

Cohabitation and Marital Dissolution

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ABSTRACT

An intriguing question for family researchers has been to explain why a positive association between cohabitation and marital dissolution exists when the primary reason to cohabit is to test relationship compatibility. Recently, researchers have discovered that the relationship between cohabitation and marital instability is complex and depends on sexual history, cohabitation history, and race/ethnicity (Teachman 2003; Phillips and Sweeney 2005). Drawing on the National Survey of Family Growth, we examine whether and to what extent variation in premarital cohabitation experiences influence marital stability. We build on prior work by examining recent patterns, including both men and women, incorporating variation in cohabitation experiences, and focusing on race and ethnic similarities and differences. Our preliminary analyses reveal that variation in cohabitation experience does matter. Premarital cohabitation history (number and who) has different effects on marital instability for men and women. Both married men and women with marriage plans at the start of cohabitation share similar dissolution rates as couples who never cohabited. This research will contribute to our understanding of cohabitation, marital instability and broader family change.

Cohabitation and Marital Stability

The increase in cohabitation is well documented such that the majority of newly weds have cohabited prior to their first marriage (Bramlett and Mosher 2002). One of the key reasons that cohabiting young adults claim they live together is to test out their relationship and determine whether they are compatible before getting married (Bumpass, Sweet, and Cherlin 2001; Smock, Huang, Bergstrom, and Manning 2005). However, many researchers have found a positive association between cohabitation and marital dissolution (e.g., DeMaris and Rao 1992; Teachman and Polonko 1990; Schoen 1992; see Smock 2000). Recently, researchers have discovered that the relationship between cohabitation and marital instability is more complex. The effect of cohabitation depends on sexual history, cohabitation history, as well as race and ethnicity (Teachman 2003; Phillips and Sweeney 2005).

We draw on the National Survey of Family Growth (2002) to examine the relationship between cohabitation and marital dissolution. The primary aim is to assess whether the effect of cohabitation on the stability of marriage differs according to the meaning of cohabitation. Our work contributes to prior studies in four key ways.

First, we tap into variation in the meaning of cohabitation by examining the influence of engagement and cohabitation history on marital dissolution. Marriage plans is one way to distinguish among cohabitators (Casper and Sayer 2000; Brown and Booth 1996). Most cohabitators eventually plan on marrying their partners; however, not all couples started cohabitation with marriage plans (Manning and Smock 2005). Cohabiting couples with marriage plans are treating cohabitation as a direct part of the marriage process. Couples without plans may view cohabitation as part of courtship or singlehood. In fact, cohabitators with marriage plans

and married respondents share similar levels of relationship quality (Brown 2004; Brown and Booth 1996). We evaluate whether the effect of cohabitation on marital stability differs according to marriage plans. Married couples who cohabited with marriage plans are expected to share similar marital stability as married men and women who never cohabited.

Another way to measure the meaning of cohabitation is to consider whether individuals experience several cohabiting unions or just cohabit with their future spouse. Cohabitation history has been found to be related to marital stability. Women who cohabited with only one partner (and only had sex with that one partner) prior to marriage had marriage dissolution rates similar to women who never cohabited (Teachman 2003). Prior studies find some support for the notion that young adults who have cohabited with more than one partner may be more prone to marital instability (Teachman and Polonko 1990; DeMaris and McDonald 1993).

Alternatively, individuals who have cohabited with more than one partner prior to marriage may have enough relationship experience to make better marriage choices than their counterparts who have only cohabited with one partner. This topic has received little empirical attention.

Second, given race and ethnic differences in cohabitation, marital disruption, and the effect of cohabitation on marital disruption (e.g., Manning, Smock, and Majumdar 2004; Phillips and Sweeney 2005; Raley and Bumpass 2003), we expect to observe differences in the effect of cohabitation according to race and ethnicity. Phillips and Sweeney (2005) find that cohabitation has a significant negative effect on marital stability among whites, but no effect among Blacks and Mexican-Americans. This racial and ethnic gap may be due in part to differences in the meaning of cohabitation among racial and ethnic groups. Among currently cohabiting couples, Blacks had weaker marriage plans than Whites or Hispanics (Manning and Smock 2002). Blacks also are less likely to make the transition to marriage, even when they

have marriage plans (Brown 2000). We expect that the race and ethnic differences in the effect of cohabitation on marital stability will be minimal among cohabitators with marriage plans and greater among those without marriage plans.

