

The Relationship Between Cohabitation and Marital Quality and Stability: Change Across Cohorts?

The relationship between premarital cohabitation and marital dysfunction was examined with a total sample of 1,425 spouses in two U.S. marriage cohorts: those married between 1964 and 1980 (when cohabitation was less common) and those married between 1981 and 1997 (when cohabitation was more common). Spouses in both cohorts who cohabited prior to marriage reported poorer marital quality and greater marital instability. When selection factors for cohabitation and subsequent marital instability were included in the statistical model, cohabitators in both cohorts continued to exhibit poorer marital quality and greater marital instability. These findings lend stronger support to an experience of cohabitation perspective than to a selection perspective as an explanation for why couples who cohabit before marriage tend to have more troubled relationships.

Unmarried heterosexual cohabitation has become a common phenomenon in industrialized societies

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across the world, including the United States. The percentage of marriages preceded by cohabitation rose from about 10% for those marrying between 1965 and 1974 to more than 50% for those marrying between 1990 and 1994 (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Bumpass & Sweet, 1989). In the 20-year period from 1977 to 1997, the number of cohabiting couples in the United States increased by more than 3.5 million couples (Casper & Cohen, 2000). The 2000 Census indicated that 5.5 million couples are currently cohabiting, which represents approximately 9% of all unions in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001).

A number of studies (reviewed later) have examined the connection between premarital cohabitation and subsequent marital quality and stability. Most of these studies, however, were based on samples of couples who married in the 1970s and early 1980s, and little information is available about couples that married in the late 1980s and 1990s. Considering the marked increase in the rate of cohabitation during the last few decades, it remains to be seen whether the relationship between cohabitation and marital dysfunction has changed over time or across generations. This study is based on marriages from two generations (representing distinct marriage cohorts) in the latter half of the 20th century. We used these data to investigate (a) the links between premarital cohabitation and measures of marital quality and stability, (b) whether the associations between cohabitation and measures of marital quality and stability have changed across generations, and (c) whether de-

mographic selection factors account for the associations between cohabitation and measures of marital quality and stability.

COHABITATION, MARITAL QUALITY, AND MARITAL STABILITY

About half of cohabiting individuals view living together as a way to assess compatibility prior to marriage (Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin, 1991). Given this common motivation for living together, cohabitation should eliminate poor matches and make subsequent marriages more stable. The evidence, however, suggests the opposite conclusion. Among married individuals, premarital cohabitation is related to lower marital satisfaction, less time spent together in shared activities, higher levels of marital disagreement, less supportive behavior, less positive problem solving, more reports of marital problems, and a greater perceived likelihood of marital dissolution (Amato & Booth, 1997; Booth & Johnson, 1988; Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002; DeMaris & Leslie, 1984; Thomson & Colella, 1992). Furthermore, compared with couples who enter directly into marriage, couples who cohabit first have a higher risk of marital dissolution (Bumpass, Martin, & Sweet, 1991; Heaton, 2002; Teachman & Polonko, 1990), especially in the early years of marriage (Schoen, 1992). The association between cohabitation and marital instability holds for remarriages as well as first marriages (Booth & Edwards, 1992).

As Smock (2000) pointed out, consistency in the research literature regarding the association between premarital cohabitation and marital dysfunction is impressive, given the wide variation in data sets, samples, analytic methods, and measures of marital quality and stability. Most of this research, however, is based on samples of couples who cohabited in the 1970s and 1980s (e.g., Clarkberg, 1999; Lillard, Brien, & Waite, 1995). Schoen (1992), using the National Survey of Families and Households, found that cohabitation was associated with an elevated risk of marital dissolution among U.S. women born between 1943 and 1947. In later birth cohorts (those born between 1948 and 1957), however, the probability of dissolution declined for marriages in which partners had previously cohabited. Schoen's findings suggest that the strength of the association between cohabitation and divorce has decreased over time. In contrast, Teachman (2002), using the fourth and fifth waves of the National Survey of Family Growth, found that the association between pre-

marital cohabitation and divorce did not change between 1964 and 1984 (see Heaton, 2002, for an analysis with similar conclusions). Existing evidence, therefore, is equivocal with respect to whether cohabitation continues to be a risk factor for divorce.

