

**Cohabitation and Marital Dissolution:
The Significance of Marriage Cohort**

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ABSTRACT

An ongoing question for family researchers has been to explain why a positive association between cohabitation and marital dissolution exists when one of the primary reasons to cohabit is to test relationship compatibility. Recently, researchers have discovered that the relationship between cohabitation and marital instability is complex and depends in part on marriage cohort, race/ethnicity, and marriage plans. Drawing on the 2006-2008 National Survey of Family Growth, we examine whether and to what extent variation in premarital cohabitation experiences influence marital stability. Our analyses reveal that a ‘cohabitation effect’ exists only for early marriage cohorts (women married prior to 1996) and there is no cohabitation effect among more women married since 1996. More specifically, among women married prior to 1996 we find that only white and foreign-born Hispanic women experience a cohabitation effect. In addition, the cohabitation effect among women in the later marriage cohort is masked until marriage plans are considered. This research contributes 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; Kennedy and Bumpass 2008). Cohabitation serves to help young adults test out their relationship (Bumpass, Sweet, and Cherlin 2001; Manning and Smock 2009; Manning, Giordano, and Longmore 2010; Smock, Huang, Bergstrom, and Manning forthcoming) which should help determine whether they are compatible before getting married. However, many researchers have found a positive association between cohabitation and marital dissolution (e.g., Jose et al. 2010; Kamp Dush, Cohen, and Amato 2003; Stanley, Rhoades, and Markman 2006, see Smock 2000). At the same time, researchers have recognized that the relationship between cohabitation and marital instability is complex and varies among subgroups of cohabitators. Prior work indicates that the effect of cohabitation differs according to marriage plans, sexual and cohabitation history, race and ethnicity as well as marriage cohort (Brown et al. 2008; DeMaris and McDonald 1993; Phillips and Sweeney 2005; Reinhold 2010; Rhoades et al. 2008; Stanley et al. 2010; Teachman 2003).

We draw on recently collected data from the National Survey of Family Growth (2006-2008) to examine the relationship between cohabitation and marital dissolution. We first assess whether there is a cohabitation effect and examine factors that may explain the cohabitation effect. However, it is important to move beyond explaining the effect of cohabitation, because a number of studies indicate there is no cohabitation effect for some subgroups. Drawing on the diffusion approach, we examine whether a cohabitation effect exists among recent marriage cohorts. Prior studies have relied on national data collected 15 years ago and our work provides an important update. Based on previous research we also consider whether a cohabitation effect exists among women with varying premarital experiences (plans for marriage, cohabitation

history, cohabitation duration, sexual activity) and race or ethnicity. These findings will provide up to date analyses of the influence of cohabitation and help to move forward our understanding marital stability and the meaning of cohabitation.

BACKGROUND

The increase in cohabitation is well documented with increasing percentages of young adults experiencing cohabitation. Furthermore cohabitation has become the modal path to marriage such that 44% of women cohabited prior to their first marriage in the late 1980s (1985-1989) and 62% in the late 1990's (Bumpass and Lu 2000; Kennedy and Bumpass 2008). At the same time, there has been a plateau in divorce trends with about one-half of first marriages ending in separation or divorce (Raley and Bumpass 2008). Thus, it appears that the rise in cohabitation is not associated with a similar growth in divorce.

Empirical and theoretical arguments suggest cohabitation may be a relationship in which marriages least likely to succeed are weeded out (Bumpass and Sweet 1989). Both quantitative and qualitative data indicate that young adults view cohabitation as a way to test out the relationship and some hope to “divorce-proof” their marriages by spending time cohabiting with their future spouse (Huang et al. 2010; Manning and Smock 2009; Manning, Longmore and Giordano 2010). More generally, in 2008 nearly 70% of high school seniors report that living together before marriage is a good way to test compatibility and these levels have been increasing steadily over the last thirty years (National Center for Family and Marriage Research 2010). While determining whether their relationship is suited for marriage may not be the primary motivation for initially cohabiting, it appears to be a latent motivation or factor that develops during the course of the relationship (Sassler 2004). The substantive findings that cohabitation is perceived as a place to filter out poor matches are in line with theoretical marital

search models (Becker 1981) in that cohabitation provides the best way to garner information about prospective spouses (England and Farkas 1986). Furthermore, Oppenheimer (1988) argues that premarital socialization helps to improve marriage matches, and cohabitation “facilitates the kind of interaction that increases the knowledge of oneself and of a potential marriage partner and of the kind of mutual adaptations that are so essential to stable relationship.” (p.583). The irony is that couples who cohabited prior to marriage experience significantly higher odds of marital dissolution than their counterparts who did not cohabit and married (Jose et al. 2010). As a consequence researchers have tried to understand why this counterintuitive finding holds true (see Smock 2000).

