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Effects of Cohabitation on Engaged Adult Relationships

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### Abstract

Low premarital intimacy and less-than-realistic marital expectations have been shown to successfully predict lower marital satisfaction and success. This study used an independent groups design to investigate the effect of cohabitation on intimacy and marital expectations among engaged adult individuals. Group I (n=30) consisted of engaged individuals cohabiting with their fiancés and Group II (n=82) included engaged individuals not cohabiting. Participants were obtained through a convenience sample. All participants provided demographic data and completed the Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships (PAIR) and the Marriage Expectations Scale (MES). Previously married participants were excluded from MES analysis due to the nature of that scale.

The current understanding of cohabitation's effect on relationships is incomplete due to a number of limitations in the existing research. This study was designed to fill the void created by two specific limitations. First, it addresses the limitation created by studies primarily drawing conclusions about cohabitation's effect on marital variables after marriage has already occurred. Although studies investigate variables within the current or dissolved marriage, they are unable to determine whether the traits that led to lower satisfaction/success developed during the marriage or whether they were displayed before marriage. By using individuals who have not yet married, this study identifies whether lower intimacy and less-than-realistic marital expectations exist before marriage. Second, this study addresses the limitation created by research that exclusively studies dating couples when investigating pre-marital cohabitation. Research has shown that the relationship dynamics of serious couples are significantly different from those of couples casually dating. By examining only individuals committed to marriage through engagement, this study uses a sample clearly distinct from the samples used in other investigations.

### Effects of Cohabitation on Engaged Adult Relationships

Since the beginning of civilization, marriage has remained one of humanity's most prominent institutions. Even with today's changing norms, studies of current trends predict that nearly 80% of all Americans will be married at least once and that 56% of adult Americans are currently married (Lugalia, 1998). In spite of the popularity of marriage, research indicates marital quality has declined over the past few decades (Amato et al., 2003; Rogers and Amato, 1997), and since the mid-1960's, divorce rates have climbed to the point where nearly half of all marriages now end in divorce (Goldstein, 1999). Still, marriage is regarded as a major goal in life (McAnulty & Burnette, 2001) and studies across many cultures have shown that married couples are happier than non-married couples (Brown & Booth, 1996).

The propensity for believing cohabitation to be a useful and beneficial stage to precede marital commitment is a growing trend. As early as the 1960's, social theorists (Mead, 1966; Trost, 1975) have believed that premarital cohabitation would improve marital quality and stability due to the test period it represents for cohabiting individuals. A growing body of research indicates that this idea of cohabitation as a beneficial preparatory stage for marriage is becoming a widespread popular public view. In their research on changing attitudes in America, Thornton and Young-DeMarco (2001) reported in their literature review that currently over two-thirds of young Americans view cohabitation as "good idea". These results are consistent with research that showed many individuals believe living together before marriage as a "trial run" will result in greater stability and quality along with providing an opportunity to rehearse marriage (Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin, 1991; Demaris & MacDonald, 1993).

The trend toward cohabitation has followed these changing viewpoints. Research by Bramlett and Mosher (2002) using the recent National Survey of Family Growth through the Department of Health and Human Services demonstrated that only 27.5% of non-married and 31.4% of married adults had not cohabited at some point. To support these findings, a large body of research has also found that cohabitation is a prominent stage in today's society (Axinn & Thornton, 1993; Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Hall & Zhao, 1995).

Contrary to the new public opinion and the growing trend of cohabitation, the vast majority of research has found that cohabitation before marriage predicts lower marital stability and increased likelihood of marital dissolution. (Booth & Johnson, 1988; Demaris & MacDonald, 1993; Krishnan, 1998; Qu, 1999). Cohabitation has also been linked to a number of negative relationship qualities such as lower commitment (Booth & Johnson, 1998; Thomson & Colella, 1992) and poorer communication (Thomson & Colella, 1992).

