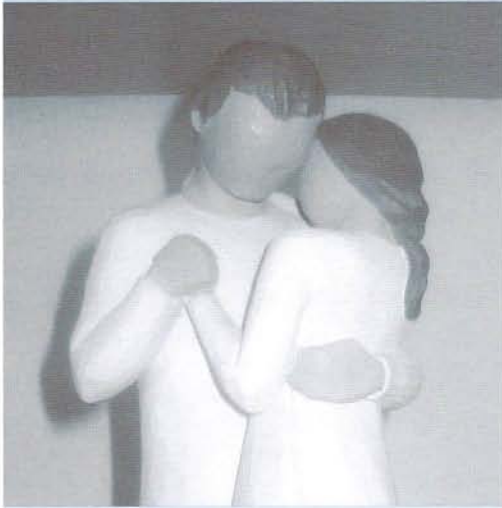


# Family Focus on . . .

## Cohabitation

Issue FF42



## “Sliding vs. Deciding”: understanding a mystery

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Here’s a mystery. What is one of the primary things young people believe that they can do before marriage that will “up” their odds of lasting love?<sup>1</sup> Hint. It’s the same as the answer to this question: What used to be rare but has now become the norm in couple development?<sup>2</sup> The answer to both, of course, is cohabitation. There are many things one could say represent fundamental shifts in how people do relationships in industrialized nations, and the increase in the prevalence of cohabitation instead of marriage or cohabitation prior to marriage would be near the top of the list. The mystery is this. The belief that cohabiting prior to marriage lowers one’s odds of divorce has no evidence going for it, yet it is a strongly held belief.

The popular media seem to publish front page articles on cohabitation regularly. In *USA Today*, there have been one or two major stories on cohabitation nearly every year for the past 7 years. While there may be many reasons for this, one reason is that the main findings in this field don’t behave according to common expectations. It makes for interesting reading. The “facts” about cohabitation just do not line up well with the beliefs most people, especially young people, hold. Virtually every published study that has examined premarital cohabitation finds it to be associated with greater, rather than lower, risk for problems in marriage.<sup>3</sup> This association is called the “cohabitation effect.” We know of no published study that shows a benefit of premarital cohabitation for marital outcomes and many published studies showing added risk. (Daniel Lichter does have some evidence for a positive effect



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but we are concerned about the age of the sample in terms of relevance for the current scene.) For a sampling of findings on the cohabitation effect, see Figure 1 (page 2).

This cohabitation effect just doesn’t make sense to the average person (nor to some non-average people, as well). After all, it’s a very reasonable proposition that living with someone prior to marriage should help one understand better the potential of the relationship, and that should improve one’s odds. In many cases, it no doubt does. But you’d be hard pressed to find data that showed this to be generally true. This constitutes a mystery both for the general public and to researchers.

For those whose initial reaction is that it’s not all that mysterious, the main way of understanding these seemingly counter-intuitive findings comes down to selection effects. We know very well that, historically, those who cohabited prior to marriage tended to be those who were less conventional in their views about marriage and divorce, and generally, those who tended to be less religious. The main explanation of the cohabitation effect has been that the

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risk has nothing to do with cohabiting per se and everything to do with who does or does not cohabit. This is a compelling hypothesis and there is evidence in support of part of it. Those who cohabit prior to marriage have, indeed, been shown to differ on these types of variables in study after study. People who cohabit also tend to be people who have been at higher risk for relationships not going so well on a host of other dimensions (e.g., coming from families with parents divorced). The mystery continues, however. A number of studies find evidence of selection, but what is lacking is overwhelming evidence that selection explains all of the risk associated with cohabitation prior to marriage.

Enter the mystery. How could something so seemingly harmless be associated with harm? Before we address this question, we should make clear that the other interesting discussion going on in this field is about whether the cohabitation risk will simply disappear over time, regardless of what explains it. The reasoning goes like this. Cohabitation used to be very unconventional but has now become normative. If some of the negative effects of cohabitation prior to marriage are due to the unconventional nature of it (and the stigma attached to living together unmarried), then as it becomes more conventional, we should see a decrease in the association between premarital cohabitation and marital distress or divorce. This perspective makes good sense, but even recent samples show evidence for the cohabitation effect, especially among those who lived together before becoming engaged.<sup>5</sup> More importantly, we, along with various colleagues of ours such as Howard Markman, are investigating an alternate theory of the cohabitation effect; one that embraces the concept of selection but also posits an additive, causal element.

