1990; Forste & Tanfer, 1996; Thompson & Colella, 1992). However, DeMaris & Leslie (1984) reported finding that cohabitators held higher expectations for marriage and were much less willing than noncohabitators to conform to traditional marital roles. They suggest the attitudes of cohabitators toward marriage are less traditional, but not necessarily less committed. Forste & Tanfer (1996) indicate that marriage itself increases one's commitment to marriage, regardless of cohabitation history. Further, DeMaris & MacDonald (1993) report that after marriage, attitudes about marital permanence do not differ by cohabitation history.

Cohabitators tend to select partners who have similar achieved characteristics, such as educational completion, but are less likely than noncohabitators to choose partners who share ascribed characteristics such as age, race and religion (Bumpass et al 1991; Forste & Tanfer, 1996; Gwartney-Gibbs, 1986; Schoen & Weinick, 1993). Previous research has indicated that this heterogamous mate selection contributes to increased levels of relationship instability among cohabitators (Bumpass & Sweet, 1972).

Forste & Tanfer (1996) found that cohabiting females were less likely to be sexually exclusive than were married females, and tended to be about as sexually exclusive as dating females. Bachrach (1987) found that cohabiting females reported significantly higher levels of sexual activity than either married or dating females.

We often have the idea that people who cohabit do so as an alternative to marriage. In the 1970s, there was a general concern that cohabitation would replace marriage. However, Bumpass (1990) found that both partners in about 75% of cohabiting couples do plan to get married, and Cherlin wrote that these couples “resemble recently married couples more than they do other cohabitators.” There is disagreement about plans to marry among 15% of cohabiting couples, and about 10% of cohabiting couples have no intention to marry (Bumpass, Sweet & Cherlin, 1991).

Research reports that cohabiting relationships generally last less than two years. About 60% of cohabitators marry and the rest break up without marrying (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989).

Summary

The purpose of this research is to examine the effects of cohabitation on the relationship satisfaction of married couples. Most of the previous work in this field has focused on the instability of cohabiting relationships and the problems associated with these break ups. Cohabiting relationships are continually compared with marriages, despite the clear evidence that cohabitation is not a long-term alternative to marriage for most Americans. Furthermore, the stability or longevity of a relationship is not in any way a predictor of relationship quality, as suggested by Neal (1998). Therefore the focus of this research will be to explore the relationship quality of married couples who cohabited prior to their marriage. It is expected that married couples who cohabited prior to marriage will report higher levels of relationship satisfaction than couples who did not cohabit premaritally, when controlling for sociodemographic characteristics.

The following chapter provides a review of the literature and a brief discussion of theoretical perspectives pertaining to this topic.

Chapter Two

Previous Research

To date, most research on cohabitation has focused on its link to increased marital instability or divorce. When cohabitation first came to the attention of American sociologists in the late 1960s and 1970s, it was viewed quite positively. It was thought that perhaps the experience of cohabitation would lead to a lower rate of divorce. However, subsequent research found that the rate of divorce for cohabitators was actually higher than for noncohabitators. This caused a change in the thinking of sociologists, and much work has been done to illuminate this difference in relationship stability.

It has been suggested that cohabitation break ups, or “premarital divorces,” as Sweet calls these separations, have actually helped to keep the divorce rate from going even higher (Bennett et al, 1988; Bumpass, 1990; Bumpass & Sweet, 1989). “If many couples are using cohabitation to test their relationship and if 40% split up without marrying, then we expect those who do marry to have more stable marriages than would have been the case in the absence of cohabitation” (Cherlin, 1990). However, most

research tends to support one of two theoretical perspectives regarding the instability of cohabitators: the cohabitation effect and the selectivity hypothesis.

The cohabitation effect suggests that cohabitation alters a relationship in such a way that the couple is more likely to experience divorce. Some researchers have suggested that cohabitation weakens one's commitment to marriage and develops attitudes or values that increase one's propensity for divorce (Axinn & Thornton 1992; Booth & Johnson 1988; Thomson & Collela 1991). While couples who cohabit prior to marriage are reported to have a greater likelihood of divorcing, this finding has not been consistent.

Many researchers have drifted away from explaining the 'cohabitation effect', or the dissolution effect cohabitation appears to have on marriage. In contrast, the selectivity hypothesis suggests that people who cohabit prior to marriage are members of a group having very different characteristics from those who do not cohabit prior to marriage. So the higher divorce rate among cohabitators is not an inevitable effect of cohabitation itself, but simply that cohabitators tend to have characteristics which predispose them to be more susceptible to divorce (Booth & Johnson, 1988; Bumpass et al, 1991).

Researchers have explored several factors that may contribute to this reported higher divorce rate among cohabitators. Booth (1988) has suggested that couples with differing desires to raise children are more likely to divorce. Parental family of origin has been found to significantly impact one's decisions about family life, and cohabitators disproportionately tend to come from divorced families. Amato (1988) found that people with divorced parents reported placing a high value in the institution of marriage, but reported less idealism about marriage relationships and were more likely to indicate acceptance of alternative family lifestyles. Axinn found that people from divorced families indicate higher levels of support for divorce when compared with people from intact families. Axinn and colleagues (1992, 1993, 1996) found that parental divorce is a strong socializing factor which tends to lead to children's support for alternatives to traditional marriage, such as divorce and cohabitation.

When examining literature on marital stability, several other characteristics commonly found among cohabitators are associated with higher divorce rates in and of themselves. These include family of origin variables, low levels of educational achievement, marital history and religious heterogamy, age at marriage, unemployment early in a marriage, and little or no joint accumulation of assets (Booth et al, 1986; Bumpass et

al, 1991). Cohabitators tend to be more likely than noncohabitators to exhibit each of these characteristics.

Additionally, the later age at marriage often experienced by cohabitators tends to lead to heterogeneous mate selection, which again is linked to a higher likelihood of divorce (Booth & Edwards, 1985).

Cohabitators often differ in terms of relationship histories, such as previous marriages and divorces, as well as other demographic variables, such as family of origin, age, educational achievement, and religiosity, which help to account for marital instability and effectively nullify the “cohabitation effect.”

