

Q&A Follow Up

[March 2023 Webinar](#)

Premarital Cohabitation: Timing, Engagement, and Marital Outcomes

By Rhoades and Stanley

Question	Answer
Can we assume that 99% were sexually active together before moving in? Do any person who are abstainers (perhaps due to a very conservative or religious feeling) live together? How did that work?	It would take some time to figure out the answer to your first question with our data sets, but it seems likely to us that a large percent of cohabiters had sex before cohabiting together. There are some people (about 4%) who say they had not had sex with spouse before marriage but who report they cohabited with spouse before marriage. Although people can report many things about sex inaccurately, this number does seem quite plausible. And those who cohabited but reported not having sex before marriage do appear to be more likely to be religious.
Does joint ownership of needed household items differ from separate ownerships? A joint checking account or separate accounts.	We think of all such questions, this way. Does the behavior make it harder to break up? (It will also reflect more connection at some key points, but that's where our thoughts about timing come in). If a behavior makes it harder to break up, and there are more of those behaviors of any sort, then the risks go up for having those behaviors before two people have strongly clarified a mutual commitment to marry.
In looking at characteristics that might "predict" later divorce, is there a correlation with "ACE's"?	We do not have such a measure in our data sets where we have looked at cohabitation histories and marital outcomes. It would make sense, though, that a history of trauma would make marital distress or divorce more likely.
For the selection theory, which characteristics specifically of those who choose to cohabitate before marriage are associated with a higher risk of divorce?	There is likely a long list, and many items on such a list will overlap. We are not trying to be exhaustive here. Personal history or characteristics - parents never married or divorced - childhood trauma - poverty, low educational achievement - race Personal functioning - mental health - substance abuse - difficulty working

	<p>- resource difficulties</p> <p>Relationship history (before mate)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - more sexual or cohabiting relationships - child from a prior partner <p>Relationship history with eventual mate</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - child together - rapid tempo through transitions (sex, living together, etc.) <p>Note a complex point: The closer in time the selection characteristic associated with greater developed, the more likely it's all part of co-occurring risks related to relationship development. It can become hard with some of these things to decide if it influenced cohabitation history ahead of time or if they were all part of the same process.</p>
<p>What are the demographics of couples who were a part of this study?</p>	<p>Once our report is out, you can find how respondents identified in terms of race, ethnicity, and gender. The statistical weights we used mean that for analyses, the sample is generalizable to the U.S. population.</p>
<p>Have you found a connection between marital dissolution and cohabitation incompatibility? In other words, in your research, have there been married couples who have divorced/separated after they started cohabitating because they couldn't handle living together?</p>	<p>Of course all couples who live together (no matter the timing) who eventually break up, likely discovered some difficulties after moving in together. What's harder to know is how much of those difficulties were related to living together per se versus just overtime increased understanding of problems or incompatibilities.</p> <p>What you ask about is not something we have studied in any depth, but it's a theme that comes up in this literature. In one recent paper on premarital cohabitation, Rosenfeld and Roesler note that those who do not live together before marriage have more trouble early on (higher divorce early, esp first year) but then lower divorce over the years to come. They speculated exactly this, that if there is an edge for some in living together, they got a head start on developing patterns in the home together. But mostly, they note how cohabiting before marriage has long been (decades) associated with higher likelihood of marital dissolution.</p> <p>Related, what you ask about surely happened for both cohabiting and married couples. Sometimes, once living</p>

	<p>together, they find it hard to work out how to do that. In a lot of ways, you could say almost every married couple who eventually divorces experienced some difficulty after moving in together. But you likely mean more near term, ‘this ain’t working’ type of experiences.</p> <p>Keep in mind, a key risk we have focused on is about how difficult it got, and how soon, and based on what understanding, it became to break up. Loads of cohabiting couples break up. More than half of cohabiting couples who were not already engaged or married break up and never marry. Our focus is more on what people do that might make it harder to break up with someone before they have really figured out where things are going.</p>
<p>Were couples sampled in this study? How were the commitment, conflict, and violence measured among 1621 participants in the first marriage?</p>	<p>We only had data from one partner, not the couple and our study we didn’t examine these variables. Further, in a cross-sectional data set like this new sample, there is no chance to ask such things in any compelling way, retrospectively. The divorce/separated people are already divorced or separated. So, one could ask them what their commitment was early on (as an example), but there is no compelling understanding of that someone’s sense of commitment was long ago when they have already become uncommitted. Essentially, asking things about relationship quality after a chunk of relationships already ended is not very compelling from a research perspective. It can be done but it’s going to be biased by the fact that the relationship ended.</p>
<p>Did the influence of Fear become apparent in any of your results?</p>	<p>We do not assess this in any of the studied we have done on cohabitation. However, if you think about what we’re saying about inertia, inertia is directly a function of how many constraints have developed that might keep a relationship doing regardless of commitment (dedication) to it. Now, extending that a little bit further, it’s not hard to think of almost all constraints as—if one wants to leave a relationship—types of fears of losing something.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - fear of losing money - fear of poverty - fear of what others will think - fears about if one could attract another partner - fears about guilt, judgement, social pressure - fear of being alone