The question about the mechanisms underlying the ways that cohabitation influences marital stability is not new. Newcomb and Bentler (1980) studied 162 couples in Los Angeles and concluded that there are two (not mutually exclusive) approaches to understand the cohabitation effect: selection or cohabitation experience. Thirty years later virtually every paper on cohabitation and marital stability continues to draw on these same two overarching explanations. One argument is that selection is operating, meaning that the same characteristics that predict cohabitation also are associated with marital dissolution. Many studies find that selection explains some of the effect of cohabitation (e.g., DeMaris and McDonald 1993; Kamp Dush et al. 2003; Phillips and Sweeney 2005). Additionally, Lillard et al. (1995) explain the effect of cohabitation completely by statistically correcting for selection processes. Similarly, the cohabitation effect on marital instability was explained by delinquency, religiosity and race/ethnicity using NLSY data (Woods and Emery 2002) or type of marriage (covenant vs. standard) in Louisiana (Brown et al. 2006). An outgrowth of the selection argument proposed by Stanley and colleagues joins commitment theory with the concept of inertia. They claim that

once couples cohabit they end up on a fast track toward marriage and as a result of this “inertia” couples end up marrying who are not necessarily highly committed to one another (Stanley and Rhoades 2009). Selection occurs because cohabitation can lead to marriage among couples who are not mutually committed to marriage at the outset of cohabitation.

The second and related explanation for the cohabitation effect is that the cohabitation experience itself is tied to a waning commitment to marriage (Axinn and Barber 1997; Axinn and Thornton 1992; Clarkberg et al. 1995; DeMaris and McDonald 1993; Kamp Dush et al. 2003; Stanley et al. 2006). Young adults report more supportive attitudes toward divorce and cohabitation after cohabiting (Axinn and Barber 1997; Axinn and Thornton 1992; Cunningham and Thornton 2005). Specifically, the experience of cohabitation leads to increased acceptance of divorce and individuals in longer lasting cohabiting unions have even less positive attitudes toward family formation, marriage and childbearing (Axinn and Barber 1997). In addition, research that cannot completely explain the cohabitation effect with demographic variables is used to lend support for the argument that experience of cohabitation itself leads to an increased risk of marital instability difficulties (Kamp Dush et al., 2003). However, a more direct test indicates that attitudes toward marital permanence do not reduce the effect of cohabitation on marital instability (DeMaris and McDonald 1993). The general consensus in the literature is that both general mechanisms are operating.

While there has been a focus on studying the mechanisms underlying the cohabitation effect, there are a number of studies which have documented that for some subgroups there is no cohabitation effect. The literature indicates variation in the effect of cohabitation on marital stability according to marriage cohort, engagement status, cohabitation experience, sexual history, and race and ethnicity (Philips and Sweeney 2005; Reinhold 2010; Stanely et al. 2010;

Teachman 2003). Thus, to best understand the cohabitation effect it is necessary to focus on those who actually experience a cohabitation effect. Research that does not recognize these well-known subgroup differentials may lead to inaccurate conclusions about the cohabitation effect. Our work contributes to prior studies by explicitly examining the contemporary context.

We use recently collected data to assess the influence of cohabitation on marital stability. The bulk of national-based research reporting a positive effect of cohabitation on marital instability is based on data collected some time ago (NSFG 2002, NSFH 1987/1988) and does not reflect recent marriage and cohabitation patterns. 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 (Schoen 1992; Reinhold 2010; Vaus et al. 2003). Reinhold (2010) reports that recent marriage cohorts (married after 1993) do not experience a cohabitation effect. Other work does not find a trend in the cohabitation effect (Kamp Dush et al. 2003; Teachman 2002, 2003); however they are based on data that reflect many marriages prior to 1993. The diffusion approach proposed by Leifbroer and Dourleijn (2006) states that as cohabitation becomes more widespread in a society the effect on marital instability may decline. Leifbroer and Dourleijn (2006) report that in European countries where cohabitation is more rare (Belgium) or very common (Finland) there is a negative cohabitation effect on marital stability. Thus, we expect that as cohabitation has become the majority experience prior to marriage, the cohabitation effect may become weaker among women married more recently.