However, recent research has contradicted these findings as well. Teachman & Polonko (1990) found that when controlling for union duration, only those married couples having more than one cohabitation relationship experienced higher risks of divorce than married couples who did not cohabit prior to marriage. The couples who had only cohabited once prior to marriage were not at higher risk of divorce. DeMaris & MacDonald (1993) also indicate finding that only serial cohabitation is linked with an increased risk of divorce: “At no point is single-instance cohabitation associated with greater odds of instability, compared with no cohabitation at all” (p. 405). Thus it is entirely possible that only serial

cohabitators have a reduced commitment to marriage, demonstrated by the higher divorce risks.

Accordingly, a 1988 study by Bennett et al found that after eight years of marriage, Europeans who had cohabited prior to marriage were no more likely to divorce than people who had not cohabited before marrying. Bennett et al draw the conclusion that there are different kinds of cohabitators. Some cohabitators are less committed to marriage, and they tend to divorce rather quickly. However, after eight years many cohabitators were still married and were not more likely to divorce than noncohabitators. Bennett's findings refute and qualify much of the research in the United States which indicates that cohabitators tend to have higher divorce rates.

Some research has been conducted in an effort to learn more about the dynamics of cohabiting relationships and determine differences with married relationships. DeMaris & Leslie (1984) found that cohabitators reported lower scores on perceived quality of relationship communication and relationship satisfaction than married couples. They attribute part of this effect to differences between cohabitators and noncohabitators in sex-role traditionalism, religiosity, and other sociocultural variables. However, they indicate that this finding may be due in part to cohabitators' higher

relationship expectations or to reluctance to conform to traditional marital roles.

Brown & Booth (1996) also found that cohabitators tended to report having lower relationship quality than married couples reported. However, cohabitators reported having significantly more frequent interaction with their partners than married couples reported. They suggest that this is due to cohabitators higher relationship expectations. Brown & Booth (1996) also found that cohabitators reporting plans to marry their partners experienced relationships quite similar to marriage, which are affected by stressors such as children in similar ways.

However, as was discussed earlier, cohabitation is generally not a long term alternative to marriage, but a stage of intimacy preceding marriage. It is inappropriate to compare cohabitation with marriage, as cohabiting relationships last, on the average, about two years (Cherlin 1992). To avoid this mistake, this research will examine married couples who cohabited prior to marriage and compare them with married couples who did not live together before marriage.

As common as divorce is in our society today, it seems odd that we still evaluate the success of a relationship by its longevity. As researchers,

we seem to overlook an obvious indication of relationship success: the satisfaction and well-being of the people involved in that relationship.

Theoretical Frameworks and Perspectives

Establishing a Couple

The creation of a shared reality is an essential task in establishing a couple. Each partner must learn to redefine the self and every aspect of life in order to create a world that can be shared completely.

Peter Berger (1977) addresses the process of creating a shared reality in the context of a marriage relationship. Cohabiting couples have the opportunity to begin this process at an earlier stage in their relationship than do couples who do not cohabit prior to marriage. This may allow the development of greater intimacy earlier in the relationship for couples who cohabit.

Each nuclear family is forced to create its own little world based on the shared reality established by that couple. Each partner must learn to define day-to-day reality in terms of an agreed-upon view of the world, and each projection made by each partner must support this shared reality in order for the relationship to continue growing closer. Even one's pre-existing relationships are redefined through the eyes of the other, and

regrouped accordingly. “It remains true that the establishment and maintenance of such a social world make extremely high demands on principal participants” (Berger, p. 11). This creation of a shared view of the world is an investment in the future of the relationship. The couple is bound together by this shared reality and the world is kept out. To quote a song from the early 1980s, “It’s you and me against the world”.

“In other words, from the beginning of the marriage each partner has new modes in his meaningful experience of the world in general, of other people, and of himself. By definition, then, marriage constitutes a nomic rupture. In terms of each partner’s biography, the event of marriage initiates a new nomic process. ... There rather is to be found the notion that one’s world, one’s other-relationships, and, above all, oneself have remained what they were before—only, of course, that the world, others, and self will now be shared with the marriage partner. It should be clear by now that this notion is a grave misapprehension. Just because of this fact, marriage now propels the individual into an unintended and unarticulated development, in the course of which the nomic transformation takes place. ... Tensions... are apprehended as external, situational, and practical difficulties. What is not

apprehended is the subjective side of these difficulties, namely, the transformation of nomos and identity that has occurred and that continues to go on, so that all problems and relationships are experienced in a quite new way, within a new and ever-changing reality” (Berger, 1977, pp. 12-13).

This creation of a shared reality is a natural and necessary process in any marriage relationship and requires a great investment of time and effort from each partner. With such an investment, many couples may choose to remain in unsatisfying relationships or marriages.

Marital Stability & Entrapment

Many stable but unhappy marriages exist in society, which tend to be ignored by literature on divorce and marital instability. As long as the marriage contract remains intact, little attention is given to the dynamics at work within these marriages.

Sociologist Art Neal (1997) introduces the concept of entrapment to explain stable unhappy relationships. “The alienating effects of heterosexual dyads reach a high level of intensity under those conditions in which individuals feel trapped in relationships, when disaffiliation is not a reasonable option, when other alternatives are not available, or when the

cost of breaking off a relationship becomes too great” (1997, Chapter 9, page 1)

People often remain in stable unhappy relationships because they see no other alternatives. Ending the relationship, for one reason or another, is not an option, so the relationship continues outwardly, but no longer has any of the benefits previously associated with it.

In addressing the high divorce rate, Neal writes “What is perhaps more remarkable than the relatively high divorce rate among modern American couples is the fact that so many unhappy marriages persist and endure. The high divorce rate does not, in and of itself, provide direct evidence that marriages are any more unhappy or troublesome than they were in the past. Instead, the higher divorce rate may more nearly indicate that individuals now have a greater freedom of choice than before... The legal and social barriers to divorce have weakened... While many couples terminate relationships that are not working out, there are many more who continue with unhappy marriages or cohabiting relationships” (1997, Chapter 9, page 3).