<p>What type of outcome data has been gathered over the frequency of divorce in same sex couples?</p>	<p>We have not conducted research on divorce and divorce risk in same-sex couples. Others have, however, and more and more researchers are looking into many aspects of same-sex relationships. However, we can say that in the sample we presented findings from, 6.5% of the marriages were same-sex couples. That’s not enough really for compelling analyses of that group alone, but it does make the sample more representative overall.</p>
<p>Was there a question about whether the couple took a relationship skills-based class before or after marriage?</p>	<p>Hah. Unfortunately, no. We thought about this (and a few other things) we’d wished we had asked after the survey was in the field. And, thank you for the painful reminder! Seriously, it’s a great question. We do report in a prior, public report, from a longitudinal sample of ours that those who had premarital education/prevention were more likely to report being happy in their marriages. Available here: http://nationalmarriageproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/NMP-BeforeIDoReport-Final.pdf</p> <p>We also have other publications on this topic. Write to one of us if you’d like a list.</p>
<p>Would buying a house together before engagement be considered a “made sense financially” constraint?</p>	<p>We asked people their top reason for why they moved in together and gave them forced-choice answers, so it was up to the participant to code what their reasons where.</p> <p>We would consider buying a house together a constraint that could make it harder to break up. Now, if that was occurring as part of a lot of talking and thinking about a future together, it would seem less likely associated with risk. The real question to us would be how much—and how accurately where they both coding this—did such a decision reflect mutual intentions to marry even if not formally engaged? Given the largeness of the step, it seems a little more likely to be interpretable as a mutual commitment than some other things people do.</p>
<p>Would living together before engagement to see how conflict is resolved without having a “runaway’ option be considered a “test the relationship” constraint?</p>	<p>Yes, if what you are asking is if this seems like a problematic test. Let us ask a more extreme version. Say someone says, “I felt I really needed to live with him/her before I could see how much of a drinking problem they actually had.”</p> <p>You are asking something more sophisticated, though. You are thinking that, in some way, one may not really know how well the relationship can handled various things until</p>