One of the key ways that variation in the meaning of cohabitation is measured is by considering the influence of engagement or plans for marriage on marital dissolution. Marriage plans is one way to distinguish among cohabitators (Brown and Booth 1996; Casper and Sayer 2000; Guzzo 2008; Kline et al. 2004) because it indicates who views their relationship as a clear

step toward marriage. Stanley and colleagues use a measure of engagement at the start of cohabitation as an indicator of initial couple commitment. Most cohabitators eventually plan on marrying their partners; however, not all couples start cohabitation with marriage plans (Guzzo 2008; Manning and Smock 2005). Cohabitators with marriage plans experience similar levels of marital quality and distress and respondents who did not cohabit (Brown 2004; Brown and Booth 1996; Kline et al. 2004; Rhoades et al. 2009; Stanley et al. 2010). Cohabiting couples without plans experience lower marital quality and higher marital distress (Kline et al. 2004; Rhoades et al. 2009). Yet the research specifically studying cohabitators' marriage plans and marital dissolution is limited. Drawing on data from four states, cohabitators without marriage plans experience higher odds of marital dissolution than cohabitators with marriage plans (Stanley, Rhoades, Amato, Markman, & Johnson, 2010). Further married couples who did not cohabit share similar odds of marital instability as married couples who cohabited with marriage plans. In contrast, Brown et al. (2006) relying on data from Louisiana find that premarital cohabitation is not associated with marital stability after accounting for the type of marriage (covenant or standard). The effect of cohabitation on marital stability is similar for covenant and married couples, even though covenant marriages are by definition highly committed couples who are quite purposive in their entry into marriage and face many barriers to dissolution. Using national data we evaluate whether the effect of cohabitation on marital stability differs according to marriage plans. As cohabitation becomes more common, we may find that plans for marriage is more important among more recent cohorts.

Upon entry into marriage women bring with them their premarital relationship experiences which include cohabiting and other sexual relationships. Not all cohabitators lived with just their husband prior to marriage, some women have lived with more than one partner

(serial cohabitation) prior to marriage. Serial cohabitation is increasing such that 11% of married women had cohabited with more than one partner prior to marriage (Lichter et al. 2010). Serial cohabitators may be skilled at negotiating relationships and have ended those that are not ‘marriage material.’ On the other hand, women who are willing to end premarital cohabiting relationships may be more likely to end their marriage. 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 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). Women who have serially cohabited have greater odds of marital dissolution than cohabiting women who lived with just their spouse (Lichter and Quiao 2008). While some of these findings have been known for two decades this topic has received little recent empirical attention. Given the growth in serial cohabitation we may expect serial cohabitation to be tied to marital instability in different ways among recent marriage cohorts.

Along a similar vein, women who have cohabited prior to marriage also have greater numbers of sexual partners (outside of cohabitation) than women without premarital cohabitation experience (Cohen and Manning 2010). Teachman (2003) reports that young women who had premarital sex with someone besides their husband experienced greater odds of marital dissolution. He finds that among women who lived with their husband prior to marriage, it is their sexual history not cohabitation history which predicts marital instability. Given that women appear to have increasing numbers of non-cohabiting sexual partners (Cohen and Manning 2010), we focus on both number of non-cohabiting sexual partners and cohabitation history.

Another factor that may distinguish cohabitators is the length of time they spent living with their spouse prior to marriage. On average, couples live together for about 18 months with about one-fifth of cohabiting couples marrying within one year and one-third marrying by two years (Kennedy and Bumpass 2008). It appears there has been little change in the odds that cohabiting couples are marry, but more recently it is taking cohabiting couples longer to get married (Kennedy and Bumpass 2008). Thus, it may be important to consider the length of time spent together prior to marriage. Few studies consider the meaning of longer or shorter term cohabiting unions and only a handful of papers have considered how length of cohabitation influences marital stability. The traditional approach is to measure the timing to marital dissolution with a clock that starts at the date of marriage (e.g., Reinhold 2010; Stanley et al. 2010). However, couples who have cohabited have already spent some time together and the cohabitation effect could be capturing an effect of time spent together. Thomson and Collela (1992) find that cohabitation duration is tied to perception of marital stability with longer time spent in cohabitation is tied to greater odds of viewing their marriage as potentially unstable. In contrast, Axinn and Barber (1997) report that length of cohabitation is not related to views about divorce, but is tied to less positive assessments of marriage. Teachman and Polonko (1990) reported there is no cohabitation effect when the start of the union is measured at the start of cohabitation, but DeMaris and Rao (1994) using more representative data found a cohabitation effect regardless of the measurement of the start of the union (date of cohabitation or marriage). More recent analyses of Australian data indicate that the effect of cohabitation is reduced to non-significance among recent marriages when considering union time versus marital time (Hewitt and DeVaus 2009). We examine how duration of time spent living together is related to marital

instability and expect couples who wait longer to marry may experience higher marital instability because of less certainty about the relationship and potential economic barriers to marriage.