Third, recent previous studies using the NSFG have been limited to only women (Phillips and Sweeney 2005; Teachman 2003). Gender scripts about appropriate sexual and relational behavior among men and women suggest that cohabitation experience before marriage may have a weaker effect on marital stability among men than women. This paper investigates and contrasts the effects of cohabitation for both men and women.

Finally, we use recent data to assess whether the influence of cohabitation on marital stability have become weaker. The bulk of the research reporting a positive effect of cohabitation on marital instability is based on data collected nearly two decades ago. The increase in cohabitation and growing acceptance of cohabitation suggests that cohabitation may be becoming less selective and a more typical family pattern than in the past. As a consequence, it is possible that cohabitation may have a weaker effect in recent years than has been reported in prior work. Aggregate evidence supports this position. Despite the continued increase in cohabitation we have not witnessed growth in divorce rates. Alternatively, the spread of cohabitation may mean that the group of individuals who do not cohabit prior to marriage may be becoming more distinct (traditional values and highly religious). We could observe even stronger effects of cohabitation on marital stability in recent years.

DATA

We draw on the National Survey of Family Growth 2002. This is a national probability sample of 12,571 women and men ages 15-44. These data are appropriate because they include a large sample of men and women with cohabitation experience. The data are ideal because they

include recently collected cohabitation histories, marriage histories, and questions about marriage plans during cohabitation. Our analytic sample is based on 3,515 women and 1,500 men ages 15-44 in 2002 who ever have been married. We base our analyses of marital dissolution on first marriages because of sample size limitations and dissolution processes differ among higher order marriages. We restrict our analyses to White, Black, and Mexican American women and men.

The dependent variable is the timing of the divorce or separation of the first marriage. The key independent variable is cohabitation experience. We find that 1,811 women and 854 men cohabited prior to their first marriage. Similar to prior work we account for the number of prior cohabiting partners, as well as whether the respondent lived with their spouse prior to marriage. We also distinguish the marriage plans of cohabitators. The marriage plans question inquires whether the respondent and spouse were engaged to be married or had definite plans to get married at the time they began living together. We also evaluate the effect of duration of cohabitation on marital dissolution. Brown (2003) finds that the differentials between married and cohabitators' perceived relationship instability is due to duration of the union. The NSFG allows us to include characteristics of the respondent and spouse that are associated with marital dissolution. These factors include: family background, religiosity, age at marriage, education and employment at the time of marriage, fertility, marriage cohort, and premarital sexual experience.

Our analytic strategy is to use life tables and survival models to examine marital instability. Life tables are used to provide an initial portrait of the relationship between cohabitation and marital stability. We estimate separate life tables for Blacks, Whites, and

Mexican-Americans. Our multivariate models are based on discrete-time survival methodology (Allison 1995). We observe the first decade of marriage stability and censor at 10 year duration.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

We present our initial descriptive life table results. Just over half of men (57%) and women (51%) cohabited prior to their first marriage. These levels are higher among men and women married since 1995. Over three-fifths (64% of men and 63% of women) who married since 1995 cohabited prior to their first marriage. Figure 1 shows that both men and women with cohabitation experience have a greater risk of ending their relationship. The gap in marital stability according to cohabitation experiences appears to be greater for women than the gap for men. Separate estimates for Black, White, and Mexican-Americans reflect a similar pattern as presented in Figure 1.