The Selection Perspective

Two perspectives have arisen to explain the links between cohabitation and marital quality and stability. The selection perspective assumes that people who cohabit before marriage differ in certain ways from noncohabitators and that these differences increase the likelihood of poor marital quality and divorce. Relevant characteristics include having a low level of education, being poor, growing up with divorced parents, holding nontraditional attitudes toward marriage, and being nonreligious. In support of this perspective, several studies have shown that controlling for selection factors causes the association between cohabitation and measures of marital dysfunction to decrease or disappear (Booth & Johnson, 1988; Lillard et al., 1995; Stets, 1993; Thomson & Colella, 1992). For example, Booth and Johnson (1988) found that cohabitation prior to marriage was associated with less marital interaction, more marital disagreements, greater divorce proneness, and more divorce. After controlling for a variety of selection factors, however, three of the four associations were no longer significant. Nonetheless, some of the selection factors, such as attitudes toward marriage, may have been consequences, rather than causes, of cohabitation.

If the association between premarital cohabitation and subsequent marital dysfunction is due to selection, then the dramatic increase in cohabitation over the past several decades may have resulted in a decline in the strength of this association. In the 1960s and 1970s, when only about 10% of marriages were preceded by cohabitation, cohabitators engaged in behavior that was uncommon and nonnormative. Consequently, these individuals may have possessed personal characteristics that made them risky marriage partners. The fact that half or more of recent marriages are preceded by cohabitation, however, means that living together has become unexceptional—even normative—in American culture. Because recent cohabitators are a less select group, they may no longer be at risk for having troubled marriages.

The Experience of Cohabitation Perspective

Contrary to the selection perspective, 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. According to this perspective, cohabitation changes people and their relationships in ways that undermine later marital quality and commitment. Although this explanation has received less attention than the selection perspective in the research literature, a few studies suggest mechanisms through which cohabitation may affect marital quality and stability. In a longitudinal study, Axinn and Thornton (1992) found that after cohabiting, people were more accepting of divorce than they had been before cohabiting. This change in attitudes may have consequences for subsequent marital quality and stability. A longitudinal study by Amato and Rogers (1999) found that married individuals who adopted more accepting attitudes toward divorce reported declines in marital happiness and increases in marital conflict, with the causal path running primarily from attitudes to marital quality. According to these authors, individuals with a weak commitment to the norm of lifelong marriage may invest relatively little time and energy in resolving relationship problems, assuming that it is easier to leave an unhappy marriage than to repair it. Consequently, people who do not support the norm of lifelong marriage are more likely than other people to see the quality of their relationships erode over time. Similarly, research has shown that married people who hold accepting attitudes toward divorce are more likely to divorce, even after controlling for the number of perceived problems in their marriages (Amato, 1996). This research suggests that cohabitation may undermine later marital quality and stability by weakening people's support for the norm of lifelong marriage. Similarly, cohabitation may increase the risk of marital dysfunction by fostering individualistic attitudes and behaviors that are incompatible with interdependent marital roles (Bennett, Blanc, & Bloom, 1988).

GOALS OF THE STUDY

The selection perspective and the experience of cohabitation perspective provide different views on how the association between premarital cohabitation and marital dysfunction may have changed over time. The selection perspective assumes that

the link between cohabitation and poor marital outcomes is explained by the type of people who cohabit, with divorce-prone individuals being overrepresented among cohabitators. Consequently, as cohabitation has become more common (and hence less selective), the association between cohabitation and poor marital outcomes may have grown weaker. In contrast, the experience of cohabitation perspective assumes that cohabitation has a causal effect on subsequent marital quality. If this is true, then the link between cohabitation and subsequent marital quality should persist despite changes in the size and composition of the cohabiting population.

This investigation examines these competing perspectives by using data from a 20-year longitudinal investigation of married individuals in two generations: those who married between 1964 and 1980 (when cohabitation was less common) and those who married between 1981 and 1997 (when cohabitation was more common). We test the selection and experience of cohabitation perspectives by incorporating a variety of demographic variables known to be associated not only with premarital cohabitation, but also with marital discord and instability. The selection perspective suggests the hypothesis that any observed association between premarital cohabitation and marital dysfunction (irrespective of marriage cohort) will disappear after controlling for variables that reflect selection into cohabitation. The experience of cohabitation perspective, in contrast, suggests the hypothesis that cohabitation will continue to be associated with poorer marital outcomes even after controlling for variables that reflect selection into cohabitation.