#### Inertia

In 2004, our team published a finding that was puzzling. We found that premarital cohabitation was associated not only with the usual risks, but also that it was associated with lower levels of husband's commitment to their wives, years into marriage.<sup>6</sup> While one might think measuring commitment could be of crucial importance in understanding something closely related to the development of committed relationships, this had been rarely, if ever, been done before. We began to speculate that there could be a subset of

### Premarital cohabitation is associated with:

- More negative communication in marriage (Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002; Kline et al., 2004; Stanley et al., 2004; Thomson & Colelia, 1992)
- Lower levels of marital satisfaction (Nock, 1995; Stafford et al., 2004; Stanley et al., 2004)
- The erosion over time of the value/view of marriage and childrearing (Axinn & Barber, 1997; Axinn & Thornton, 1992)
- Higher perceived marital instability (Kamp Dush, Cohan, & Amato, 2003; Stafford et al., 2004; Thomas & Colella, 1992)
- Lower levels of male commitment to spouse (Rhoades (Kline) et al., 2006; Stanley et al., 2004)
- Greater likelihood of divorce (DeMaris & Rao, 1992; Kamp Dush et al., 2003; Philips & Sweeney, 2005; Teachman, 2003; Stanley, Amato, Johnson, & Markman, 2006)

Figure 1: The Cohabitation Effect<sup>4</sup>

men among those who cohabited premaritally who married someone they would not have married had they never cohabited, thus showing lower commitment in their marriages. The crucial idea here was that cohabiting is more constraining of one's options in a relationship than dating without sharing a single address. This thinking is almost axiomatic. It simply must be harder to end the average cohabiting relationship than it is to end a dating relationship. Although the level of constraints could vary greatly from couple to couple, the idea of moving out, splitting things and friends up, and finding another place to live must have some greater force of constraint on one's perceived options for the future of the relationship than the same person would experience during dating. This idea that it is harder to end a cohabiting relationship than a non-cohabiting dating relationship is the essence of the concept of inertia in our work.

In physics, inertia pertains to the amount of energy it would take to move an object at rest or redirect and object on one trajectory to another. A rolling ten-ton truck is harder to stop than a VW Bug. The hypothesis is that cohabitation is more of a truck than a bug. We suggest that cohabitation puts the average couple on trajectory toward marriage and that it may be difficult to exit the trajectory, even if the relationship doesn't have what it takes to make a marriage happy or lasting.

The potential implications of this inertia are great. Young people tend to believe cohabitation is a good test of a relationship, but what they may not realize is that cohabitation may make it harder to break up, even if the relationship fails the test. Of all the reasons for cohabiting, doing so to test the relationship appears to be associated with the lowest relationship quality,<sup>7</sup> suggesting that those who believe they need to test their relationships before marriage may have good reasons for desiring a test. The problem is that cohabiting may only make it more likely that a lower quality relationship will result in marriage.

Is this way of thinking in opposition to the selection perspective? Not at all. It embraces it. We agree that there are differences between those who cohabit and those who choose not to and that these differences, particularly in terms of religiousness and attitudes about the stability of marriage, can also be linked with risk for marital distress and divorce. Imagine that a person already at risk for marital problems links up with someone else at greater-than-average risk. Let's call them Bob and Mary. Bob and Mary begin to live together. After all, they like being around each other, they want to spend more time together, and they both believe that cohabitation can do nothing but improve their odds of things working out well in marriage. They believe they will

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learn important details about one another that will make their decision about marriage a more informed one. They also think that cohabiting will help them learn and develop patterns that could help them out in marriage. But notice what has happened here. Nothing about cohabiting lowers their risk. In fact, cohabiting, for the most part, could only lower the risk for individuals who are committed to breaking up with this person if things are not going as desired. Doubtless, some do just this. But equally doubtless, for others, what cohabitation did is increase the odds of an already high risk relationship continuing. This is consistent with Norval Glenn's idea of premature entanglements that foreclose adequate searching for the right partner.