People stay in unfulfilling relationships for a variety of reasons. For some it is difficult to admit failure by breaking off a relationship that is not working out. Others feel they have no choice for a better life outside the

relationship. People often stay in relationships out of a sense of moral and social obligation. This is even more prominent for marriage, in which there is a legal and often a sacred lifelong commitment. Most religions do not encourage divorce and some do not even allow it, despite the circumstances. There are great barriers to breaking off an unhappy relationship, and many people feel unable to conquer those barriers. The shared reality a couple creates isolates them in some ways from the larger society, and it is very difficult to separate oneself again once a couple is formed.

Proposed Research

Therefore, the purpose of this research is to compare the relationship satisfaction reported by married couples who cohabited prior to their marriage with the relationship satisfaction of married couples who did not cohabit premaritally. Prior research has demonstrated that relationship stability, or “staying married” may not be the best indicator of relationship success. This research will use respondents’ self-reported marital satisfaction as a measure of relationship success.

The following chapter will address data, hypotheses, variables and the sample.

Chapter Three

Research Methods & Data

Data for this research was taken from the General Social Survey conducted by the National Opinion Research Center with the University of Chicago. The General Social Survey has been conducted nearly every year since 1972 and selects a random sample of about 1500 U.S. residents each survey year. The interviewers are carefully trained and the survey contains 400-600 items. The interviews last approximately 90 minutes.

All survey items are carefully constructed, pretested and statistically analyzed before use. The items cover a variety of topics including respondent background characteristics, family of origin information, respondent behaviors and attitudes. Many items are used annually, so trends over time can be examined. The current research uses data collected during survey years 1988 and 1994, as they are the only years in which cohabitation history was examined.

This dataset was selected because of the large number of respondents interviewed, the use of random sampling to obtain respondents, the variety of items addressing life satisfaction, one's attitudes and feelings.

sociodemographic items, and the possibility of comparisons over time. Furthermore, access was easily available through the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research, of which this institution is a member.

Hypotheses

This research examines two hypotheses:

1. When controlling for sociodemographic characteristics, one-time cohabitators will report higher levels of relationship satisfaction than respondents who did not cohabit prior to marriage;
2. When controlling for sociodemographic characteristics, one-time cohabitators will express different attitudes toward marriage than noncohabitators.

Variables

Survey items were selected to measure the dependent variables relationship satisfaction and attitudes toward marriage and divorce. The items and responses are listed in Appendix I.

Marital Happiness

Respondents were asked to report how happy they were with their marriages. It was felt that this would measure one's relationship satisfaction, as defined in Hypothesis One.

General Happiness

Respondents were asked to report how happy they were with their lives in general. It was felt that this item would measure the life satisfaction of respondents.

Satisfaction with Other Domains of Life

Five items were selected which asked respondents to report their levels of satisfaction with specific domains of life. The items asked about one's satisfaction with family life, friendships, city of residence, health, and hobbies and nonworking activities. It was hoped that these five items would help to further define one's own personal happiness and levels of satisfaction with family and relationships.

Attitudes toward Marriage and Divorce

Seventeen items were selected which addressed respondent attitudes toward marriage and divorce. They are listed in Appendix I. They asked about such things as one's feelings about the difficulty of obtaining a divorce, advantages of marriage, and the role children play in marriage and divorce. These items were chosen to measure attitudes toward marriage and divorce as discussed in Hypothesis Two. Each item was recoded so that a high number indicates some level of agreement with the initial statement.

Sample Characteristics

A subsample of 936 was selected from the survey data. These respondents were currently married, had never been divorced, had spouses that had never been divorced, and were white. Of these, 18% respondents indicated they had cohabited before marriage, and 82% reported they had not cohabited before marriage. The mean age for the sample was 47.3 years and the mean marital duration was 24.9 years.

There were differences between the groups of cohabitators and noncohabitators. First, there was a statistically significant difference in age. The mean age for cohabitators was 33.6 years, while the mean age for noncohabitators was 50.2 years. Furthermore, cohabitators were married at a

later age, had fewer children and desired fewer children than noncohabitators. However, it is believed that some of these differences may be attributable to the difference in age.

In order to avoid differences due to age or length of marriage, it was determined that the study would examine couples married for seven or fewer years. First, this resulted in groups more similar in age. Additionally, any affect that cohabitation might have on marital happiness might reasonably be expected to dissipate after several years of marriage. Finally, the divorce rate is highest in the first seven years of marriage, so this was also an attempt to control for marital duration as a confounding variable. Age ranged between 20 and 41 years. The mean age was 27.13 and the mean marital duration was 3.82 years, which did not differ significantly by cohabitation status. The final subsample consisted of 144 respondents: 70 cohabitators and 74 noncohabitators. There were slightly fewer males respondents than females, about 45% males in each group. Most statistical analyses were conducted on the responses of this sample.

The following chapter will discuss the statistical analyses and research findings.

Chapter Four

Statistical Findings

This research compares levels of relationship satisfaction reported by married couples who cohabited prior to their marriage with the relationship satisfaction of married couples who did not cohabit premaritally. Prior research on cohabitation has tended to focus on relationship stability. However, due to the existence of stable unhappy marriages, relationship stability, or “staying married” may not be the best measure of relationship success. This research will instead use respondents’ self-reported marital satisfaction as a measure of relationship success. Other measures used include respondents’ self reported satisfaction with other domains of life, and their responses to items measuring attitudes toward marriage and divorce.

Although the literature suggests that differences exist between one-time cohabitators and serial cohabitators, those differences were unable to be examined in this research. Unfortunately, the survey only addressed that item in 1994, and none of the cohabitators in the subsample used for analysis indicated they had lived only with their current partner before marrying.

This makes testing the original hypotheses rather difficult. Therefore, cohabitators will not be differentiated by their number of partners.

Analysis

In this first phase of analysis, the dependent variable items addressing general happiness, marital happiness, and satisfaction with family life were examined by cohabitation status. It was originally thought that these items would adequately demonstrate if the data showed support for the first hypothesis. An analysis of variance was conducted (N=936). Of the three items, one was statistically significant by cohabitation status, but not in the direction hypothesized. Noncohabitators reported higher levels of general happiness than did cohabitators ($p=.004$).

In an effort to obtain more reliable information on the dependent variable, a factor analysis was conducted to see if a scale could be devised from the five satisfaction items selected: satisfaction with city of residence, satisfaction with family life, satisfaction with friendships, satisfaction with health, and satisfaction with hobbies and nonworking activities. Each item loaded above .49 on one factor, so the scores were combined to construct an index. After running an analysis of variance test, no statistically

significant differences were found between the Satisfaction Index scores of cohabitators and noncohabitators.