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; Raley and Sweeney 2007), 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 2005). Blacks also are less likely to make the transition to marriage, even when they have marriage plans (Brown 2000). Further there are distinctions in cohabitation behavior according to nativity and generation status of Hispanics (Choi and Seltzer 2009; Landale and Oropesa 2007). Brown et al. (2008) report that foreign born Hispanics have lower levels of cohabitation than native born Hispanics. We expect that cohabitation may have a more negative effect on marital stability among foreign born Hispanics and similar to prior work (Phillips and Sweeney 2005) we expect a negative effect among Whites.

While the goal of this paper is to examine how cohabitation influences marital stability, we also include other factors associated with marital instability. As described above we include premarital experiences (cohabitation, sexual partners), race and ethnicity, marriage cohort as well as background indicators and spouse characteristics. The background factors (mother's education and family instability) are tied to later marital instability. Women from more disadvantaged backgrounds and lower socioeconomic status experience greater marital

instability (Amato 2010; Teachman 2002). Family background is tied to marital dissolution in part due to social learning and disadvantage that is linked to family instability (Amato and DeBoer 2001; Li and Wu 2008). Women with higher levels of education experience lower divorce rates than their less well educated counterparts (Raley and Bumpass 2003). Prior work suggests that women who have children born prior to the marriage face greater odds of marital stability (Graefe and Lichter 2002; Teachman 2002) and cohabiting women are more likely to have children than single women (Manning 2001; Reinhold 2010). Thus, fertility prior to marriage may explain some of the effect of cohabitation on marital instability (Tach and Halpern-Meekin 2008). Characteristics of the spouse, such as racial heterogamy, an age gap, prior marital experience may be sources of conflict or tension in a marriage and result in greater marital instability (Phillips and Sweeney 2005).

DATA

We draw on the National Survey of Family Growth 2006-2008. This is a national probability sample of 7,356 women ages 15-44. These data are appropriate because they include a large sample 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 3,416 women ages 15-44 in 2006-2008, who have ever 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.

The core dependent variable is the timing of the divorce or separation of the first marriage. In our sample 30 % of women have experience the dissolution of their first marriage. We measure the duration to the event or interview in terms of months.

The key independent variable is cohabitation experience. We find that 1,883 or 55% of women cohabited prior to their first marriage. Similar to past research, we account for the number of prior cohabiting partners, as well as whether the respondent lived with their spouse before marriage. Relatively few respondents had cohabited but not cohabit with their spouse prior to marriage (2% of women). 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. Respondents are categorized into four categories: no premarital cohabitation, premarital cohabitation with spouse and no engagement (22 %), premarital cohabitation and engaged (30%), and cohabit but not with spouse (2%). We also differentiate women by their number of premarital cohabitations. This serial cohabitation predictor categorizes respondents into three groups: never premaritally cohabited, cohabited once (44%), and cohabited twice or more (11%). We account for the duration of cohabitation with spouse with four categories, women who did not cohabit with their first husband, women who cohabited for less than one year (18%), one to two years (14%) and two or more years (20%). On average, women had about three non-cohabiting sex partners and approximately two-fifths (42%) had zero or one sexual partners prior to marriage. Less than half of the sample (45%) married prior to 1996 and 55% married in 1996 or later.

The NSFG allows us to include characteristics of the respondent and spouse that are associated with marital dissolution. We include race and ethnic indicators of White, African American, Hispanic native born, and Hispanic foreign born. Foreign born women have dissolution rates much lower than Mexican American native born so it is important to distinguish in our analyses.

The measure of education is not based on education prior to marriage, but educational attainment at the time of interview. We recognize this is flawed, but the majority women have completed their education by the time they marry. This measure includes women who did not graduate from high school (15%), women who earned a high school degree (50%), and women who graduated from college (36%). We also include an indicator conception prior to marriage. Nearly two-fifths (35%) of women conceived a child before they were married.

We include two measures of family background. We measure whether respondents lived with both biological parents through age 18. We find that 68% of women had not experienced the break-up of their parents' marriage. Mother's education is divided into three categories: less than high school (26%), high school (56%), and college and beyond (18%). Most mothers had at least a high school degree.

We measure four spousal characteristics: age and race heterogamy as well as marriage and fertility history. We create a variable that determines whether there was a five year or greater age gap between spouses. About one-third (30%) of women were married to someone at least 5 years older or younger than themselves. Over one-tenth (13%) of women were married to someone who was a different race or ethnicity. Most women (85%) married someone who did not have any children prior to marriage. Similarly, most women (87%) married someone who had never-been married.