To understand the associations between cohabitation, cohort, and marital outcomes, we controlled for age, marital duration, and gender. Marital quality tends to decline with age and duration of marriage (VanLangingham, Johnson, & Amato, 2001), and some studies show that wives report poorer marital quality than husbands (Amato, Johnson, Booth, & Rogers, 2003). Because our cohort and cohabitation groups differed somewhat on these variables (as we show later), it was necessary to control for these variables in all analyses.

With respect to selection factors, we relied on six variables—race, parental divorce, marriage order, education, income, and welfare use—that predict cohabitation as well as marital outcomes. For example, African Americans, compared with European Americans, are more likely to divorce

(White, 1990) and to enter a cohabiting relationship as their first union (Raley, 1996). Adults with divorced parents, compared with adults with continuously married parents, report more marital problems and are more likely to see their own marriages end in divorce (Amato, 1999). Adults with divorced parents also are more likely to cohabit prior to marriage (Thornton, 1991). Spouses in second (or higher order) marriages, compared with spouses in first marriages, report lower marital quality (Booth & Edwards, 1992), are more likely to see their own marriage end in divorce (White, 1990), and are more likely to cohabit prior to entering marriage (Teachman & Polonko, 1990). Husbands' and wives' educations appear to reduce the odds of divorce (Bumpass et al., 1991; Teachman & Polonko), whereas economic stress appears to decrease marital quality (Conger & Elder, 1994; Conger et al., 1990). Correspondingly, studies indicate that cohabitation is more common among those with less education, less income, and greater dependence on public assistance (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Clarkberg, 1999). According to the selection perspective, these variables (race, parental divorce, marriage order, education, income, and welfare use) should explain a substantial proportion of the association between cohabitation and marital outcomes in the two cohorts.

METHOD

Sample

The analyses are based on the study of Marital Instability Over the Life Course (Booth, Amato, & Johnson, 1998). Telephone interviewers used a random-digit-dialing procedure to obtain a national sample of 2,034 married individuals 55 years of age and younger in 1980. Within each household, interviewers used a random procedure to select either the husband or wife. An estimated 65% of the eligible households yielded a completed interview. The refusal rate was 18%, and another 17% could not be reached after 20 telephone calls. The 1980 sample, when compared with census data, was representative of the U.S. married population with respect to age, race, household size, number of children in the household, home ownership, and region of the country. In 1983, information on marital status was collected from 81% of the original respondents. Attrition from the sample was more common for men, younger respondents, renters, respondents with lower educational achievement, and non-Whites.

In 1992 or 1997, investigators interviewed 691 adult offspring (19 years of age or older) of the original respondents. Only one offspring from each family was interviewed, and the response rate was 80% across all eligible offspring. In 2000, follow-up information on marital status was collected from 92% of the adult offspring previously interviewed.

This study used two samples for analysis. The 1981–1997 marriage cohort consisted of 306 married individuals from the 1997 offspring survey who were between the ages of 19 and 40 in that year and who had married within the previous 17 years. The 1964–1980 marriage cohort was selected from the original survey respondents who were interviewed in 1980. To ensure comparability between samples, members of the 1964–1980 cohort had to meet the following two criteria: respondents were (a) between the ages of 19 and 40 in 1980 and (b) married within the previous 17 years. To avoid problems with dependencies in the data, a third criterion was necessary: (c) respondents in the 1964–1980 cohort were not parents of individuals in the 1981–1997 cohort. Of the 2,034 people interviewed in 1980, 1,119 people met these three criteria and were included in the 1964–1980 sample. These two groups married in different social milieus, with cohabitation being relatively uncommon in the 1960s–1970s and relatively common in the 1980s–1990s.

Variables

Independent variables. The two independent variables were cohort and cohabitation prior to marriage. Cohort was coded 1 = *married between 1981 and 1997* and 0 = *married between 1964 and 1980*. Cohabitation prior to marriage was coded 1 = *yes* and 0 = *no*. In the 1964–1980 cohort, 24% of individuals had cohabited prior to marriage, compared with 46% in the 1981–1997 cohort.