**Sliding vs. Deciding**

There is straightforward prediction resulting from the reasoning we present here. Those partners who are already clear about and strongly committed to marriage at the time they start living together should not experience the cohabitation effect. In essence, inertia suggests the greatest risk is for those who do not have mutual clarity about the future together because they are increasing the likelihood of marriage before clarifying these important matters of fit, intention, and commitment. By the way, the word "mutual" in that prior sentence is pretty crucial. There are bestselling books on the downside of non-mutual commitment to the future of a relationship—we're "just not that into" this being a good thing. Conversely, if two people

already know they intend to marry, it is much less likely that cohabitation will increase their odds of staying together because they already determined they would be together. So, we should find less of a cohabitation effect for those who are already committed, such as by being engaged, prior to cohabiting. We have now found evidence to support this essential prediction in four data sets. In each study, those who began living together before they were engaged had lower marital quality than those who were engaged before cohabitation or who did not live together at all premaritally. We are increasingly convinced that there is something protective about having clarified both the fit of a relationship and the mutual commitment to marriage before taking steps like cohabitation or marriage that constrain future options.

If being clear about commitment and the future is protective, how do most couples actually begin to cohabit? Colleagues Wendy Manning and Pamela Smock have found that the majority (just over 50%) of cohabiting couples do not report any kind of deliberative process that culminated in cohabiting.<sup>8</sup> Rather, most people report that it just sort of happened. One thing led to another and, bingo, the couple was living together. In contrast, commitments are decisions. Commitment can be viewed, in its essence, as making a choice to give up other choices. If most couples "slide" into cohabiting (as well as through other types of transitions), they are not "deciding" at what can be a crucial transition where constraints are increasingly

favoring relationship continuance. Deciding is protective, sliding is not. Deciding clarifies commitment and an intention to follow through on what one has chosen. The prevalence of sliding-type transitions in relationships may play a causal role in undermining the development of the protective elements of commitment. That moves the discussion beyond mere selection into how selection sets in motion relationship development patterns that undermine the development of mutual, strong commitments.

If most couples "slide" into cohabiting, . . . they are not "deciding" at what can be a crucial transition where constraints are increasingly favoring relationship continuance.

**Does any of this matter for helping people?**

We could, and eventually will, write a book on this topic. But here are a few thoughts we have about the practice of helping people succeed in their aspirations for lifelong love. First, whatever you believe are the reasons, we know from many studies over decades (including very recent samples) that cohabiting prior to the development of commitment is risky. That means we have a direct way to identify a very large group of individuals at higher risk for problems in their relationships. If we can find them, we can try to reach them to help them lower those risks in any number of ways. Second, we suspect that sliding transitions are inherently risky, whether we're talking about cohabitation, sex, becoming pregnant, or whatever else you can think of. We have a generation of young people growing up who doesn't appear to recognize that certain relationship transitions are fundamentally capable of altering their future options in a downward direction. Helping young people (and older ones, too) make decisions about transitions should be a crucial aspect of our relationship education efforts. Third, people do seem intent on doing things that improve their odds. It just so happens that one of the main things they believe will do this, doesn't. Could couples considering testing their

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relationship with cohabitation be steered instead to think about relationship education as a pathway to better understand their potential? That's probably a tough sell, but some tough sells are smart to attempt.

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**Endnotes**

- <sup>1</sup> One source of data supporting this point is: Thornton, A., & Young-DeMarco, L. (2001). Four decades of trends in attitudes toward family issues in the United States: The 1960s through the 1990s. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 63, 1009-1037.
- <sup>2</sup> Smock, P.J. (2000). Cohabitation in the United States: An appraisal of research themes, findings, and implications. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26, 1-20.
- <sup>3</sup> For a review as well as a deeper summary of many of the conceptual points made here, see: Stanley, S. M., Rhoades, G. K., & Markman, H. J. (2006). Sliding vs. Deciding: Inertia and the premarital cohabitation effect. *Family Relations*, 55, 499 - 509.
- <sup>4</sup> Most of the full citations for this literature can be found in the previous reference.
- <sup>5</sup> The most recent in a series of papers where we show this is: Rhoades, G. K., Stanley, S. M., & Markman, H. J. (2008). The pre-engagement cohabitation effect: A replication and extension of previous findings. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 23, 107 - 111.
- <sup>6</sup> Stanley, S. M., Whitton, S. W., & Markman, H. J. (2004). Maybe I do: Interpersonal commitment and premarital or nonmarital cohabitation. *Journal of Family Issues*, 25, 496-519.
- <sup>7</sup> Rhoades, G. K., Stanley, S. M., & Markman, H. J. (2009). Couples' reasons for cohabitation: Associations with individual well-being and relationship quality. *Journal of Family Issues*, 30, 233 - 258.
- <sup>8</sup> Manning, W. D., & Smock, P. J. (2005). Measuring and modeling cohabitation: New perspectives from qualitative data. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 67, 989 - 1002.

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