We employ life tables and survival models to examine marital instability among women. Basic bivariate contrasts and life tables are used to provide an initial portrait of the relationship between cohabitation and marital stability. Due to the sampling strategy techniques must be applied that account for design effects. We use STATA to estimate Cox event history models that account for complex design effects. We initially present analyses of marital dissolution for

the entire sample (3,416) and test for a cohabitation and marital cohort interaction. We then present analyses separately for women who married prior to 1996 (1,413) and those who married 1996 or later (2,003).

RESULTS

We begin by presenting the initial descriptive life table results. Overall, just over half of women (55%) cohabited prior to their first marriage. Figure 1 shows that women with cohabitation experience have a greater risk of ending their relationship.

Cox survival analyses indicate that these cohabitation experience differences are statistically significant (Table 2). Respondents who cohabited have a 39% greater hazard of dissolving their first marriage than respondents who did not cohabit. The second model includes an interaction of marriage cohort and cohabitation experience. The indicator of marriage cohort is a dichotomous variable measuring whether the respondent was married prior to 1996 or after 1996. We tested many versions of the cohort indicator (e.g., continuous and four category) and present the version that represents what appears to be the ‘tipping’ point for the effect of cohabitation on marital dissolution. Table 2 shows that the effect of cohabitation is significantly greater among women married prior to 1996. This relationship remains statistically significant in a model including all the covariates. Thus, we estimate models based on this marriage cohort distinction.

Table 3 presents the zero and multivariate hazard models predicting marital dissolution among women married prior to 1996 (early marriage cohort) and women married in 1996 or later (recent marriage cohort). Among women married prior to 1996, cohabitation is positively related to marital dissolution, such that the hazard of dissolution is 63% greater among women who cohabited prior to marriage. The zero-order relationship between cohabitation and marital

instability among women married since 1996 indicates that premarital cohabitation is not associated with marital stability.

The second set of models includes the remaining covariates and indicates that cohabitation prior to marriage in the early marriage cohort is still positively related to dissolving a first marriage, but the hazard is much lower (37%). The last column indicates that among women married since 1996 cohabitation continues to not be related to marital stability with the inclusion of the covariates. Many of the covariates are related to marital dissolution but do not explain the effect of cohabitation (results not shown). These covariates operate largely in the same manner for the early and recent marriage cohort. We find Native-born and foreign-born Hispanics have lower odds of marital dissolution than Whites in the more recent but not earlier marriage cohort. Premarital fertility is tied to marital instability in the more recent and not earlier marriage cohort. A greater number of non-cohabiting sex partners are associated with greater marital instability. Women married at older ages have lower odds of marital instability. Women with some post-high school education have lower odds of dissolving their first marriage. Mother's education is not related to marital instability. Women from intact families experience lower hazards of dissolution in the early but not recent marriage cohort. The husband's prior fertility is associated with greater marital instability in the recent marriage cohort; however, in the multivariate model heterogamy in terms of age and race are not related to instability.

Given the racial and ethnic variation in family formation behaviors we estimate a series of supplemental analyses to test whether the effect of cohabitation exists for each race and ethnic group. We find that among whites and foreign-born Hispanics there is a negative effect of cohabitation on marital stability among women married before 1996. In contrast, among women married since 1996 we find no significant effects of cohabitation for any racial and ethnic group.

Thus, the cohabitation effect is not evident among native-born Hispanics and African-Americans and only exists among Whites and foreign-born Hispanics married prior to 1996.

Marriage plans. Overall, about two-fifths (42%) of women who cohabited with their spouse prior to marriage report having marriage plans when they started cohabiting and similar levels exist for women from the early and recent marriage cohort. Thus, the growth in cohabitation is not tied to a decline or increase in marriage plans among cohabitators. It is notable that a substantial proportion of women did not have marriage plans when they initiated cohabitation. The first column of Table 4 is limited to women married prior to 1996 (early cohort). In the early cohort cohabiting women with and without engagement plans experience higher odds of dissolution and there is no statistically significant difference in the hazard of marital dissolution according to marriage plans. The next column shows that women from the recent marriage cohort without marriage plans have significantly greater hazards of marital dissolution than women who did not cohabit. Women who had marriage plans have similar hazards of dissolving their marriage as women who did not cohabit. Further analyses reveal that the hazard of dissolution is significantly greater among women without marriage plans than cohabiting women with marriage plans. Even though there is not an initial cohabitation effect among women married since 1996, we find there is a cohabitation effect among women who started cohabiting without marriage plans. In fact, the multivariate model indicates that engagement becomes protective of marital dissolution and cohabitators without marriage plans experience similar odds of marital dissolution as women who did not cohabit (results not shown). We will explore this further in additional analyses.