Table I

Rotated Factor Matrix – Satisfaction Index

Dependent Variable Item	Factor I	Factor II
Satisfaction with City	.49025	.06635
Satisfaction with Family Life	.63257	.44781
Satisfaction with Friendships	.71123	.15472
Satisfaction with Health	.67372	.06803
Satisfaction with Hobbies	.73767	.04381
Marital Happiness	-.02312	.87967
General Happiness	.24249	.74870

Although the two items addressing marital happiness and general happiness loaded highly on a second factor, they are analyzed as separate items in this research and are not combined into a scale.

Next, unstandardized residuals of the happiness and satisfaction means were calculated in order to control for possible confounding effects of age, education, marital duration, and sex. Then T-tests were run by cohabitation status so what remains is the variance in happiness and satisfaction independent of age, education, marital duration, and sex. There

is no significant difference by cohabitation status for the Satisfaction Index of Marital Happiness when taking these residuals into account. There was a significant difference between the General Happiness means by cohabitation status ($p=.005$) when taking these residuals into account, but in the opposite direction of that which was hypothesized. Noncohabitators were again found to have higher reported general happiness scores than cohabitators.

Dependent Variable Response Distribution

Distributions for each dependent variable item were examined by cohabitation status. Respondents tended to respond favorably to most items addressed and the distributions were highly skewed. Dependent variable items were recoded into dichotomous variables in an effort to smooth the highly skewed distributions. Items were recoded as follows:

Marital happiness values 1-2 were combined.

General happiness values 1-2 were combined.

Satisfaction with city values 1-5 and 6-7 were combined.

Satisfaction with family life values 1-6 were combined.

Satisfaction with friendships values 1-6 were combined.

Satisfaction with health values 1-5 and 6-7 were combined.

Satisfaction with hobbies values 1-5 and 6-7 were combined.

Table II

Marital Happiness

	Count	Percent
1=Not too happy	16	1.7%
2=Pretty happy	321	34.4%
3=Very happy	596	63.9%
Total	933	100.0%

Dichotomized

	Count	Percent
0	337	36.1%
1	596	63.9%
Total	933	100.0%

Table III

General Happiness

	Count	Percent
1=Not too happy	53	5.7%
2=Pretty happy	480	51.3%
3=Very happy	402	43.0%
Total	935	100.0%

Dichotomized

	Count	Percent
0	533	57.0%
1	402	43.0%
Total	935	100.0%

Table IV

Satisfaction with City

	Count	Percent
1=None	6	1.2%
2=A little	16	3.2%
3=Some	24	4.7%
4=A fair amount	79	15.6%
5=Quite a bit	93	18.3%
6=A great deal	190	37.5%
7=A very great deal	99	19.5%
Total	507	100.0%

Dichotomized

	Count	Percent
0	218	43.0%
1	289	57.0%
Total	507	100.0%

Table V

Satisfaction with Family Life

	Count	Percent
1=None	1	0.2%
2=A little	3	0.6%
3=Some	2	0.4%
4=A fair amount	10	2.0%
5=Quite a bit	29	5.7%
6=A great deal	187	37.0%
7=A very great deal	274	54.2%
Total	506	100.1%

Dichotomized

	Count	Percent
0	232	45.8%
1	274	54.2%
Total	506	100.0%

Table VI

Satisfaction with Friendships

	Count	Percent
1=None	0	0.0%
2=A little	5	1.0%
3=Some	11	2.2%
4=A fair amount	41	8.1%
5=Quite a bit	81	16.0%
6=A great deal	207	40.8%
7=A very great deal	162	32.0%
Total	507	100.1%

Dichotomized

	Count	Percent
0	345	68.0%
1	162	32.0%
Total	507	100.0%

Table VII

Satisfaction with Health

	Count	Percent
1=None	6	1.2%
2=A little	20	3.9%
3=Some	22	4.3%
4=A fair amount	66	13.0%
5=Quite a bit	86	17.0%
6=A great deal	168	33.1%
7=A very great deal	139	27.4%
Total	507	99.9%

Dichotomized

	Count	Percent
0	200	39.4%
1	307	60.6%
Total	507	100.0%

Table VIII

Satisfaction with Hobbies

	Count	Percent
1=None	9	1.8%
2=A little	10	2.0%
3=Some	16	3.2%
4=A fair amount	59	11.7%
5=Quite a bit	90	17.8%
6=A great deal	202	39.9%
7=A very great deal	120	23.7%
Total	506	100.1%

Dichotomized

	Count	Percent
0	184	36.4%
1	322	63.6%
Total	506	100.0%

Next, another factor analysis of the recoded dependent variable items was conducted. Each of the five satisfaction items loaded high on one factor, so these items were again combined to form an index of satisfaction. Again, although the items addressing marital happiness and general happiness loaded highly on a second factor, they are analyzed as separate items in this research and are not combined into a scale.

Table IX
Rotated Factor Matrix – Satisfaction Index
Using Dichotomized Variable Responses

Dependent Variable Item	Factor I	Factor II
Satisfaction with City	.55062	.02840
Satisfaction with Family Life	.57524	.35795
Satisfaction with Friends	.61507	.20434
Satisfaction with Health	.59983	.06874
Satisfaction with Hobbies	.71964	.01785
Marital Happiness	.01980	.85837
General Happiness	.19157	.78076

However, the findings were not significantly different from the previous analysis. General happiness scores are significantly higher for noncohabitators than cohabitators. There is no difference between the scores of noncohabitators and cohabitators for marital happiness and the satisfaction index.

Subsample Limiting Marital Duration to 7 years or Less

Because age and marital duration differed greatly between cohabitators and noncohabitators, a subsample of respondents was selected that had been married for seven years or less. It was believed that comparing

groups more similar in age and marital duration would provide more accurate findings. Additionally, any affect that cohabitation might have on marital happiness might reasonably be expected to dissipate after several years of marriage. All statistical analyses conducted from this point forward are based on this subsample.