Research has not demonstrated any causal relationship to explain these strong findings, but Thomson and Colella (1992) explained two main theories that have been hypothesized by researchers. The first claims that cohabitation is a choice that draws individuals with negative personal characteristics such as being less committed to relationships; thus, these individuals are more likely to see a relationship as a trial and/or to end a relationship when it begins to have negative aspects. The second claims that cohabitation is chosen by individuals prone to numerous other existing risk factors (outside of personal characteristics) that increase instability such as low socio-economic status, experiencing parental divorce, or unstable work patterns. Interestingly, while both theories center on personal characteristics or outside risk factors, the primary message from the body of research is that cohabitation is a negative relationship state that is responsible for increased marital troubles. This message is due to the fact that cohabitation continually arises as a significantly prevalent choice among couples demonstrating marital difficulties or having dissolved their marriage.

Our current understanding of the true nature of cohabitation as a predictor of relationship/marital satisfaction and success is limited. Studies have investigated cohabitation as an alternative to marriage; however, these studies are not useful for understanding cohabitation's possible impact on marriage. Other studies have investigated the correlation between cohabitation and relationship satisfaction/success, but these studies have limitations. Some examine cohabitation among any available romantic couple, regardless of their commitment or lack of commitment to marriage. Research has shown that a strong number of cohabiting couples either end their relationships before making any commitment to marriage or continue cohabiting as a alternative to marriage (Cherlin, 1992). Research has also shown that serious relationships are significantly different from casual dating relationships in terms of relationship dynamics (Bettor, Hendrick, & Hendrick, 1995). While these studies investigating cohabitation across a broad sweep of couples do gather important data about cohabitation, they are unable to examine it specifically among adults that do marry or intend to marry. Moreover, the studies that have drawn conclusions about cohabitation's relationship to marital satisfaction and stability do so after marriage (or divorce) has already occurred. Although these studies investigate variables within the current or dissolved marriage, they are unable to determine whether demonstrated qualities such as lessened intimacy, poor communication, or increased conflict that led to lower satisfaction/success developed during the marriage or whether they existed before marriage.

This study will investigate whether cohabiting adult couples who are committed to marriage display qualities that predict lower marital satisfaction and stability. It will use adult couples who are not yet married, but who have made this commitment to marriage through a formal engagement. Two relationship constructs that are valid predictors of marital satisfaction and success will be measured.

The first construct measured will be expectations about marriage. Research has shown that individuals who hold non-realistic expectations about marriage (pessimistic or idealistic), have less successful marriages (Larson, 1988). Research linking cohabitation to negative outcomes also described cohabiting couples as having higher (idealistic) expectations for marriage (Demaris & Leslie, 1984). This is one of the many possible factors that enhanced the likelihood of negative outcomes.

The second construct measured will be perceived intimacy within the current relationship. Studies have shown that high levels of intimacy are correlated with higher levels of relationship satisfaction and success (Sanderson & Cantor, 2001). Other studies have specifically examined sexual intimacy, a sub-area of intimacy, finding a strong positive correlation between sexual intimacy and relationship satisfaction (Byers & Demmons, 1999).

By looking at engaged couples, this study will contribute to the understanding of cohabitation by providing data on cohabitation before marriage, but only for individuals committed to marriage. Since cohabitation is strongly linked to negative marital outcomes, two hypotheses concerning intimacy and marital expectations were formed.

Hypothesis I: Engaged cohabiting adults will report lower levels of intimacy in their relationship in comparison to non-cohabiting engaged adults.

Hypothesis II: Engaged cohabiting adults' marital expectations will be more idealistic in comparison to non-cohabiting engaged adults' expectations.

If one or both of these hypotheses are supported, this study will provide evidence that premarital cohabitation is a valid predictor of lower intimacy and/or non-realistic marital expectations. With either supported hypothesis, it will also support the link between premarital cohabitation and negative marital outcomes since both measured traits have been linked to lower marital satisfaction and success.

If no differences are found between groups for intimacy scores, this study will show that intimacy levels must decline at some point after marriage occurs for couples that cohabit prior to marriage. If no differences in expectations are shown, this study would suggest that differing expectations are not one of the factors that lead to the negative outcomes shown by cohabiting couples.

Regardless of the nature of the outcomes, it is my hope that this study will prompt researchers to examine cohabitation more closely for two reasons. First, because engaged adults are an un-investigated population that may demonstrate significant differences when compared to adults who are simply dating and, second, because many differences may exist between cohabiting couples who have intentions to marry and cohabiting couples who do not have intentions to marry.

