

Premarital Cohabitation and Marital Quality: A Reassessment

Prior research has established a relationship between premarital cohabitation and subsequent marital outcomes, with cohabitators generally reporting lower marital quality. Using data from approximately 3,000 women from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 cohort, and borrowing heavily from the strengths of propensity scores, we employ a novel method for concurrently examining the impact of two perspectives (social selection and experience of cohabitation) commonly used to explain the negative relationship outcomes cohabitators experience. After decomposing the effect of cohabitation into the part due to selection and the part due to the experience of cohabitation, results reveal that cohabitation is negatively related to marital happiness and positively related to marital conflict. Our work supports prior research in that selection mechanisms do appear to be operating to simultaneously increase the odds of cohabitation while decreasing marital quality. A closer examination of the problem, however, also reveals a robust, negative effect of the experience of cohabitation as well. This paper's primary contributions, then, are the ability to model selection into and the experience of cohabitation in the same model and the finding of a robust effect of cohabitation on marital quality. These results also serve to underscore the complex pathways between union formation, family structure, and marital outcomes and stress the need for more research on the topic.

Interest in how premarital cohabitation impacts the individuals in these unions and the quality of the marriages they form has motivated research on the topic since at least the 1970s (Stein, 1970). Subsequent scholarly interest has focused on differences in both marital quality and marital instability, with results generally supporting the proposition that, on average, cohabiters tend to have poorer marital quality and experience more marital instability than those who move directly into marriage (Brown & Booth, 1996; Reinhold, 2010; Smock, 2000).

However, the true effect of cohabitation on marital quality, to the extent that it exists, cannot be reliably estimated simply by including a variable for whether an individual has cohabited or not prior to marriage. This is because the observed relation between cohabitation and marital outcomes is comprised of at least two parts—selection into and the experience of cohabitation. Consequently, scholars have proposed two theories focusing on each of these aspects of cohabitation. The first, which we term the social selection perspective, refers to the idea that people who cohabit are different from people who enter directly into marriage, and it is these differences between the two groups that are responsible for the negative relationship outcomes that cohabiters experience. Unmeasured differences such as nontraditional values and attitudes or poor relationship skills may increase the risk of marital instability, poor marital quality, and cohabitation. Other studies have explicitly identified that those who cohabit are less likely to be religious (Glezer, 1997; Stanley, Whitton & Markman, 2004; Thornton, Axinn & Hill, 1992), advocate greater gender equality (Le Bourdais & Lapierre-Adamcyk, 2004), tend to report lower levels of education (Bumpass, Sweet & Cherlin, 1991; McGinnis, 2003) and are more apt to have experienced a parental divorce (Dush, Cohan & Amato, 2003; Glezer, 1997).

Individuals who select into cohabitation may also hold more pessimistic views regarding the stability of intimate relationships because of parental divorce and other family transitions

experienced in childhood. As a result, these individuals may also be more likely to view relationships as inherently unstable and therefore be more accepting of relationship dissolution than those who do not select into cohabitation (Brown & Booth, 1996). Such beliefs, if acted upon, could result in marital instability and poor quality marriages.

Selection mechanisms regarding homogamy may be at play as well. Mate selection studies find evidence that, when compared to cohabiting couples, married couples are more homogamous in age, religion, and race-ethnicity; the evidence on educational homogamy is mixed. Although statistically significant, any marital issues arising from these differences tend to be modest in size and appear to be declining over time (Smock, 2000).

In contrast, the second theory refers to the experience of cohabitation. Scholars highlighting this perspective suggest that there may be something about cohabitation itself that increases the risk of marital disruption beyond one's characteristics at the beginning of the union. Although this perspective has received less attention, it has received some support. For instance, Axinn and Thornton (1992) found that individuals who cohabited prior to marriage expressed more favorable attitudes toward divorce after cohabitation, net of prior attitudes toward divorce. Thus, because cohabiting relationships tend to be relatively short-lived, unstable interactions, individuals with experience in cohabiting unions may be more likely to learn about and embrace the temporary nature of romantic relationships (Brown & Booth, 1996). For example, awareness of relationship impermanency may reduce investment in a relationship, potentially resulting in a poorer quality marriage as well as a lower threshold for leaving it (Qian, Lichter & Mellot, 2005). Similarly, there is evidence that people are less religious after experiencing cohabitation (Thornton et al., 1992). Because attendance at religious services has been tied to greater marital quality and stability (Carlson, McLanahan & England, 2004; Eggebeen & Dew, 2009; Lichter &

Carmalt, 2008), decreases in religious activity may translate into decreased marital quality (Thornton et al., 1992).

These differences may stem largely from the lack of institutionalization regarding cohabitation (Nock, 1995). In spite of cohabitation's widespread diffusion, with a majority of marriages being preceded by cohabitation (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Bumpass et al., 1991), Nock argued that it is not yet governed by strong consensual social norms and formal laws. Consequently, cohabiting couples may not benefit from the same level of social support that married couples do. Support from family and friends may differ due to disapproval of cohabiting relationships in general or because of uncertainty in dealing with certain social situations (how to address a cohabiting partner, whether to introduce and interact with them as a family member, etc.). Furthermore, the stress from this lack of social support may result in lower levels of marital quality and this effect may amplify as individuals proceed through the life course (Umberson, Williams, Powers, Liu & Needham, 2006; Williams & Umberson, 2004). Recent research also supports the experience perspective. Kamp-Dush, Cohan, and Amato (2003) found that even when accounting for mechanisms through which individuals select into cohabitation and comparing across two U.S. marriage cohorts, cohabitators continued to report poorer marital quality and increased marital instability.

Thus, available research appears to provide conflicting evidence regarding how and why those who enter a cohabiting relationship prior to marrying report lower marital quality, on average, than those who enter directly into marriage. As a result, researchers have struggled to come to firm conclusions regarding the causal processes behind cohabitor vs. married differentials in marital quality. This difficulty is largely because most studies on the topic have been unable to simultaneously test both theories. In what follows, we articulate two substantial

problems in extant research that may be responsible for the inconsistent findings on the selection and experience perspectives in the literature. We then propose, develop, and test a model for exploring the impact of both the social selection and experience perspectives in the same model to predict the marital quality of those who cohabited with those who entered directly into marriage. This improves our ability to make causal claims regarding the process under study because we pay particular attention to the time-ordering of variables, leading to less biased estimates of both the social selection and experience perspectives.

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