

Cohabitation and its effects on relationships and marriage research proposal samp...

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Cohabitation and its Effects on Relationships and Marriage

Introduction

Popular media and scholarly research both show statistically that cohabitation among couples is on the rise. The increase in cohabitation has changed family dynamics and attitudes about marriage among couples and society. Now that cohabitation has been more acceptable to society for at least the past three decades, it will be interesting to see what affect it had on relationships, marriage, and divorce over the past few years.

The first question to explore will be whether or not cohabitation leads to divorce. Couples often rationalize their choice to live together before marriage by seeing cohabitation as a “ trial run” before making the decision to marry. Whether or not this works is a question to be answered.

The second question to be explored is if cohabitation harms relationships. Are there effects of cohabitation that are negative for the individuals and the couple during the cohabitation, effects that can later impact a marriage? How do couples who cohabit or have cohabited before marriage view the quality of their relationship versus couples that did not cohabit?

The third question to be explored is the reason for a greater number of divorces among couples that cohabit before marriage. The previous questions may shed some light on this issue.

These issues are important for society to understand as they make choices about their own relationships, as well as for people such as counselors, clergy, medical personnel, and others who provide information and advice to couples. A better understanding of this issue for all the previously mentioned people can help increase the quality of relationships,

Literature Review

Susan Brown and Alan Booth's 1996 publication explores a comparison of relationship quality in cohabitation versus marriage. Variables considered in the study are the presence of biological children, previous union experience, marital intentions, and relationship stressors (Brown, and Booth: 670-672). Their analysis of these factors in evaluating relationship quality is taken from the 1987-1988 National Survey of Families and Households, and they restrict their analysis to " Black and White respondents under the age of 48 who are in marital or cohabiting relationships of no more than 5 years' duration" (Brown, and Booth 1996: 672). The results of their research shows " the correlations between cohabitation and other variables are in expected directions" (Brown, and Booth: 673). A significant negative difference is found between marrieds and cohabitators in four out of five dimensions, including disagreement, fairness, happiness, and conflict management, but not interaction. They discovered that not only do plans to wed affect relationship quality, but also can be affected by relationship quality (Brown, and Booth: 674). The biggest predictors of plans to wed were previous marital experience, then duration and cohabitation experience (Brown, and Booth: 676). The presence of children, whether biological or from previous unions, is the same in both cohabitators who plan to wed and those who do not, and is associated with greater disagreement, less interaction, and less happiness (Brown & Booth 676).

Kamp Dush, Cohan, and Amato's 2003 publication compares cohabiting couples between the years 1964-1980 and 1981-1997, seeing if there is a difference in the qualities of relationships between the earlier group, when

cohabiting was less common, and the more recent group, when cohabiting became more common (539). It explores common theories of why cohabiting couples experience a lower quality of relationship than married couples. First is the selection perspective, which “ assumes that people who cohabit before marriage differ in certain ways from noncohabitators” that increase the chance of divorce (Kamp Dush et al. 2003: 540). The opposing view, the experience of cohabitation perspective, “ assumes that cohabitation itself increases the likelihood of marital dysfunction above and beyond the characteristics that spouses bring to their relationships” (Kamp Dush et al. 2003: 541). Their data comes from a two decade longitudinal study of married people from the two aforementioned generations (Kamp Dush et al. 541). Their results showed that regardless of generation and demographics, from the experience cohabitation perspective, there was no dissipation in negative consequences of cohabitation (Kamp Dush et. al. 2003: 545).

Michael Svarer’s 2004 publication aims to present “ new evidence concerning the relationship between premarital cohabitation and divorce” (523). He explores the Danish marriage market because premarital cohabitation has been more common there since the 1960s. The data comes from the Intergrated Database for Labour Market Research from Statistics Denmark, which includes a random subsample of people born between 1 January 1955 through 1 January 1965 who were followed from 1980 to 1995 (Svarer 2004: 524-525). The main finding of this study is that “ premarital cohabitation is negatively correlated with the risk of divorce” (Svarer 2004: 526). A comparison with 19 other countries supports this conclusion; the United States is not included (Svarer 2004: 532).

Julie A. Phillips and Megan M. Sweeny's 2005 publication explores the differences between racial and ethnic groups with a focus on premarital cohabitation (296). They explore the data of the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth to see if "the nature of the association between premarital cohabitation and marital disruption varies across racial and ethnic groups in the United States" (Phillips, and Sweeny 2005: 297). Their sample includes only cohabitators who eventually marry, and they find that White and Black women are more likely to cohabit before marriage than Mexican American women (Phillips, and Sweeny 2005: 302). The researchers find that there is "a large and significant destabilizing effect of premarital cohabitation on marriages among White women but no significant association between premarital cohabitation and disruption among Black or Mexican American women" (Phillips, and Sweeny 2005: 309). However, there was no significant difference found across the racial groups who had multiple cohabitations (Phillips, and Sweeny 2005: 310).

Methods

The latest data from the National Survey of Families and Households was updated on August 11, 2008. The data from Susan Brown and Alan Booth's 1996 publication will be compared with the more up to date information with a similar analysis. Similar areas will be explored such as disagreement, fairness, happiness, and conflict management, and interaction. In addition, the presence of children and previous experience with cohabitation will be included with the same factors.

This data will be appropriate to use because it has provided significant

results before with which the current results can be compared. Additionally, more recent research publications will be searched with to see whether they correlate with the data from this survey or if they find other differences answering the research questions.

Appendix

The 2008 update of the Survey of Families and Households is found at the web site <http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/nsfh/>

References

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