## Method

### *Participants*

One-hundred-twelve adults were surveyed for this study. All adults surveyed were formally engaged to be married, and all but three were to be married for the first time. The sample consisted of 41 males and 71 females. Participants ranged from age 18 to 47. The majority of participants were young adults (mean age of 22.3 years). The vast majority of the sample population consisted of undergraduates at a medium-sized, public, Midwestern university. Due to the homogeneous nature of the sampling area, it can be confidently presumed that the majority of the sample population was Caucasian. Thirty participants were currently cohabiting with their fiancé; 82 participants were not.

### *Materials*

Two separate measurement scales and a demographic questionnaire I created were used. The first scale used was the Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships (PAIR), developed by Schaefer and Olsen (1981). The PAIR was designed to measure an individual's perceived level of intimacy in his or her current relationship across five domains of intimacy: emotional, social, sexual, intellectual, and recreational. The PAIR then measures his or her desired level of intimacy across those same sub-areas. The instrument was strictly developed and demonstrated strong validity and reliability (Schaefer & Olsen, 1981). The scale uses 36 statements (6 of which are questions to determine conventionality of responses) to measure current levels of intimacy. It then uses a 30 statement section (no conventionality questions) to measure participants' desired level of intimacy. Participants rate their level of agreement for both parts on a 0-4 scale, with higher scores representing more intimacy. For this study, only the section of the PAIR to assess participants' current level of intimacy was used.

The second scale used was the Marriage Expectations Scale (MES), developed by Jones and Nelson (1996). This scale was specifically designed to measure never-married individuals' (specifically college students') expectations of what marriage will be like. The purpose is to determine how realistic participants' expectations are on a continuum of pessimistic, realistic, and idealistic expectations. Evidence for the scale's strong validity and reliability was provided by Jones (1997). The scale uses 40 statements about marriage to which participants rate their level of agreement on a 1-5 scale. High scores represent idealistic expectations, middle scores represent more realistic expectations, and low scores represent pessimistic expectations.

Last, I created a demographic questionnaire to include on the survey. This section asked participants for their age, gender, relationship length, whether they'd been previously married, and whether they currently resided on a full time basis with their fiancé in order to determine their cohabitation status for the grouping variable.

### *Design and Procedure*

This study used a sample of convenience and did not provide any reimbursement, reward, or bribery to or for the volunteer participants. All participants for this study were recruited through word of mouth. I formally introduced my study to college students, co-workers, family, and friends and asked for available engaged adults to participate. Besides asking for available engaged adults, I asked all individuals to provide references of those they knew to be engaged. I then contacted these references either by phone or electronically to introduce my study and ask for them to volunteer their participation.

Participation in this research was through surveys and the study used an independent groups design. Group I consisted of engaged adults who were currently cohabiting with their fiancés. Group II consisted of engaged adults who were not currently cohabiting with their fiancés. All participants received identical surveys, each having contained the aforementioned PAIR, MES, and demographic scales along with an informed consent form. All participants were reminded that participation was voluntary, that they could leave any questions they wished blank, and they were informed that their participation would be kept anonymous and confidential. To help prevent potential bias in responses, participants were not informed that cohabitation status would be used as an independent variable.

Participants completed a survey in either one of two ways. Participants readily available received a survey along with a blank, unmarked envelope in person. These participants, regardless of whether they chose to complete the survey or not, returned the survey sealed inside the provided envelope. I then pooled all sealed envelopes until the data collection period was complete. Other participants were not available in person. These participants were first emailed the information about the volunteer and confidential nature of the study and asked to reply if still willing to participate. Those willing to participate replied, which also demonstrated they had read and been informed of the study. A survey was then E-mailed to them as a file attachment, which they completed and returned as a file attachment. These E-mail responses were printed and also inserted immediately into blank, unmarked envelopes and then pooled with all the other sealed envelopes until the data collection period was complete.

SPSS (version 11.5) was used to analyze responses. Individuals who had been previously married were excluded from data analysis that used MES responses. Due to the limited sample size, any item not answered in a response was filled with a dummy value equal to the mean value of all responses for that item. Responses that did not include demographic information or that had a substantial number of skipped items were excluded. Lastly, surveys that demonstrated sections of accidentally inverted responses were also excluded from data analysis. In all, 7 survey responses were eliminated for these reasons.