Dependent variables. Marital quality was measured with two variables: marital happiness and marital conflict. Marital happiness was based on 11 items that measured how happy people felt about aspects of their marriages (e.g., the amount of understanding received from the spouse, the spouse as a companion, the sexual relationship), as well as how happy people felt about their marriages overall. Response options consisted of 1 = *not too happy*, 2 = *pretty happy*, and 3 = *very happy*. The alpha reliability coefficient for this

TABLE 1. MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS, AND PROPORTIONS OF CONTROL AND SELECTION VARIABLES BY COHORT AND COHABITATION

Variable	1964–1980 Cohort				1981–1997 Cohort				Main Effects		Interaction
	Noncohabit		Cohabit		Noncohabit		Cohabit		Cohort	Cohabit	Cohort × Cohabit
	<i>M</i>	(<i>SD</i>)	<i>M</i>	(<i>SD</i>)	<i>M</i>	(<i>SD</i>)	<i>M</i>	(<i>SD</i>)	<i>F</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>F</i>
Gender (female)	0.62		0.57		0.51		0.52		6.72*	2.06	0.95
Age	29.00	(5.11)	28.86	(5.21)	30.04	(4.76)	29.12	(4.07)	3.76	2.52	1.36
Marital duration	7.08	(4.59)	4.35	(3.67)	6.62	(4.80)	4.79	(3.83)	0.00	60.15***	2.32
Race (White)	0.87		0.85		0.93		0.93		4.45*	0.76	0.19
Parental divorce	0.15		0.30		0.11		0.28		1.89	28.13***	0.67
In first marriage	0.92		0.67		0.96		0.85		3.81	91.19***	0.15
Education	13.63	(2.49)	13.61	(2.58)	14.99	(2.21)	14.39	(2.27)	42.30***	3.51	3.12
Family income ^a	49.77	(24.09)	48.89	(22.56)	55.26	(19.43)	54.70	(21.71)	13.32***	0.21	0.01
Welfare use	0.11		0.17		0.06		0.09		3.33	7.66**	0.04
<i>N</i>	847		272		164		142				

Note: For dichotomous variables, the means are replaced with proportions and the *F* statistics are replaced with Wald statistics. Standard deviations are not shown for dichotomous variables.

^aFamily income is reported in thousands of dollars.

p* < .05. *p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

scale was .89, with higher scores indicating greater happiness. Marital conflict was a four-item scale that measured the amount and severity of conflict between spouses, including general disagreements, serious quarrels, and physical aggression. This scale had an alpha reliability coefficient of .54, with higher scores indicating greater marital conflict. To simplify the interpretation of results, we standardized these scales to have means of 0 and standard deviations of 1. (For additional details on these scales, see Johnson, White, Edwards, & Booth, 1986.)

Divorce was measured 3 years following the assessment of marital quality, that is, in 1983 for respondents interviewed in 1980 (*n* = 926, the 1964–1980 marriage cohort) and in 2000 for respondents interviewed in 1997 (*n* = 273, the 1981–1997 marriage cohort). A small number of respondents who had separated permanently were included in the divorce category, a procedure recommended by Bumpass et al. (1991).

Selection factors. To assess the role of selection, variables related to the decision to cohabit as well as subsequent marital quality and stability were examined (Kreider & Fields, 2002; Seltzer, 2000; Smock, 2000; White, 1990). The selection factors included race, parental divorce, marriage order (i.e., being in a second or higher order marriage), education, family income, and welfare use. Race was coded 1 = *White* and 0 = *non-White*. (Because the percentage of non-Whites in the sample was small, it was not possible to subdivide this

group. The largest group of non-Whites, however, consisted of African Americans.) Parental divorce was coded 1 = *parental divorce* and 0 = *no parental divorce*. Education was coded as the number of years of education of the participant. Marriage order was coded 1 = *first marriage* and 0 = *second or higher order marriage*. Family income was measured as the total family income (husband plus wife) in thousands of dollars. The 1964–1980 cohort's family income was adjusted for inflation between 1980 and 1997. Welfare use was coded 1 = *used public assistance in the previous 3 years* and 0 = *did not use of public assistance within the previous 3 years*. The selection factors were measured in 1980 for the 1964–1980 cohort and in 1997 for the 1981–1997 cohort.

Control variables. Gender was coded 1 = *wife* and 0 = *husband*. Age and duration of marriage were coded in years. The ages of respondents in the 1964–1980 cohort ranged from 19 to 40 with a mean of 29.0, whereas the ages of respondents in the 1981–1997 cohort ranged from 19 to 40 with a mean of 29.6 (see Table 1). In the 1964–1980 marriage cohort, marital duration ranged from 0 to 16 years with a mean of 6.4, whereas in the 1981–1997 marriage cohort, marital duration ranged from 0 to 16 years with a mean of 5.8 (see Table 1). The median year of marriage in the 1964–1980 cohort was 1974 and the median year of marriage for the 1981–1997 cohort was 1991.