The final subsample consisted of 144 respondents: 70 cohabitators and 74 noncohabitators. Age ranged between 20 and 41 years. The mean age was 27.13 and the mean marital duration was 3.82 years, which did not differ significantly by cohabitation status. There were slightly fewer males than females, about 45% males in each group.

The recoded dichotomous variables were used for analysis. Remember that higher means indicate greater satisfaction. As before, the only variable that is significantly different by cohabitation status is general happiness. Noncohabitators continue to have higher scores than cohabitators. Marital happiness and the five item satisfaction index do not differ significantly by cohabitation status, although it is notable that cohabitators have a higher mean for the satisfaction index.

Table X

General Happiness

	Cohabitors	Noncohabitors	Sig. of F	Sig. of Gamma
Group Mean	.2857	.4730	p=.021	p=.018

Table XI

Marital Happiness

	Cohabitors	Noncohabitors	Sig. of F	Sig. of Gamma
Group Mean	.667	.712	p=.560	p=.556

Table XII

Satisfaction Index

	Cohabitors	Noncohabitors	Sig. of F	Sig. of Gamma
Group Mean	3.270	2.804	p=.147	p=.194

Cohabitors report lower levels of general happiness, but it was not apparent what domains of life they were unhappy with. To try to get more insight into this area, each satisfaction item was examined separately by cohabitation status. Please note that high scores indicate greater levels of satisfaction than do low scores.

Table XIII
Satisfaction Index Items

Satisfaction with:	Cohabitors Mean	Noncohabitators Mean	Sig. of F	Sig. of Gamma
City	.487	.435	p=.643	p=.638
Family Life	.568	.522	p=.682	p=.676
Friendships	.647	.698	p=.654	p=.651
Health	.757	.565	p=.070	p=.060
Hobbies	.811	.587	p=.029	p=.021

Table XIII shows that cohabitators have higher means for all items but one, satisfaction with friendships. However, only one item differs to a statistically significant degree. Cohabitators tended to report significantly higher satisfaction levels with hobbies and nonworking activities than did noncohabitators (F-test $p=.029$).

It seems strange that noncohabitators reported having higher general happiness scores, while their satisfaction with domains of life is not higher than those of cohabitators. In fact, cohabitators actually indicated having greater satisfaction with hobbies and nonworking activities than noncohabitators.

Sex Differences

In order to further explore possible differences in satisfaction, sex was added as an independent variable and each item was analyzed again. It appears that there are three significant findings: reports of general happiness and satisfaction with health are significantly higher for noncohabiting males than cohabiting males (gamma $p=.043$ and $p=.007$, respectively); and satisfaction with hobbies is significantly higher for cohabiting females than noncohabiting females (gamma $p=.043$). These were the only significant findings for sex differences by cohabitation status.

Differences between Cohabitors & Noncohabitors

There were a few differences between characteristics of cohabitators and noncohabitators. There was a significant difference between the age at marriage for cohabitators and noncohabitators. The mean for cohabitators was 24.1 years while the mean for noncohabitators was 22.5 years ($p=.017$). This is consistent with previous research, which indicates that cohabitators tend to marry slightly later. Intuitively, it makes sense that cohabitators would marry slightly later. Cohabitators are often living with a partner at the age that noncohabitators are getting married.

Cohabitors reported being significantly less politically conservative than did noncohabitators, as was expected ($p=.004$). Cohabitors also indicated that the ideal family had fewer children than did noncohabitators, 2.34 children compared with 2.63 children, respectively ($p=.04$). However, both groups had about the same number of children. The mean number of children for cohabitators was .86 and the mean for noncohabitators was .77 for those couples married seven years or less.

Attitudes toward Marriage & Divorce

A number of items addressing feelings about marriage and divorce were examined. Of seventeen items, only one differed by cohabitation status. Cohabitors were much more likely than noncohabitators to agree with the statement, "Personal freedom is more important than the companionship of marriage" ($p=.037$). Means and significance values for these seventeen items are displayed in Table XIV.

Table XIV
Attitudes toward Marriage and Divorce
by Cohabitation Status

Note: Unless otherwise specified, the responses to each item range from 1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree. High numbers show agreement with the statement.	Did Cohabit	Did Not Cohabit	Sig. of F-value
1. Personal freedom is more important than the companionship of marriage.	1.75	1.33	p=.037
2. Should divorce in this country be easier or more difficult to obtain than it is now? (1=Easier, 3=More Difficult.)	1.97	1.96	p=.925
3. Married people are generally happier than unmarried people.	2.33	2.55	p=.123
4. The main advantage of marriage is that it gives financial security.	1.51	1.20	p=.069
5. The main purpose of marriage these days is to have children.	1.04	1.14	p=.457
6. It is better to have a bad marriage than no marriage at all.	1.59	1.62	p=.757
7. People who want children ought to get married.	2.47	2.75	p=.134
8. A single mother can bring up her child as well as a married couple.	1.91	1.76	p=.566
9. A single father can bring up his child as well as a married couple.	1.84	1.59	p=.540
10. Couples don't take marriage seriously enough when divorce is easily available.	2.53	2.67	p=.606

11. In general, would you say that the law now makes it easy or difficult for people who want to get divorced? (1=Very Easy, 5=Very Difficult.)	1.97	1.87	p=.713
12. And in general, how easy or difficult do you think the law should make it for couples without young children to get a divorce? (1=Very Easy, 5=Very Difficult.)	2.48	2.93	p=.106
13. And what about couples with young children? How easy or difficult should the law make it for them to get a divorce? (1=Very Easy, 5=Very Difficult.)	3.67	3.37	p=.218
14. When a marriage is troubled and unhappy, do you think it is generally better for the children if the couple stays together or gets divorced? (1=Much Worse to Divorce, 5=Much Better to Divorce.)	2.89	2.73	p=.525
15. And when a marriage is troubled and unhappy, is it generally better for the wife if the couple stays together or gets divorced? (1=Much Worse to Divorce, 5=Much Better to Divorce.)	3.00	2.76	p=.214
16. And when a marriage is troubled and unhappy, is it generally better for the husband if the couple stays together or gets divorced? (1=Much Worse to Divorce, 5=Much Better to Divorce.)	2.76	2.77	p=.700

17. Do you agree or disagree... Divorce is usually the best solution when a couple can't seem to work out their marriage problems. (1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree.)	1.53	1.28	p=.384
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Support for Hypotheses

1. When controlling for sociodemographic characteristics, one-time cohabitators will report higher levels of relationship satisfaction than respondents who did not cohabit prior to marriage;
2. When controlling for sociodemographic characteristics, one-time cohabitators will express different attitudes toward marriage than noncohabitators.