T-tests were used to analyze differences between Group I and Group II responses and to identify gender differences within each measured variable. A univariate ANOVA was used to investigate whether gender and cohabitation status had a significant interaction within each of the two measured variables. Lastly, Pearson's product-moment tests for correlation were used to investigate other potential relationships.

### *Scoring*

The PAIR instrument was designed to measure participants' levels of intimacy in their relationships and to result in scores for five sub-areas of intimacy: emotional, social, sexual, intellectual, and recreational. This study combined all sub-area scores to create one overall total score for intimacy, with higher scores representing higher levels of intimacy.

The MES was designed to measure participants' expectations of marriage as pessimistic, realistic, or idealistic. It uses a system of weighting specific response items to create simple cutoffs between those categories. For this study, the MES was used to provide a look at the continuum of expectation levels of participants rather than to provide category cutoffs, thus no weighting of specific items to create these cutoff groups was used. All participants received a Total Expectations score, which was then converted into a percentage of possible points, with higher percentages representing more idealistic expectations.



### Results

An independent samples *t*-test was used to analyze differences between Group I and Group II using alpha level of .05 for all tests. The *t*-test revealed that a significant difference between groups existed for marital expectation scores from the MES as the comparison of Group I ( $n=27$ ,  $M=.69$ ) and Group II ( $n=82$ ,  $M=.72$ ) resulted in a *t*-value of  $-2.03$  which showed significance at the .05 level. A *t*-test used to investigate whether gender significantly impacted MES scores revealed that no significant difference between genders existed as comparison of males ( $M=.709$ ) and females ( $M=.715$ ), resulted in a *t*-value of  $-.385$ , which was clearly insignificant with ( $p=.70$ ). To summarize, data analysis revealed Group I (engaged cohabiting adults) had significantly more realistic marital expectations than Group II (engaged non-cohabiting adults). Analysis also found that gender did not have any impact on MES scores.

An independent samples *t*-test was also used to analyze differences between Group I and Group II for intimacy scores from the PAIR instrument. The *t*-test revealed a significant difference between groups as the comparison of Group I ( $n=30$ ,  $M=343.84$ ) and Group II ( $n=82$ ,  $M=376.29$ ) resulted in *t*-value of  $-3.07$ , which showed significance beyond the .00 level. A *t*-test used to investigate whether gender significantly impacted PAIR scores revealed that a significant difference also existed between genders as the comparison between males ( $M=341.45$ ) and females ( $M=382.76$ ) resulted in *t*-value of  $-4.44$  which showed significance beyond the .00 level. To summarize, data analysis revealed Group I (engaged cohabiting adults) had significantly lower scores for intimacy than Group II (engaged non-cohabiting adults). Analysis also showed that males had significantly lower scores for intimacy than females.

A univariate ANOVA test was used to determine if gender and cohabiting status demonstrated a significant interaction for MES and PAIR scores. For MES scores, the ANOVA analysis between gender and cohabiting status demonstrated a *F*-value of .004 ( $p=.95$ ), showing that no interaction occurred between gender and cohabiting status for marital expectations. For PAIR scores, the ANOVA analysis between gender and cohabiting status demonstrated a *F*-value of 5.48 ( $p<.02$ ) showing a significant interaction did occur between gender and cohabiting status. The analysis showed that non-cohabiting females reported the highest levels of intimacy ( $M=386.35$ ) while cohabiting males reported the lowest levels of intimacy ( $M=294.40$ )

Pearson's product-moment correlation tests were run to investigate other potentially significant relationships. Some significant correlations were found in the data analysis. First, higher PAIR scores demonstrated a strong positive correlation with higher MES ( $r=.429$ ,  $p<.00$ ). Second, relationship length was shown to have a significantly negative correlation with both PAIR scores ( $r=-.194$ ,  $p<.05$ ) and with MES scores ( $r=-.268$ ,  $p<.01$ ). To summarize, higher levels of intimacy tended to coincide with higher (more idealistic) expectations. Also, as relationship length increased, individuals reported lower levels of intimacy and more realistic expectations.