Serial Cohabitation. Women married prior to 1996 less often experience serial cohabitation (7%) than women married since 1996 (14.5%). Approaching one-quarter of women

who cohabited in the more recent marriage cohort had lived with more than one person prior to marriage. Table 4 shows that in the early marriage cohort single-instance cohabitation (cohabit with one partner) is associated with higher odds of marital dissolution and serial cohabitators share similar odds of dissolution as women who did not cohabit prior to marriage. Among women married since 1996 there is no association between single-instance or serial cohabitation and marital instability.

Duration. The median duration of cohabiting unions formed prior to marriage is about 18 months, and women who married prior to 1996 have on average shorter cohabiting unions than women married more recently. Table 4 presents the zero-order relationship between cohabitation duration and marital dissolution. Women from the early marriage cohort who cohabited for less than two years experience greater hazards of marital dissolution in contrast to women who never cohabited. Women who cohabited for two or more years do not seem to experience a cohabitation effect. There appears to be no relationship between cohabitation duration and marital dissolution among women married since 1996.

Sexual History. Based on the findings of Teachman (2003), we investigated how sexual history influences marital stability. Table 1 shows that sexual and cohabitation history has shifted across marriage cohorts. Women married prior to 1995 only had on average 2.7 non-cohabiting sex partners and women who married after 1995 had on average 4. Additional analyses indicate that women who have cohabited prior to marriage have greater mean number of premarital sexual partners. A variable that combines sexual and cohabitation history is presented in Table 1. There has been a slight decline in the percentage of women who married as virgins (15.4% vs. 12.3%). However, there has been an increase in the proportion of women who have cohabited and have had at least one other sexual partner (30% to 52%).

The prior analyses indicate that women with more premarital partners have higher hazards of dissolving their first marriage. Table 4 presents findings based on the variable that combines cohabitation and sexual history. In the early marriage cohort women who had no premarital sexual partners and did not cohabit prior to marriage (reference category) had the lowest hazard of dissolving their marriage. Women who did cohabit and had no other sex partners had greater risk of marital dissolution than women who did not cohabit and had no premarital sex partners. Further analyses (change the reference category) that among women who have had premarital sexual partners those who cohabit have greater hazards of marital dissolution than those who did not cohabit. Thus, among women in the early marriage cohort there is a cohabitation effect regardless of sexual experience. The second column presents the findings for the most recent marriage cohort and there appears to be no cohabitation effect regardless of sexual history. Women who cohabited and had no other sex partners have a similar hazard of marital dissolution as women who did not cohabit and had no premarital sex partners. Additional analyses indicate that there is no cohabitation effect among women with premarital sex partners. Thus, sexual history is tied to cohabitation status and marital dissolution. Cohabitation experience matters among women married prior to 1996 while sexual experience with the opposite sex and not cohabitation is related to marital stability among women married in more recent years.

DISCUSSION

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, young Americans 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 (Manning and Smock 2009). At the same time, it is increasingly recognized that cohabitators are not a monolithic group and there are different meanings to cohabitation. Newcomb and Bentler (1980) concluded “It seems clear from the data that the impact of premarital cohabitation on a subsequent marriage is not a simple nor direct relationship, but rather is multifaceted.” (page 23). Thirty years later researchers are drawing similar conclusions.

Similar to prior work we find premarital cohabitation is associated with a greater hazard of marital instability, but this only exists among white and foreign born Hispanic women married prior to 1996 (Philips and Sweeney 2005). Our work shows that cohabitation no longer influences marital instability among women who were married within the last 15 years (since 1996). There has been a 60% increase (marriage cohorts before and after 1996) in the proportion of women who have cohabited prior to marriage. Consistent with a diffusion perspective, our results show a reduced effect of cohabitation on marital instability. Increased normative support for cohabitation appears to have resulted in weaker effects of cohabitation among recent marriage cohorts. We have updated the Reinhold (2010) findings and support his argument about an important marriage cohort distinction in the role of cohabitation on marital instability. An important caveat is that the cohabitation effect is masked when we ignore plans for marriage among women married since 1996. We find that women who were not engaged experience greater marital instability than their counterparts who were engaged at the start of cohabitation. Thus, there is a cohabitation effect but it depends on the plans for marriage. Our findings are consistent with the Stanley et al. (2010) research on four states and supports prior work by Brown and Booth (1996) that argues one way to differentiate cohabitators is based on their marriage plans. We recognize that the meaning of engagement or plans to marry may not always

be consistent, but recognize it is an indicator of some type of commitment at least by one member of the couple.