Hypothesis One was not supported by the data. Cohabitators did not report higher marital happiness than noncohabitators. In fact, there was no difference between levels of marital happiness by cohabitation history. Hypothesis Two was supported. There was a difference in attitudes toward marriage and divorce on one item of seventeen. Overall, however, there was little difference between cohabitators and noncohabitators when examining

dependent variable items. In the next section, possible reasons for these findings will be addressed.

Chapter Five

Discussion of Findings

As stated in the introduction, it is insufficient to evaluate the success of a relationship by its longevity alone. The purpose of this research was to examine the satisfaction and well-being of the people involved in a marriage relationship, and to see if there were differences by cohabitation history.

There were two hypotheses tested:

1. When controlling for sociodemographic characteristics, one-time cohabitators will report higher levels of relationship satisfaction than respondents who did not cohabit prior to marriage;
2. When controlling for sociodemographic characteristics, one-time cohabitators will express different attitudes toward marriage than noncohabitators.

The first hypothesis was not supported. There was no difference between the levels of marital happiness reported by cohabitators and noncohabitators. Curiously enough, noncohabitators reported having greater general or overall happiness than did cohabitators. However, there was no

difference between cohabitators and noncohabitators when examining their reports of satisfaction with specific domains of life, being satisfaction with city of residence, family life, friendships, and health, with one exception: cohabitators reported greater satisfaction with their hobbies and nonworking activities than did noncohabitators.

Although the first hypothesis was not supported, this is still a theoretically interesting finding. Most previous research has focused on the inconsistent finding that cohabitators are more likely to divorce. The underlying assumption is that cohabitators must be unhappy with their relationships to have such a high divorce rate. As discussed in the literature review, some researchers have suggested that cohabitators make poor partners because of their background characteristics and attitudes toward marriage. Others have suggested that cohabitators select less compatible or desirable partners. This research demonstrates that no differences were found in the marital satisfaction of cohabitators and noncohabitators during the first seven years of marriage.

The second hypothesis was supported. Of the seventeen items measuring attitudes toward marriage and divorce, only one differed by cohabitation history. Cohabitators were much more likely than noncohabitators

to agree with the statement, “Personal freedom is more important than the companionship of marriage.”

This may help to explain the cohabitators’ reports of greater satisfaction with hobbies and nonworking activities. Emphasis on the importance of personal freedom within a relationship is likely to allow greater tolerance for a spouse’s hobbies and nonworking activities than would be the case for a couple in which companionship was more highly valued than personal freedom.

Very little difference was found between the attitudes of cohabitators and noncohabitators toward marriage and divorce. This supports work by Forste & Tanfer (1996), who indicate that marriage itself increases one’s commitment to marriage, regardless of cohabitation history as well as research by DeMaris & MacDonald (1993), who report that after marriage, attitudes about marital permanence do not differ by cohabitation history.

It has previously been assumed that cohabitators are very different from noncohabitators. Perhaps as cohabitation has become more common, there are fewer differences to be found and studied. As cohabitation becomes a less deviant behavior, the characteristics of cohabitators and their relationships are certain to become less nontraditional as well. As cohabitation is becoming institutionalized, couples are as likely to cohabit

as not prior to marriage. Cohabitation has become a stage of intimacy in a relationship and is no longer a deviant practice. More research should be conducted with current data that can better analyze these trends.

Surprises

There were some unexpected findings in this research, which are listed below.

1. I was surprised to see that cohabitators reported greater general happiness than noncohabitators. That is the opposite of what I had anticipated. This is especially puzzling when coupled with the fact that cohabitators did not report being less satisfied than noncohabitators with any one specific domain of life. In fact, cohabitators reported being more satisfied with their hobbies and nonworking activities than did noncohabitators.
2. I was surprised that marital happiness did not differ by cohabitation experience. I had hoped that cohabitators would report greater marital happiness than noncohabitators. However, in light of the high divorce rate of cohabitators, some would have expected that cohabitators would report lower marital happiness than noncohabitators.

3. I was initially surprised that cohabitators reported greater satisfaction with hobbies and nonworking activities. However, this seems to lend support for the idea that cohabitators emphasize individuality in relationships.
4. I was initially surprised that cohabitators reported greater agreement than noncohabitators with the item “Personal freedom is more important than the companionship of marriage.” This also seems to highlight the importance of individuality in relationships for cohabitators.

Possible Explanations

Initially, the purpose of this research was to examine the quality of relationships in which the partners had cohabited prior to marriage. Although one of the hypotheses was not supported, it is important to reexamine the findings in order to allow ourselves to be instructed by the data.

The failure of the data to support the hypotheses is an interesting finding which has implications for prevailing ideologies on cohabitation. First, the ideas that cohabitation will either improve marital satisfaction or, alternatively, decrease marital quality, are not supported. Cohabitation

history appears to have no significant effect on marital happiness for couples in the first seven years of marriage.

General Happiness

It is possible that the cohabitators' lower reports of general happiness are due to the lack of social support for cohabitation. Although a common lifestyle, cohabitation is not generally encouraged by one's family and friends. In contrast, traditional couples who marry without living together first are strongly encouraged to remain in that marital relationship by family, friends, and coworkers as well as formal institutions such as employers, financial institutions, and the government. Everyone loves a wedding, and married couples lend stability to a community. Cohabitators are not given the same level of social support, and are often encouraged to end the relationship. Once the support of family and friends has been lost, it is difficult to regain. This lack of social support in the beginning of a cohabiting relationship could continue on through marriage. It may also be difficult for cohabitators to make the transition from cohabiting as separate individuals to living together as a married couple. This could potentially lead to cohabitators' lower reports of general happiness when compared with married couples who did not cohabit.

