

Sharing a home with a partner before marriage is an important life transition for an increasing number of young adults in the U.S. By the mid-1990s, nearly half of all women in their mid-twenties and thirties had been in at least one cohabiting relationship (Bumpass and Lu 2000). Much research has focused on who enters cohabitations, but important questions remain about the transition out of cohabitation: Who is likely to marry a cohabiting partner? Which couples are at greater risk of separation?

Researchers stress economics as the driving force behind transitions out of cohabitation (Smock and Manning 1997; Smock, Manning, and Porter 2005). Though money is clearly a central concern of cohabiting couples, religion is an important cultural factor that has been largely overlooked in previous work. Studying religious cohabitators allows researchers to examine individuals' responses to competing economic and cultural pressures. Many religious groups discourage or prohibit cohabitation, a living arrangement that often serves as public acknowledgement of premarital sexual relations (Thornton, Axinn, and Hill 1992). Most religious groups promote childbearing within marriage – a goal that often places religious groups in opposition to cohabiting couples. Religious proscription against cohabitation is likely to be stronger among religious groups that are more fundamentalist/conservative than liberal, and individuals who indicate stronger religiosity are themselves likely to be more receptive to religious proscriptions.

Religious affiliation and religiosity have been linked to union formation; more religious individuals enter cohabitations less frequently and enter marriages more frequently than non-religious individuals (Lehrer 2004; Stanley, Whitton, and Markman 2004; Thornton, Axinn, and Hill 1992). However, the current prevalence of cohabitation

in the U.S. indicates that many religious individuals are among those living together outside of marriage. How do these religious cohabitators reconcile their behavior with their religion? Does religious affiliation or religiosity play a role in the transition from these cohabiting relationships? This paper asserts that individuals with conservative religious affiliations and higher levels of religiosity are more likely to either separate or marry their cohabiting partners than those with liberal affiliations and lower levels of religiosity, even after accounting for economic explanations.

The data for this paper come from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), a nationally representative, school-based sample first interviewed in 1994 (Wave I) and re-interviewed in 1995-96 (Wave II) and 2000-01 (Wave III). Wave III provides retrospective data on cohabitation history. Over forty percent of respondents report at least one cohabitation that lasted one month or longer; this study only considers the first cohabitation (N=4955). Wave I contains measures of religious affiliation, importance of religion, and religious service attendance from both the adolescents and their parents. These items, plus an expanded set of questions on spirituality and religious activity, are available for the young adults in Wave III. The models for this research use the Wave I religion items, measured prior to any cohabitation for the adolescents. Temporal precedence is important because cohabitation experience could change an individual's religious affiliation or religiosity.

This study uses discrete-time logistic event history analysis to model the transition from cohabitation. Event history models incorporate information on the timing of the transition from cohabitation, and a competing risks framework allows the simultaneous modeling of marriage and separation as exits from cohabitation, providing a

direct contrast between the impact of religion variables on both marriage and separation. Preliminary analyses show that religious factors do push respondents out of cohabitation, even when controlling for economic and demographic variables. Respondents who reported attending any religious services are significantly more likely to separate from their cohabiting partner; those who went to a service at least once a week are 1.24 times as likely to separate as cohabitators who never attended a service. Individuals who attended religious services at least once a week are 1.30 times as likely to marry their cohabiting partner, compared to those who never attended a service. These results suggest that religious background does have an impact on cohabiting couples' decisions to marry or separate, over and above economic factors. These results are complicated by gender as well; religious service attendance appears to push men towards separating from their cohabiting partners and women towards marrying their cohabiting partners. The full analyses will explore further the gendered nature of religious experience in cohabiting relationships.

References:

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