We examined whether different ways of conceptualizing cohabitation influence marital instability. In the early marriage cohort we found variation according to sexual history, number of partners and duration. However, we do not find that the effect of cohabitation in the more recent marriage cohort depends on sexual history, duration, or number of cohabiting partners.

There are some limitations to this study. First, the social background measures are quite limited. We only have indicators of parental family structure and mother's education. Second, our analyses have been limited to women but we will present similar models for men to test whether there is a marriage cohort differential in the effect of cohabitation. Third, the marriage plans indicator is retrospective and may be biased somewhat, especially among women from earlier marriage cohorts. Fourth, we do not account for selection processes into marriage from cohabitation. There may be cohort shifts in the factors tied to the transition from cohabitation to marriage. Even though we do not find large differentials in our sample according to marriage cohort, there are differences in family background, age at marriage, and sexual history. We plan to explore this issue further. Fifth, this work cannot measure diversity in the contrast group – never cohabitators. We believe the fact these are recently collected national level data offset some of these shortcomings and provide important new evidence about variation in cohabitators experiences and marital dissolution.

This paper will provide new estimates of the effect of cohabitation on the timing of marital instability for both men and women. Using recently collected data we demonstrate that the effect of cohabitation on marital stability is not as straightforward as prior work may suggest. This research provides a starting point for more nuanced understanding of the effects of

cohabitation on marital stability. More broadly, findings from this work will contribute to our understanding of marital stability and recent family change.

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Figure 1. First Marriage Dissolution among Ever-Married Women