RESULTS

Preliminary Analysis

The means and standard deviations of all control and selection variables (by cohort and cohabitation) are presented in Table 1. To test for significant group differences, we relied on ordinary least squares (OLS) regression for the continuous variables (age, marital duration, education, and income) and logistic regression for the dichotomous variables (gender, race, parental divorce, marriage order, and welfare use). Main effects for cohort and cohabitation were assessed on the first step, and interactions between cohort and cohabitation (using multiplicative terms) were assessed on the second step. The 1964–1980 cohort contained a somewhat larger proportion of wives than did the 1981–1997 cohort. Although the groups did not differ in age, marriages preceded by cohabitation were shorter in duration than were marriages not preceded by cohabitation. Because gender and marital duration may be correlated with marital outcomes, these variables (along with age) were controlled in subsequent analyses.

Significant main effects of cohort were found for race, education, and family income. Compared with the earlier 1964–1980 cohort, the more recent 1981–1997 cohort contained fewer non-Whites, was better educated, and had higher family incomes. These differences are consistent with larger changes in the U.S. population of married people. During the last two decades, this population saw declines in the percentage of African Americans, increases in spouses' education, and increases in family income (Amato et al., 2003; Casper & Bianchi, 2002). Significant main effects of cohabitation were found for parental divorce, marriage order, and welfare use. Compared with respondents who did not cohabit prior to marriage, respondents who cohabited were more likely to have divorced parents, less likely to be in first marriages, and more likely to have used public assistance in the recent past. These findings are consistent with prior research on factors associated with cohabitation, as noted earlier. The interactions between cohort and cohabitations were not significant for any of the control and selection variables.

Do Marital Outcomes Vary by Cohort and Cohabitation?

To determine whether marital quality and stability differed by cohort and cohabitation, OLS regres-

sion analyses were conducted for the two continuous dependent variables: marital happiness and conflict. These results appear in Table 2. Cohabitation was significantly associated with marital happiness and conflict (see Model 1). Across both cohorts, cohabitators reported less marital happiness than noncohabitators, with the difference between groups representing about one sixth of a standard deviation ($b = -.16$). Similarly, across both cohorts, cohabitators reported more marital conflict than noncohabitators, with the difference between groups representing about one third of a standard deviation ($b = .34$). The main effect of cohort was not significant for either outcome. Table 2 also reveals that the interaction of cohort and cohabitation was not significant for either marital happiness or marital conflict (see Model 2). There were also tendencies for wives to report less happiness than husbands, for older respondents to report less conflict than younger respondents, and for marital happiness to decline with duration of marriage.

Because divorce was a dichotomous dependent variable, a logistic regression analysis was used to test for group differences, controlling for gender, age, and marital duration. The main effect of cohabitation was significant in Model 1. Couples who cohabited prior to marriage were more likely to have divorced at the 3-year follow up. Converting the b coefficient to an odds ratio ($e^b = 2.51$) reveals that cohabitation was associated with an increase of 151% in the odds of divorce. The main effect of cohort was also significant, indicating that divorce was more common in the more recent 1981–1997 cohort. Converting the b coefficient to an odds ratio ($e^b = 1.90$) indicates that the odds of divorce were 90% higher in the more recent cohort. The interaction between cohort and cohabitation was not significant (see Model 2). In addition, the odds of divorce were lower among younger respondents than among older respondents. In summary, the results show that across the two marriage cohorts, spouses who cohabited prior to marriage had poorer marital quality and greater marital instability than those who did not cohabit. Thus, cohabitation was associated with more troubled unions, irrespective of the decade of marriage.

Do Demographic Selection Factors Account for the Association Between Cohabitation and Marital Quality and Marital Stability?

The next step in the analysis incorporated the demographic selection factors that may predispose

individuals not only to cohabit, but also to have less stable marriages. Model 3 in Table 2 added the six demographic selection factors: race, parental divorce, marriage order, education, family income, and welfare use. (Although we included the interaction between cohort and cohabitation in Model 2, we excluded it from Model 3 because it was not significant.) As shown in Table 2, the main effect of cohabitation on marital happiness and marital conflict remained significant, although both coefficients were somewhat lower than in Model 1. In both cohorts, cohabitators reported less marital happiness and more marital conflict than noncohabitators. In addition, Whites reported greater marital happiness than non-Whites, parental divorce was associated with greater marital conflict, and respondents who had used public assistance during the last 3 years reported less marital happiness and greater marital conflict.