We next examine how cohabitation with only a spouse versus cohabitation with others affects marital instability. Among respondents who cohabited prior to their first marriage 76% of men and 91% of women lived only with their spouse. Figure 2a shows that married men who lived only with their spouse have higher dissolution rates than married men who never cohabited or lived with more than one partner. This finding is unexpected and suggests that men with greater cohabitation experience prior to marriage manage to better sustain their marriages. Figure 2b reveals a different pattern of results for women. Life table estimates indicate that there are relatively few differences in marital stability based on the number of prior cohabiting partners. Women who lived with only their spouse prior to marriage report marital dissolution levels similar to women who had more extensive premarital cohabitation experience. It is notable that very few women reported living with someone other than their spouse prior to their first marriage.

Our final set of findings focus on marriage plans during cohabitation. We find that 45% of men who cohabited prior to marriage report having marriage plans when they started cohabiting. A slightly higher percentage (53%) of women with cohabitation experience prior to their first marriage claimed to have had marriage plans when they began cohabiting. Thus, a substantial proportion of men and women did not have marriage plans when they initiated cohabitation. The life tables in Figures 3a and 3b show that men and women who cohabited without initial marriage plans have greater marital dissolution rates than their counterparts who did not cohabit or cohabited with marriage plans. Interestingly, marriage plans is related to marital stability in a parallel way for men and women. Our initial life table estimates suggest similar patterns among Whites, Blacks and Mexican Americans; however, this requires further investigation.

SUMMARY

Cohabitation has become part of the marriage process in the United States and is a normative step on the pathway to marriage. Despite the empirical evidence that cohabitation has been associated with higher rates of marital instability, cohabitators still believe that cohabitation helps to select good spouses that will ensure stable marriages. In fact, qualitative evidence indicates that a fear of divorce is a motivation among some young adults to cohabit (Smock et al. 2005). At the same time, it is increasingly recognized that cohabitators are not a monolithic group and there are different meanings to cohabitation. Researchers have begun to document how variation in the cohabitation experience influences marital stability (Phillips and Sweeney 2005; Teachman 2003). We build on this work by considering additional sources of variation among cohabitators. This research will provide a more nuanced understanding of the effects of cohabitation on marital stability. More broadly, this work will contribute to our understanding of

marital stability and recent family change.

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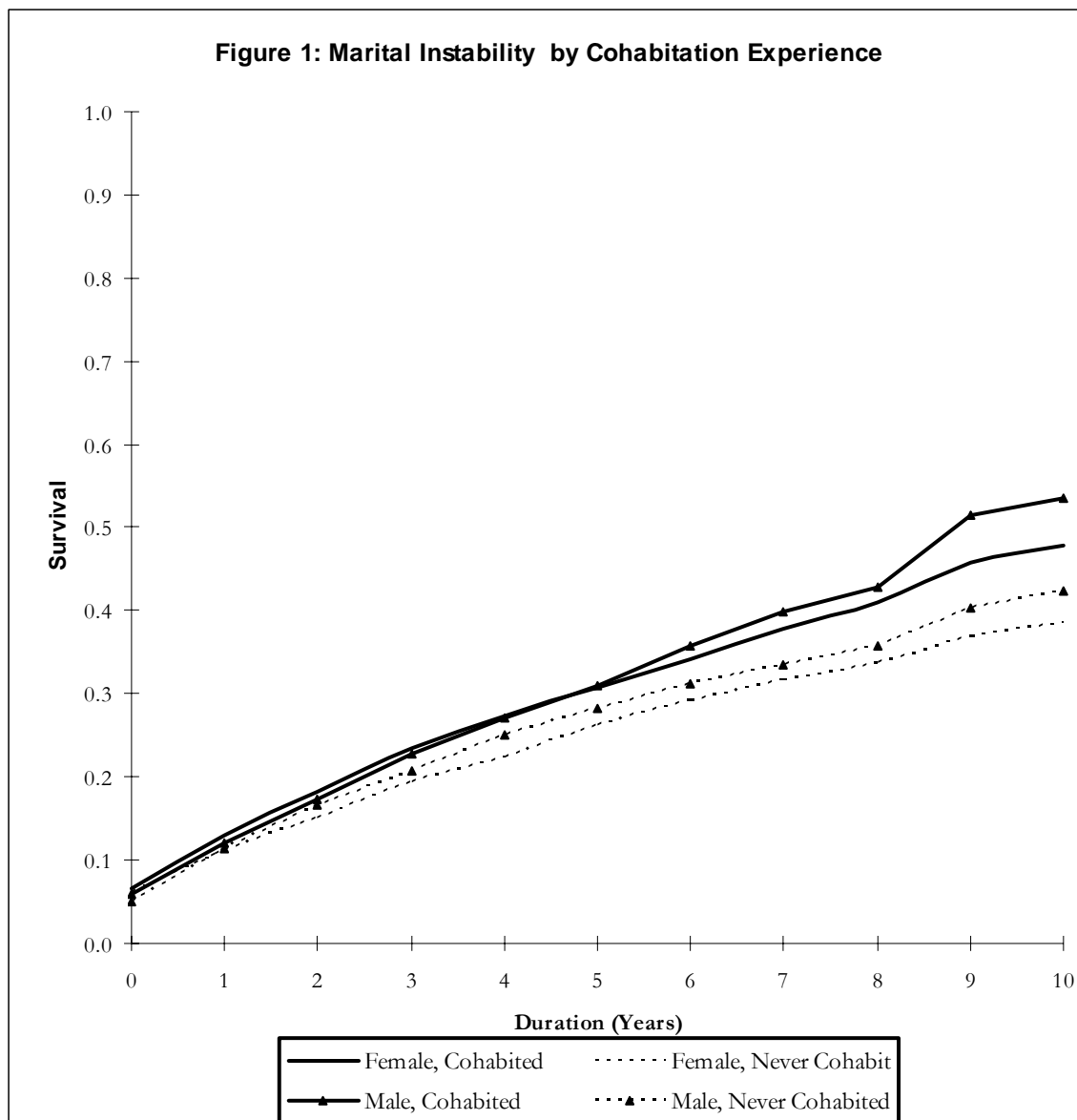