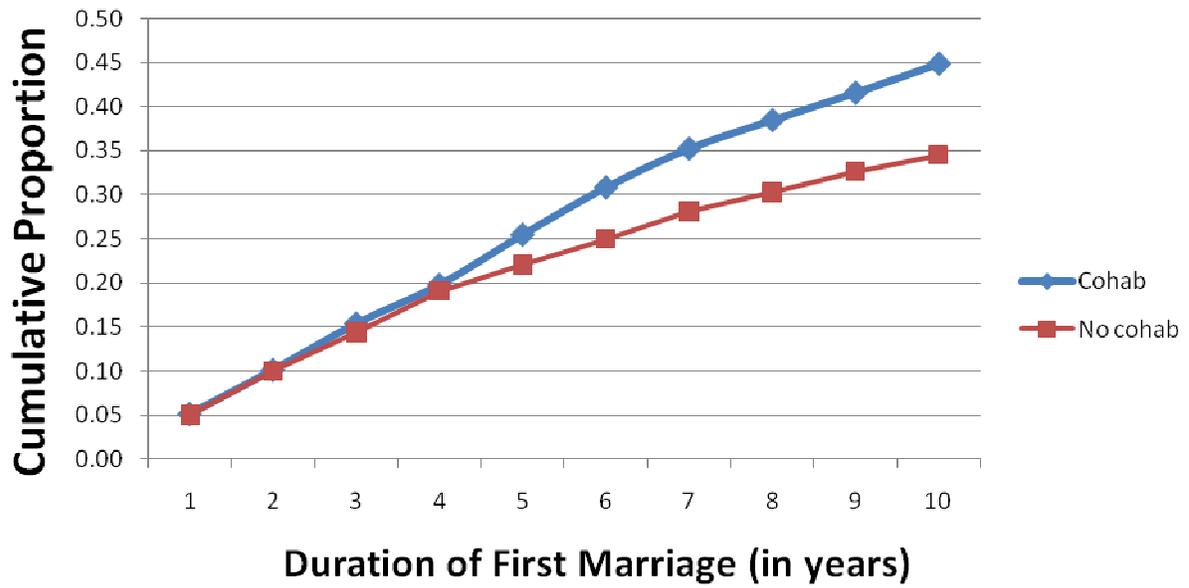


Table 1. Distribution of Variables

Variable	Married < 1996	Married > 1996
	%/mean	%/mean
Premarital Cohabitation		
Yes	42.12	64.77
No	57.88	35.23
Serial Cohabitation		
Zero	57.88	35.23
Once	35.53	50.31
Two or more	6.60	14.46
Cohabitation and Sexual History		
No premarital cohabiting or sex partners	15.40	12.29
Premarital Cohabitation, no non-cohabiting sex partners	12.08	12.96
No premarital cohabitation, had sex partners	42.48	22.94
Premarital Cohabitation, had non-cohabiting sex partners	30.04	51.81
Duration of Cohabitation with First Husband		
Did not cohabit with first husband	58.90	38.46
Cohabited < 1 year	18.07	18.69
Cohabited 1-2 years	11.02	16.16
Cohabited 2 or more years	12.00	26.69
Engagement Status: Start of Cohabitation with 1 st Husband		
No cohabitation	57.88	35.23
Not Engaged	17.02	26.77
Engaged	24.07	34.77
Did not cohabit with first husband	1.03	3.23
Age at Marriage	21.63	24.92
Number of Non-Cohabiting Sex Partners	2.68	4.02
Premarital Conception		
Yes	32.84	36.29
No	67.16	63.71
Respondent's Education		
Less than H.S. degree	14.92	14.19
H.S. degree	53.72	46.40
College degree	31.36	39.42
Mothers Education		
Less than H.S. degree	30.96	21.81
H.S. degree	53.51	57.39
College degree	15.53	20.80

Table 1. Distribution of Variables (Continued)

Variable	Married < 1996 %/mean	Married > 1996 %/mean
Race/Ethnicity		
White	64.93	64.52
Black	8.10	10.85
Native-Born Hispanic	5.81	7.54
Foreign-Born Hispanic	11.11	9.70
Other	10.05	7.39
Husband has Children		
Yes	12.76	16.47
No	87.24	83.53
Husband was Previously Married		
Yes	11.87	13.32
No	88.13	86.68
Racial Heterogomy		
Yes	10.54	14.62
No	89.46	85.38
Five Year Gap		
Yes	28.86	30.00
No	71.14	70.00
N	1413	2003

Note: Results are weighted

Source: 2006-2008 National Survey of Family Growth

Table 2. Binomial Logistic Regression Cox Modeling Predicting Odds of First Marriage Dissolution (N=3416)

	Marriage Dissolution			
	Odds Ratio	SE	Odds Ratio	SE
Premarital Cohabitation				
Yes (reference = no)	1.39	** 0.14	1.10	0.13
Marriage Cohort				
Married < 1996 (reference = married > 1996)			0.95	0.13
Premarital Cohabitation X Married < 1996			1.49	* 0.23

$p < .05^*$; $p < .01^{**}$; $p < .001^{***}$

Table 3. Binomial Logistic Regression Cox Modeling Predicting Odds of First Marriage Dissolution

	Zero-Order Model				Full Model			
	Married < 1996		Married > 1996		Married < 1996		Married > 1996	
	Predicting Marriage Dissolution							
	Odds Ratio	SE	Odds Ratio	SE	Odds Ratio	SE	Odds Ratio	SE
Premarital Cohabitation Yes (reference = no)	1.63	*** 0.20	1.09	0.13	1.37	** 0.15	0.76	0.13
N	1413		2003		1413		2003	

Note: Full model includes controls for Age at First Marriage, Number of Non-Cohabiting Sex Partners, Premarital Conception, Respondent's Education, Mother's Education, Childhood Family Structure at Age 14, Race/Ethnicity, Husband's Characteristics

$p < .05^*$; $p < .01^{**}$; $p < .001^{***}$

Table 4. Bivariate Binomial Logistic Regression Cox Modeling Predicting Odds of First Marriage Dissolution

	Zero-Order Models			
	Married < 1996		Married > 1996	
	Odds Ratio	SE	Odds Ratio	SE
Engagement Status at Start of Cohabitation with First Husband				
Not Engaged	1.65 **	0.29	1.42 *	0.23
Engaged (reference = No cohabitation)	1.67 **	0.26	0.85	0.13
<hr/>				
	Odds Ratio	SE	Odds Ratio	SE
Serial Cohabitation				
Once	1.80 ***	0.20	1.05	0.15
Two or more (reference = Zero)	0.75	0.28	1.24	0.24
<hr/>				
	Odds Ratio	SE	Odds Ratio	SE
Duration of Cohabitation with First Husband				
Cohabited < 1 year	1.94 ***	0.34	1.22	0.21
Cohabited 1-2 years	1.87 ***	0.31	1.03	0.19
Cohabited 2 or more years (reference = Did not cohabit with first husband)	1.10	0.23	1.01	0.19
<hr/>				
	Odds Ratio	SE	Odds Ratio	SE
Cohabitation and Sexual History				
Premarital Cohabitation, no non-cohabiting sex partners	2.85 ***	0.68	1.79	0.58
No premarital cohabitation, had sex partners	2.39 ***	0.43	2.62 **	0.78
Premarital Cohabitation, had non-cohabiting sex partners (reference = No premarital cohabiting or sex partners)	3.38 ***	0.62	2.40 **	0.64

$p < .05^*$; $p < .01^{**}$; $p < .001^{***}$