For the dichotomous divorce variable, a logistic regression analysis assessed group differences. Although the gap in the odds of divorce between cohabitators and noncohabitators narrowed after controlling for the demographic selection factors, the relationship between cohabitation and divorce remained significant. Net of the demographic selection characteristics, cohabitators in both cohorts were more likely to divorce (odds ratio = 1.77). In addition, divorce was positively associated with marital duration, negatively associated with age, negatively associated with being in a first marriage, and positively associated with welfare use. In summary, when demographic selection factors were included in the model, cohabitators in both cohorts continued to report less marital happiness, more conflict, and greater instability than noncohabitators.

DISCUSSION

Summary of Results

The association between cohabitation and marital quality and marital stability was examined across two marriage cohorts: those married between 1964 and 1980 and those married between 1981 and 1997. We examined marital quality (marital happiness and conflict) and marital stability (divorce) as a function of cohabitation status and cohort. Two competing perspectives were tested in an effort to examine whether the links between cohabitation and marital quality and marital stability have changed over time. First, the selection perspective posits that people who cohabit before

marriage differ in certain ways from those who do not and that those differences increase the likelihood of poor marital quality and marital instability. Based on this perspective, we expected that the increase in cohabitation over the past 20 years would result in a decline in the strength of the association between cohabitation and later marital dysfunction. Furthermore, we expected that the association between cohabitation and marital dysfunction (irrespective of cohort) would no longer be significant after controlling for demographic selection factors that increase the likelihood of cohabitation as well as the risk of poor marital outcomes. Second, 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. According to this perspective, cohabitation changes people and their relationships in ways that undermine later marital quality and commitment. For example, being in a relationship with an uncertain commitment to the future may make individuals more accepting of divorce (Axinn & Thornton, 1992), which, in turn, may cause individuals to invest less in their marriage and be more likely to divorce when confronted with marital problems (Amato & Rogers, 1999). Based on this perspective, we hypothesized that premarital cohabitation would be associated with lower levels of marital quality and higher levels of marital instability, regardless of marriage cohort and demographic selection factors.

The findings provided support for the experience of cohabitation perspective. Consistent with this perspective, there was little evidence that the negative consequences of cohabitation dissipated over time as cohabitation became more prevalent. In addition, even after controlling for demographic variables that are associated with cohabitation, premarital cohabitation remained significantly related to marital happiness, marital conflict, and divorce, a finding consistent with the experience of cohabitation perspective.

Limitations

Before considering the broader implications of these findings, several limitations of this study should be noted. First, the sample size for the more recent cohort was relatively small, and the reliability of our measure of marital conflict was modest. These constraints lowered the statistical power of the analysis to detect change over time in the relationship between cohabitation status and

TABLE 2. REGRESSION OF MARITAL HAPPINESS, MARITAL CONFLICT, AND DIVORCE ON PREMARITAL COHABITATION AND COHORT

	Marital Happiness			Marital Conflict		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Independent variables						
Cohort	0.09	0.08	0.06	0.11	0.16	0.11
Cohabitation	-0.16*	-0.16*	-0.13*	0.34***	0.37***	0.30***
Cohort × cohabitation		0.03			-0.12	
Control variables						
Gender (female)	-0.16**	-0.16**	-0.15**	0.06	0.06	0.06
Marital duration	-0.02*	-0.02*	-0.02	0.01	0.01	0.00
Age	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01*	-0.02*	-0.01
Selection variables						
Race (White)			-0.17*			-0.07
Parental divorce			-0.03			0.19***
In first marriage			-0.03			0.04
Education			0.01			0.02
Family income			0.00			0.00
Welfare use			-0.23*			0.33***
(Constant)	0.45	0.45	0.31	0.22	0.22	-0.12
R ²	.02***	.02***	.04***	.03***	.03***	.04***
Chi-square						

Note: Table values are unstandardized *b* coefficients based on ordinary least squares regression (marital happiness and marital conflict) and logistic regression (divorce). *N* = 1,425 (for divorce, *n* = 1,199).

p* < .05. *p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

marital functioning. Second, although past research supported our choice of selection factors, the factors we examined were not exhaustive. Unmeasured selection factors (such as religiosity, attitudes toward marriage, or a premarital birth) may account for the association between premarital cohabitation and marital dysfunction. Future research should build on our findings by testing a more comprehensive longitudinal model that includes relationship process variables, attitudes related to relationship commitment and stability, and perceptions of the meaning of cohabitation across the transition to marriage from either cohabitation or dating.