### Discussion

The first primary result found was that the engaged adults who are cohabiting have significantly lower levels of intimacy in their engaged relationship compared to non-cohabiting engaged adults. This supports Hypothesis I. It also supports the vast research that has linked cohabitation to poor marital outcomes.

Although this research shows that engaged cohabiting individuals have much lower intimacy, it cannot be assumed that cohabitation causes individuals to have lower intimacy. Research has linked a number of negative variables to individuals who choose to cohabit such a

more deviant lifestyle (Booth & Johnson, 1988), lower education levels (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989), lower economic current status or family status while growing up (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989; Tanfer, 1987), and more unsettled employment histories (Clarkberg, 1999). The results of this study clearly demonstrate that cohabiting engaged individuals had significantly lower intimacy levels. With the demonstration of these negative variables being linked to individuals who chose to cohabit, it appears more likely that cohabitators are individuals who will experience less intimacy than to assume cohabitation lowers intimacy for the participants. This relationship between cohabitation and lower intimacy for engaged individuals is something that has not yet been established by other research.

The second primary result found was that engaged adults who are cohabiting have expectations that are considered significantly more realistic compared to non-cohabiting engaged adults. This directly opposes Hypothesis II, and is strong enough to support an alternative hypothesis of cohabiting engaged couples having more realistic expectations compared to non-cohabiting couples. While this also directly refutes the findings of the very early cohabitation research by DeMaris and Leslie (1984), it does provide some validation for the public opinion that cohabitation is a constructive preparatory stage for marriage. The violation of expectations is a significant producer of stress and conflict regardless of a situation's nature; thus, it can be concluded from the results that cohabiting engaged adults will have less stress and conflict because their expectations are more realistic.

Although, the differences shown between groups cannot be directly linked to cohabitation causing the differing expectations, it seems likely that the difference shown in expectation levels, compared to intimacy levels, is more likely a direct result of cohabitation. Aspects of marriage such as sharing meals regularly, planning expenses, balancing family time, are dealt with much more frequently in a cohabiting situation due to its full-time nature. Support for the belief that cohabitation directly impacts expectations comes from the fact that these aforementioned issues are also the types of issues and topics asked about when measuring marital expectations. Therefore, the navigating of these issues on a regular basis by cohabiting individuals would seem to be a likely reason for their more realistic expectations.

Other significant results were also demonstrated. As there exists no data on cohabitation among engaged couples, I feel all statistically significant results are important to report as they provide further knowledge about this population even though few studies exist to aid in the interpretation of the current results.

Concerning intimacy experienced, females were shown to report higher levels of intimacy compared to males. There was also a significant interaction between gender and living status as females who were not cohabiting reported the highest levels of intimacy within their relationship whereas cohabiting males reported the lowest levels of intimacy. Females, on average, tend to be both more emotional and more relationship oriented (Timmers, Fischer, & Manstead, 1998), thus the finding that they report more intimacy seems reasonable.

The results showed that gender did not have any impact on expectations and that no interaction between gender and living status existed. Without any significant research on the impact of gender on marital expectations, it is inconclusive as to whether this finding is normal and representative for all engaged adults. Also concerning expectations was the strong finding that as the engaged adult's relationship lengthens, their expectations move toward being more realistic. This would demonstrate that couples that are engaged do indeed move towards a marriage-level relationship and shows that they do grow towards what could be considered "more-ready" for marriage. Support for this notion that an individual is better prepared for

marriage with a longer premarital relationship is provided by research that reported individuals delaying age of marriage or having a longer relationship before marriage are significantly more likely to experience marital stability (Heaton, 2002).

Without any research on the development or decline of intimacy among dating or engaged couples over time, the findings that longer relationships were correlated with lower intimacy cannot be interpreted. It is my belief that the excitement of engagement for participants very recently engaged somewhat artificially heightened their reports of intimacy within their relationship as engagement likely corresponded to a very “good” time in their relationship.

Lastly, it is important to comment on the finding that high levels of intimacy were strongly correlated to more idealistic marital expectations. This finding was reasonable considering the non-cohabiting group demonstrated both the highest intimacy levels and the most idealistic expectation levels. A possible explanation for this is that participants reporting positive levels of intimacy during the survey then carried their positive feelings over to more idealistic expectations. Again, without research on intimacy and marital expectations for this population, this correlation cannot entirely be interpreted.