Additionally, it is possible that the cohabitators' report of lower general happiness is due to their higher expectations. This would support findings by DeMaris & Leslie (1984), who found that cohabitators reported lower scores on perceived quality of relationship communication and relationship satisfaction than married couples, but indicated that this may be due in part to cohabitators' higher relationship expectations or to reluctance to conform to traditional marital roles. Brown & Booth (1996) also found that cohabitators tended to report having lower relationship quality than married couples reported, while they reported having significantly more frequent interaction with their partners than married couples reported. They suggest this is due to cohabitators' higher relationship expectations. Higher expectations could result in more critical evaluation on the part of cohabitators, resulting in perceptions of dissatisfaction and thus lower reports of general happiness.

It is possible that marriage is not the same for cohabitators as noncohabitators. Clearly personal freedom and individuality are important to cohabitators. Cohabitators tend to be thought of as innovators, willing to experiment with a relationship before committing to marriage. Perhaps this culture of individuality causes cohabitators to create different kinds of marriages - marriages in which individuality and personal freedom are

more important than the companionship of marriage, one's hobbies are respected and encouraged, and in which marital happiness does not suffer. Doubtless, the greater age at marriage for cohabitators contributes to this formation of individuality.

I would argue that the "traditional" marriage is an institution in which the whole, the couple, is greater than the sum of its parts, and the partners cease to be individuals. Marriage is the ultimate institution, blessed by God and sacred in the eyes of man. For the many people who don't believe there are any reasonable alternatives to marriage, it is easier to 'look at the bright side' and make the most of a mediocre marriage. Based on the cohabitators' emphasis on individuality, I would guess they would be more likely to openly voice any dissatisfaction they were experiencing with any aspect of life, and marital happiness would be no exception. I think that traditionalists (in this case, noncohabitators) would be more likely to make presumptions of happiness. Cohabitators enter a relationship with a more critical view of things – 'We'll try it for a while, and see if things work out.' There is a conscious review and analysis built into the system before making a more definite commitment to marriage. There is more dialogue about what is and is not acceptable within the relationship. Only if the relationship passes the standards of both parties does it continue and

progress to marriage. There seems to be more equality built into this kind of a relationship, which emphasizes individuality and personal freedom within the marriage. Additionally, people who cohabit tend to choose partners with different ascribed characteristics than their own, but more similar achieved characteristics. This heterogamous partner selection may be a factor that contributes to the individuality of cohabitators' relationships.

When a "traditional" couple gets married, there isn't the same review process. A couple gets married, and that's the end of it. There isn't the same ongoing decision process to stay or go, and there's a lot more social pressure to stay in the relationship. While cohabitators spend a year or more defining the relationship as it will exist after marriage, I think traditionalists are not as well prepared for what to expect, and may not have anticipated anything beyond the wedding day. As I was told when I asked a traditionalist family member why she chose to marry, "It seemed like the thing to do at the time." There doesn't seem to be as much analysis conducted in preparation for the marriage relationship.

Attitudes Toward Marriage and Divorce

This sample is very selective, consisting of couples who remain married during the first years of marriage. Those couples that divorce are

not included in this sample. This could help to explain the overwhelming congruence in attitudes toward marriage and divorce. Perhaps the similarity in attitudes reflects not so much the similarity of cohabitators and noncohabitators as it is a reflection of couples in the first seven years of marriage.

Personal Freedom & Hobbies

One important difference between cohabitators and noncohabitators was the emphasis on personal freedom to pursue one's individual interests. This was displayed in the cohabitators' agreement with the statement "Personal freedom is more important than the companionship of marriage" and their reports of significantly higher satisfaction with hobbies and nonworking activities. Hobbies ideally provide a freedom of choice, a high level of engagement, and pleasure (Gunter & Gunter), which seem to fit in with the cohabitators' emphasis on personal freedom within a marriage. It is possible that cohabitators have a different model for marriage, which allows a greater degree of personal freedom and individuality.

Cohort Differences

It's interesting to look at the traditional/nontraditional comparisons. In this same mode of thinking, cohort differences were examined. It was thought that there might be a difference by cohort in expectations for family life. All the Baby Boomers were selected out by year of birth 1946-1964, and the Generation Xers were born 1965 or after. There was no significant difference in the number of cohabitators in either cohort. As a group, the older generation reported significantly less satisfaction with family ($p=.021$) and marriage (.029) than the younger respondents. In fact, each of the seven happiness and satisfaction items followed this pattern, although the numbers for the remaining five items were not found to be statistically significant.

It is unclear why the Baby Boomers reported less satisfaction than did Gen Xers. Perhaps the differences are solely age-related and there is no real cohort difference. The Baby Boomers were married at later ages than did the Generation Xers, so it is possible that this is a function of age or marrying later in life. It's also possible that the Baby Boomers were shaped by the 1950s perfect family image of their youth and they are disillusioned because these impossibly high standards have not been met. Perhaps the Gen Xers are just happy to be married, in an age when a large proportion of

their parents are divorced. Of course it is entirely possible that these findings are just a statistical anomaly. However, this would be a very interesting topic for future research.

Existing Theory Reexamined

As discussed previously, both existing theoretical perspectives, the cohabitation effect and the selectivity hypothesis are inadequate for evaluating cohabitation and its effects on subsequent marriages. These existing theories focus on perceived differences (such as relationship duration) between cohabiting couples and married couples, which are absolutely incomparable. The existing theories cannot explain similarities between married couples who did and did not cohabit. It is apparent that we need to begin thinking about cohabitation differently, and that there is a need to develop theory that will address differences in marital expectations and satisfaction by cohabitation experience.

Limitations

Like all studies, this study has some limitations. First, the sample was quite small. Most of the data was conducted on a sample of 144. Because of the small number of cohabitators, data was taken from two

separate survey years, 1988 and 1994. Although no differences were found between the survey years, ideally the data would have all been gathered at the same time. Additionally, it is possible that the respondents tended to give socially desirable answers to the items on life satisfaction.

Although the sample was small, responses were selected from a random sample dataset. The sample consisted of whites in their first marriage, married for seven or fewer years, to partners also in a first marriage, during the years 1988 or 1994. Results may be different when the variables of race, ethnicity, and social class are added.

Recommendations for Future Research

I would offer the following recommendations for future research on cohabitation and marital satisfaction:

1. Measure several aspects of the marital relationship, not just marital happiness. Additional items could provide more insight into one's relationship. I would recommend items be constructed which inquire about the amount of time partners spend together, the kinds of activities shared, methods of communication and conflict management, allocation of household duties, and feelings about one's partner, as well as marital satisfaction.