Figure 2A: Marital Instability by Cohabitation Experience Prior to First Marriage
(Males)

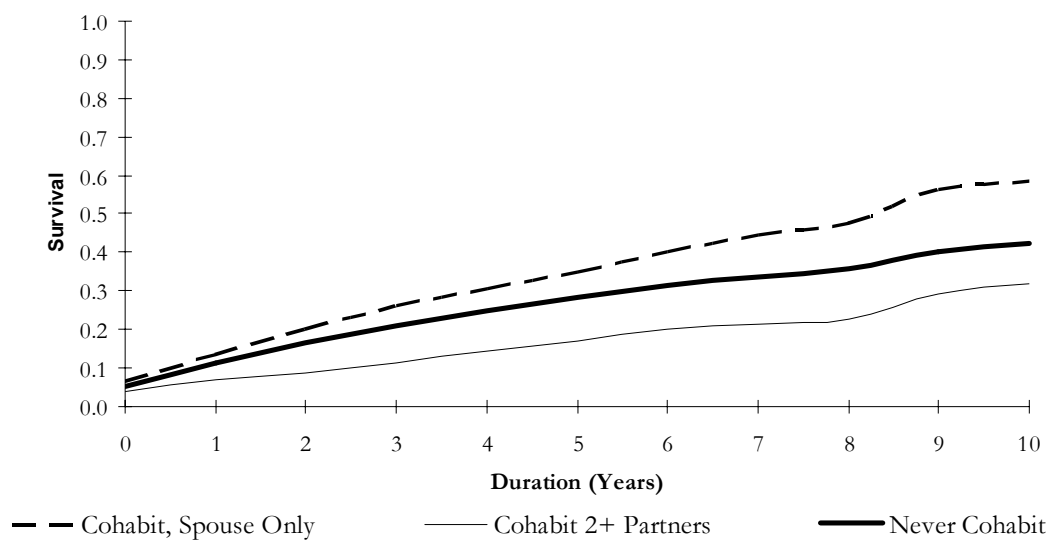


Figure 2B: Marital Instability by Cohabitation Experience Prior to First Marriage
(Females)

