national healthy marriage resource center

Cohabitation: Defining the Differences

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Background/Importance

Unmarried romantic partners sharing a household are defined in scholarly literature as *cohabitating*. *This is an extremely broad category that presents a unique challenge*: identifying who, exactly, is classified as cohabitating. Some cohabit with the intent to marry while others cohabit as an alternative to marriage. There are also those who cohabit out of convenience. "Cohabitants" could be engaged couples, common-law husband and wife, or singles living together in a romantic relationship.

In 2006, 4.4% of all households in the United States were comprised of unmarried partners (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). This percentage represents a dramatic increase from just a generation ago and it is likely an underestimate because of the way cohabitation has been defined by the Census. Another way to think about the ubiquity of cohabitation is to recognize that an estimated 60% to 75% of couples now live together before they marry (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004).

Rates of cohabitation vary some by ethnicity and income level, just as marriage and divorce rates vary (for more details, see Fields, 2004; Raley & Bumpass, 2003). It is likely that the types of cohabitation or the reasons for it vary across subgroups, as well (see Manning & Landale, 1996; Manning & Smock, 1995), though little research has investigated these questions directly. There is also some evidence that premarital cohabitation is most strongly associated with subsequent divorce for individuals who are white than for those who are Hispanic or African-American (Phillips & Sweeney, 2005).

The rise in popularity of cohabitation is linked with other important shifts in family patterns across the United States.

The rise in the popularity of cohabitation is linked with other important shifts in family patterns across the United States. In particular, the age of first marriage has been rising for several decades (Fields, 2004) and it is likely that although people tend to be delay-

ing marriage, they are not delaying living together, as many people are cohabiting several years before they marry. In the 1990s about 53% of cohabitations resulted in marriage (Bumpass & Lu, 2000). Additionally, the percentage of children who are born to unmarried mothers has increased over the past several decades. For many years, these mothers were considered "single," but it is likely that many of them are actually in cohabiting relationships. The U.S. Census Bureau has recently devised new questions that will address these issues more clearly in future surveys (see Kreider, 2008).

About 39% of people who identify themselves as living in cohabiting households include children (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). Some of these children are the biological children of both partners, but often they are the biological child of just one of the partners. In 2007, 3% of children in the United States lived with both of their parents who were unmarried; 68% of children lived with both of their parents who were married to each other (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). More generally, researchers have estimated that at least 20% of children will live in a cohabiting household at some point while growing up (Bumpass & Lu, 2000).

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Research and Trends

Different Types of Cohabitation

A growing literature is focused on why and how partners come to cohabit. According to one study, when asked why they began sharing a household, many people reported that they entered it without much thought (Manning & Smock, 2005). Another study found that when asked the same question, most reported that they wanted to spend more time together and that it was more convenient than living apart (Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, in press). Some individuals report using cohabitation as a way to test the relationship before marriage, even though this type of cohabitation represented only a small minority in one study (Rhoades et al., in press).

Many cohabiting individuals report that they plan to marry their current partner (Brown & Booth, 1996). And, as was noted above, in the 1990s about 53% of cohabitations resulted in marriage (Bumpass & Lu, 2000).

Although cohabitation as an alternative to marriage is becoming widespread in many Western European countries, this arrangement in the United States still tends to be short-lived, resulting either in marriage or break-up within two to three years (Bumpass & Lu, 2000). Thus, cohabitation as an alternative to marriage could be seen as another type of cohabitation, although it is less common in the United States because the majority of people report a desire to be married (Glenn, 2005).

Implications

Evidence shows that cohabiting before marriage is a risk factor for divorce. This association has been deemed the "cohabitation effect." In one study based on national survey data, couples who lived together before marriage were 1.77 times more likely to divorce than those couples who did not cohabit prior to marriage (Kamp Dush, Cohan, & Amato, 2003). There has been a great deal of speculation in the research literature as to why this cohabitation effect occurs.

Are poorer relationships due to the experience of cohabitation or to the types of people who choose to cohabit? Brown and Booth (1996) summarized this issue well. Some argue that selection factors, such as age, religiousness, and education, that are linked with both a higher likelihood of cohabitation and a higher likelihood of divorce can account for the cohabitation effect (see Smock, 2000).

The "Cohabitation Effect" could be due to the fact that married couples who lived together before marriage both report and are observed to have worse communication, less marital satisfaction, and more physical violence than couples who did not live together before marriage (Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002; Stanley et al., 2004). Living together before becoming engaged is associated with lower marital quality as well (Kline et al., 2004).

Others surmise that there is something about the experience of cohabitation that leads to the association between premarital cohabitation and lower marital quality or divorce. One theory suggests that cohabitation increases constraints to stay together (e.g., financial or social pressure) and that these constraints may lead some couples to marry; these couples may not have married had they not already been sharing a household (Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006).

Effects on Children

Brown and Booth's interpretation of the "Cohabitation Effect" can also be applied to effects on children: poor child outcomes could be due to the types of parents who choose to cohabitate rather than to the experience itself. There is some evidence that children and adolescents in cohabiting families fare worse than children growing up in married families or in single-parent families in the areas of behavioral outcomes, emotional outcomes and school performance (Manning & Lamb, 2003).

It may also be that pregnancy intentions (i.e., whether the parents planned or wanted the child they have together) could explain some of the differences in child outcomes across family structures; this is because unmarried couples are more likely than married couples to experience unplanned or undesired pregnancies. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, an unwanted or undesired pregnancy may influence a woman's behavior and experiences during pregnancy and negatively affect the health of her newborn infant. Unwanted pregnancies have been shown to be associated with lower child self-esteem (Axinn, Barber, & Thornton, 1993) and poorer mother-child relationships (Barber, Axinn, & Thornton, 1999). Because unwanted pregnancies mostly occur among couples who are unmarried, better child outcomes can thus be associated with marriage.

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Lack of social support is another plausible way in which children are disadvantaged in unmarried families. Cohabiting individuals (with or without children) report less support from their parents than singles or married (Eggebeen, 2005); research shows that a lack of parental social support can lead to poorer outcomes in children Still, very little research has been conducted to understand what it is about unmarried families that contributes to the poorer outcomes for children.

Cohabitation and the Law

There can be legal implications of cohabiting. In some states, for example, if partners live together and represent themselves as married, they can be considered legally married (called a "common-law marriage"). Before moving in together, some couples may also decide to sign a legal agreement about how finances would be divided if the cohabitation ends. Such agreements are rare in the United States, but may become more popular if cohabitation becomes more of an alterative to marriage in the future.

Policymakers and anyone involved with community organizations that work with or on behalf of families should understand the contexts in which cohabitation occurs. Evidence shows that cohabitation is associated with poorer outcomes for children and increased chances of divorce. Because it is so difficult to isolate the reasons why this occurs, much research is needed to explore this relationship.

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