### Conclusion

It can be concluded from this study that individuals who cohabit with their fiancés can expect to have lower levels of intimacy and are more likely to demonstrate more realistic expectations about what marriage will hold for their relationship. It is not known whether the intimacy difference is a direct effect of the cohabiting aspect of the relationship or whether it is an innate variable more likely to be exemplified by individuals choosing to cohabit. Although the reasoning for differences in marital expectations has not been explained, it seems more likely cohabitation directly affects expectations.

With these results and the review of previous research, I feel two conclusions about cohabitation should be drawn. First, with the results on intimacy levels helping to support the link between cohabitation and poor marital outcomes, it can be concluded that cohabitation is a likely marker for lower intimacy and increased risk of marital struggle and dissolution.

It is my conclusion that cohabitation, as a choice of living arrangement to precede marriage, should not be considered as a negative choice or as a choice that will directly lead to negative outcomes, although it continues to be reported in that manner even without research to support that assumption. Clearly, the link to negative outcomes has been demonstrated but, as mentioned, research has linked a number of risk factors present among individuals who have chosen to cohabit. No apparent research exists to show that an individual in a premarital cohabiting relationship has undergone a change from their non-cohabiting self. Also, supporting the conclusion that cohabitation does not directly have negative effects is that no apparent research has measured actual relationship variables before and after a couple marries among both cohabiting and non-cohabiting couples. Without this research, it cannot be concluded that the marital difficulties shown by pre-maritally cohabiting couples can be directly attributed to their choice to cohabit.

It is supported by research and entirely likely that cohabitation is nothing more than a marker for the risk factors and negative personal or environmental traits that predict relationship and marital difficulties. The current results demonstrate that cohabitation may in fact help lessen the impact of these risk factors by providing a more realistic view of marriage, which theoretically would reduce the stress resulting from violated expectations. Other research has also shown benefits from premarital cohabitation. One study showed that couples cohabiting

before marriage are 3 times more likely to reconcile a separated marriage than couples who didn't cohabit before marriage (Wineberg, 1994). A recent comprehensive study by Heaton (2002) on marital stability also demonstrated that premarital cohabitation indirectly increases marital stability by delaying the age of marriage. Finally, research by Teachman and Polonko (1990) demonstrated that individuals who only cohabitated with their future spouse showed no heightened likelihood of marital dissolution compared to participants not cohabiting before marriage. With all of this, it seems logical that cohabitation can be considered an arrangement that may help protect individuals from risk factors while having no true negative impact on the situational factors and personal variables that already exist for those choosing to cohabit before marriage.

This along with previous research does suggest that there are things individuals should know if they do chose to cohabit before marriage. If an individual does chose to cohabit, the results of this study indicate that extra effort must be given to both building and maintaining intimacy. Following the findings of other research, cohabiting individuals must also take extra time and effort to identify and minimize the risk factors likely to be inherent due to the fact they are the type of individual choosing to cohabit along with being determined to maintain commitment. With efforts to minimize their personal and situational risk factors and with a strong focus on maintaining commitment to marriage, I strongly believe that cohabitation will have no negative influences on their future marital satisfaction and stability.

#### Limitations

This study has several limitations. The main limitation is the extremely small and homogenous sample size. With the small sample size, the strength of the statistical tests, especially the ANOVA results, are certainly compromised. With the sample consisting primarily of college age students of the same ethnicity and from the same region, these results should not be applied across engaged relationships as a whole.

A second limitation results from using a sample of convenience and personal references. Without a randomized list of engaged couples to chose from along the fact only willing individuals participated, the results are also not representative of engaged couples as a whole. Similarly, since many participants were referred by other participants, it is possible that this method only increased the likelihood of a non-representative sample.

Lastly, the nature of the intimacy scale created a potential limitation. It created the potential for biased responses due to participants possibly being overly positive about how intimate their relationship is, especially among newly engaged participants. Using the established measures for conventionality in the PAIR to find participants who are "faking good", the large majority of participants in this study would have been eliminated from analysis. This statement is inconclusive due to possible misinterpretation of the conventionality scoring, but it is highly probably that that some participants did "fake good" or report biased levels of intimacy.

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