Implications for Theory and Research

The cohabitation literature has treated the selection perspective and the experience of cohabitation perspective as competing explanations for the association between premarital cohabitation and subsequent marital dysfunction. These two perspectives, however, are not mutually exclusive, and the results of our study, when considered with prior evidence, suggest the usefulness of both perspectives. We argue that the integration of selection and process variables into a mediational model will yield a richer understanding of how

cohabitation is associated with marital functioning. Demographic background characteristics may be the proximal cause of entry into cohabitation rather than marriage. Once in a cohabiting relationship, however, processes related to the experience of cohabitation may become the proximal cause of marital dysfunction and instability, and demographic characteristics become more distal influences. Lewis (1997) argued that when trying to understand development, concurrent variables have greater explanatory power than variables from the past. In a meta-analysis of longitudinal studies of marriage, Karney and Bradbury (1995) showed that demographic characteristics (e.g., age, education, income, parental divorce) and communication skills are related to changes in marital satisfaction and stability over time, but communication skills (which are more proximal to spouses' daily transactions) account for greater variance in marital outcomes than do demographic factors (which are more distal to spouses' daily transactions). Focusing on background characteristics as well as relationship processes yields a more complete understanding of how cohabitation fits into a broader temporal model of relationship development.

Research indicates that people choose riskier

TABLE 2. EXTENDED

		Divorce	
Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	
0.64***	0.37	1.27***	
0.92***	0.73**	0.57**	
	0.50		
0.10	0.10	-0.11	
0.01	0.00	0.07*	
-0.05*	-0.05	-0.11***	
		-0.26	
		0.08	
		-1.93***	
		-0.05	
		-0.01	
		0.70**	
-1.16	-1.14	3.11	
.04	.04	.10	
51.24***	52.93***	126.89***	

partners when cohabiting than when marrying. For example, completing high school, stable employment, and high earnings are less important prerequisites for cohabitation than for marriage (Clarkberg, 1999; Clarkberg, Stolzenberg, & Waite, 1995; Landale & Forste, 1991; Schoen & Weinick, 1993). Cohabitation also may be attractive to people who experienced their parents' marital breakdown or who saw their own prior marriages end in divorce, and hence feel anxious about making a long-term, legal commitment. In general, because people anticipate that cohabiting relationships are easier to terminate than marriages, they may choose to cohabit rather than marry.

Living together, however, may set processes into motion that culminate in marriage, even to a risky partner. Cohabiting partners acquire shared possessions, pets, and children; they invest time in their relationships; and they benefit from economies of scale. If we extend a social exchange perspective to cohabitation (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), these investments and barriers to exiting the relationship may spur a cohabiting couple to marry. Other factors that may propel a cohabiting couple into marriage include cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) about breaking off a relationship in which partners have made an investment, as well as pressure from family and friends to marry.

During the same time that cohabiting partners

are moving toward marriage, the experience of cohabitation may change partners' attitudes and behaviors in ways that undermine later marital quality and stability. Indeed, living in an unconventional relationship appears to make people less religious (Thornton, Axinn, & Hill, 1992). Cohabitors also may develop problematic relationship skills and spend less time resolving problems or providing support to their partners (Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002). A weak commitment to lifelong marriage and less attention to communication skills during cohabitation may carry over into marriage and make couples more vulnerable to the inevitable challenges that couples face over time. Thus, various personal and social forces may encourage some cohabiters in weak relationships to marry, and over time these initial limitations, combined with attitudes and relationship processes that develop during the period of cohabitation, may erode the quality of the marriage and eventually lead to divorce.

In conclusion, we recommend that future research pursue an integrative model that encompasses selection factors into cohabitation, as well as changes that may result from the experience of cohabitation, to understand how living together before marriage increases the risk of marital dysfunction. The first generation of cohabitation research has established links between selection factors and cohabitation and between cohabitation and marital instability. The second generation of cohabitation research should integrate the study of background characteristics and relationship processes for a more comprehensive perspective. Accordingly, future longitudinal research on relationship development should examine the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural characteristics that relate to whether people choose to cohabit, and how these factors interact with cognitive, behavioral, and social factors that develop during the relationship and affect the subsequent marriage.

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