2. Inquire about the number of years a couple cohabited prior to marriage and the number of previous cohabiting relationships one was involved in. According to previous research, these variables could prove useful in defining different kinds of cohabiting relationships. It would also be helpful to examine the transition to marriage by looking at circumstances such as unplanned pregnancy and financial pressure in order to obtain information on the decision-making process that leads to marriage.
3. Obtain information on specific characteristics of a couple's cohabiting relationship and compare this with characteristics of their marriage. Do the relationships differ? If so, how have they changed? How do the people in the relationship feel about it? Is this finding a common one, and could it be generalized as part of the intimacy process as a couple moves from cohabitation to marriage? For example, who handles the household income and finances? Who performs household tasks? Who takes primary responsibility for child care? Who negotiates when there is a conflict? These types of questions can help address the transition to marriage.

4. Get survey responses from both partners so that relationship satisfaction can be measured from the perspectives of both parties involved, as feelings often differ.
5. Examine cohort differences. Although cohabitators tend to be young, there may be cohort differences that exist regardless of cohabitation history, particularly in comparing Baby Boomers and Generation Xers. It is possible that marriage has become a different institution altogether in the last thirty years, and that the generational effects are a reflection of this change in attitudes.
6. Devise objective measures of relationship interaction and quality. Subjective measures are only useful if the comparison groups have similar expectations. Objective items could collect information on actual behavior patterns within the relationship.
7. As I have done, avoid comparing actively cohabiting couples with married couples. It is very clear that for the majority of couples cohabitation is a stage of intimacy, not an alternative to marriage. Therefore it is irrelevant to compare the quality of relationships across groups.

Conclusion

Cohabitation is an increasingly common stage of intimate relationships, often preceding but rarely replacing marriage. It is still generally considered to be an alternative living arrangement, but is becoming institutionalized. It is important to find out what effects cohabitation may have on marriage, since about half of all couples live together before marrying. The transition from cohabitation to marriage is another area that needs further research. The dynamics of marriages involving cohabitants have been largely ignored, as most work has tended to focus instead on the divorce rates of cohabitants. There is a need for theory that explains these findings. It is clear that existing theory on cohabitation does not apply to the marriages of cohabitants. Because cohabitants tend to choose mates with ascribed characteristics different from their own, their marriages may be more individualistic. In fact, those who marry following cohabitation may have a different model for marriage. It is my hope that this study will encourage, challenge and guide future work in the area of cohabitation and marital satisfaction.

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Appendix

Survey Items

The following survey items were selected to measure the dependent variables relationship satisfaction and attitudes toward marriage and divorce. The items and responses are listed below. Responses indicating “Don’t Know” or “No Answer” are excluded from analysis and are not listed below.

General Happiness

“Taken all together, how would you say things are these days—would you say that you are very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?”

Very happy

Pretty happy

Not too happy

Marital Happiness

“Taking all things together, how would you describe your marriage?
Would you say that your marriage is very happy, pretty happy, or not too
happy?”

Very happy

Pretty happy

Not too happy

Satisfaction with Other Domains of Life

The following instructions preceded each of the following five items. Each
item was followed by responses numbered one through seven.

“For each area of life I am going to name, tell me the number that shows
how much satisfaction you get from that area.”

1. The city or place you live in.

A very great deal

A great deal

Quite a bit

A fair amount

Some

A little

None

2. Your non-working activities—hobbies and so on.

A very great deal

A great deal

Quite a bit

A fair amount

Some

A little

None

3. Your family life.

A very great deal

A great deal

Quite a bit

A fair amount

Some

A little

None

4. Your friendships.

A very great deal

A great deal

Quite a bit

A fair amount

Some

A little

None

5. Your health and physical condition.

A very great deal

A great deal

Quite a bit

A fair amount

Some

A little

None

For analysis purposes, the dependent variable items measuring happiness or satisfaction were recoded so that a high score indicates a greater level of satisfaction.

Attitudes toward Marriage and Divorce

The survey also included some items which addressed attitudes toward marriage and divorce. The following seventeen items were selected for analysis.

1. Personal freedom is more important than the companionship of marriage.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Neither agree or disagree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

2. Should divorce in this country be easier or more difficult to obtain than it is now?

Easier

Stay as is

More Difficult

3. Married people are generally happier than unmarried people.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Neither agree or disagree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

4. The main advantage of marriage is that it gives financial security.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Neither agree or disagree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

5. The main purpose of marriage these days is to have children.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Neither agree or disagree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

6. It is better to have a bad marriage than no marriage at all.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Neither agree or disagree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

7. People who want children ought to get married.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Neither agree or disagree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

8. A single mother can bring up her child as well as a married couple.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Neither agree or disagree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

9. A single father can bring up his child as well as a married couple.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Neither agree or disagree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

10. Couples don't take marriage seriously enough when divorce is easily available.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Neither agree or disagree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

11. In general, would you say that the law now makes it easy or difficult for people who want to get divorced?

Very easy

Fairly easy

Neither easy nor difficult

Fairly difficult

Very difficult

12. And in general, how easy or difficult do you think the law should make it for couples without young children to get a divorce?

Very easy

Fairly easy

Neither easy nor difficult

Fairly difficult

Very difficult

13. And what about couples with young children? How easy or difficult should the law make it for them to get a divorce?

Very easy

Fairly easy

Neither easy nor difficult

Fairly difficult

Very difficult

14. When a marriage is troubled and unhappy, do you think it is generally better for the children if the couple stays together or gets divorced?

Much better to divorce

Better to divorce

Worse to divorce

Much worse to divorce

15. And when a marriage is troubled and unhappy, is it generally better for the wife if the couple stays together or gets divorced?

Much better to divorce

Better to divorce

Worse to divorce

Much worse to divorce

16. And when a marriage is troubled and unhappy, is it generally better for the husband if the couple stays together or gets divorced?

Much better to divorce

Better to divorce

Worse to divorce

Much worse to divorce

17. Do you agree or disagree... Divorce is usually the best solution when a couple can't seem to work out their marriage problems.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Neither agree or disagree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

The items were recoded so that a high score indicates agreement with the statement.