	<p>it's really committed in some way—hard to end. On the one hand, we think it's true that a strong commitment (including a lot of constraint) can change (positively) how people behave because it can represent some type of investment. But, still, it's making it harder to break up before one has decided this is the future.</p>
<p>Why did you choose the term inertia for your theory? Can you define inertia in this application and explain how the term "inertia" fits your theory?</p>	<p>In physics, inertia is “The tendency of a body at rest to remain at rest or of a body in straight line motion to stay in motion in a straight line unless acted on by an outside force; the resistance of a body to changes in momentum.”</p> <p>https://www.wordnik.com/words/inertia</p> <p>Inertia speaks to how much energy it would take to make something move in a direction it is not already moving, or move at all if it's not already moving, or change speed. It's the energy needed to make something do something other than it's already doing. So, in relationships, inertia speaks to how much energy it would take either partner/both to make their relationship do something other than what it's already doing (like, break up). In our use here, inertia is analogous constraint. And, in that regard, we think it matters a lot whether constraints built up before dedication matured and at a mutually high level.</p> <p>This blog post may be of use:</p> <p>https://slidingvsdeciding.blogspot.com/2018/03/citations-for-tests-of-inertia_26.html</p>
<p>For those who do choose to cohabit and are set on that decision, what is the most important principle to teach these individuals to lessen the risk of divorce?</p>	<p>Slow down. Wait a long time before taking such a step. Have some very frank, open discussions of what moving in together means, who is thinking what, what it means about how each is thinking about marriage, etc. Do what you can to reduce the constraints that cohabitation builds so that you make a decision about marrying this person based on the relationship, not the constraints.</p> <p>We can't answer the question much better than the PREP team did in this 4 minute video based on our work.</p> <p>https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CwlLyhebmro</p>
<p>How CAN people "test the relationship" without moving in together?</p>	<p>Yes. Testing really means getting information. So, what are some ways people can get information about another short of increasing constraints by moving in together?</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -take a class on relationships together - talk a lot - clarify values and dreams - share expectations for relationship and family and marriage. Marriage? Children? - date a lot - try new experiences together where you get to see a lot of the other in different lights: see what they are like at work, in learning something new, around the holidays, with different people - pay attention to how a person manages money. Talk openly about money and goals. - pay attention to how a person handles responsibility - meet friends and family. What is their friend network like? How about their family relationships? - plan some things together. Some couples don't get information about the ability to plan something together until it's a marriage. Getting a window on being able to plan something together is going to say a lot about how life together might go.
<p>Do you have thoughts about White, J. M. (1987) or Hill Kulu Paul and J. Boyle (2010)?</p>	<p>Nope. I bet you mean by White 1987 a paper showing cohabiters doing better in marriage than non-cohabiters, in Canada. Going to guess the other paper is similar. There is also some data from Australia on cohabiters doing relatively well in marriage if not better. We can offer a couple of points on these types of findings: 1) America is not Canada or Australia or Europe. Often, in other countries, cohabiting has more baked in meaning about commitment. In the U.S., it's more part of the dating part of life than the marrying part of life. Exceptions abound, though, and we want to acknowledge this. But, it's just different. 2) Studies consistently show (surely with some notable exceptions) that cohabiting before marriage in the U.S. is associated with poorer odds of marriages going well. Decades of studies. And, although some researchers argue the risk has gone away, others argue it's very much present and consistent for decades. Of course, all these studies speak to simple comparison of cohabitation or not, not the timing points that we have focused on for many years—comparing the timing based on clarity about plans/engagement, with three groups, Before, After, Ats as our short-hand describes the three groups. Regardless of these other studies on the binary of cohabitation or not before marriage, we're not seeing an obvious way that it</p>

	<p>will ever not be true—on average—that it’s better to have clarified a lot about the future of a relationship (and commitment, and marriage) before taking such a step.</p>
<p>What is the beta coefficient of sliding vs. decision in the full model with other covariates included?</p>	<p>Let’s talk odds ratios. It’s .713 for decided to cohabit after talking it through ($p = .063$). So, it’s a near miss with controls. In comparison, it’s .52 ($p < .001$) without covariates. In light of this and other research, we think the talking and making a decision thing is important, but it’s also clearly related to other factors in a much stronger way than our primary timing predictors. Also, we will likely, in the future, start asking about deciding vs sliding in somewhat more detail. What we believe is clearly protective is talking openly about expectations and especially commitment and what living together means related to marriage. That’s the talk we think people should be having, and we would not expect that type of talk to be something reduced much by control variables. As you can see, that’s quite parallel to why we think engagement is relatively powerful to other things. There is not much messing around about not being on the same page.</p>
<p>Are there any subgroups of premarital cohabitators who have the same rate of divorce as non-premarital cohabitators? I.e., someone whose motivation is spending time with partner and/or has higher SES and/or has cohabitated before, etc.</p>	<p>Surely so, and without doing some more analyses, you named some good candidates. Net of all the other things, those who have more resources, education, and who lived together to spend more time together and made a decision about it are going to have a lower, or as low, a divorce rate as others who have other risks but did not cohabit. It’s all relative, and some people both by selection and (we believe) by behavior and choices are far more loaded up for risk than others.</p>
<p>Did you assess to see if there was an effect was due to serial cohabitators as opposed to people who cohabitated only once then married the person they originally cohabitated with?</p>	<p>In the test of how cohabitation is associated with divorce, we controlled for whether the participant lived prior partners, so these data suggest that the effect of living together before engagement on divorce is not explained by having had prior cohabiting partners.</p> <p>And, we need to explore this and other questions more. There was a study 20 years ago making this point (Teachman, 2003). We are not sure the finding still holds but it seems likely to be an even more complex question now than before. So, it’s a good question and it bears further study.</p> <p>This is a point related to many questions here. Researchers cannot do random assignment experiments</p>

on things like relationship history. Those can be done on things like relationship education programs, and you can sometimes get at things like differences in government policies where individuals had no choice (unless they wanted to move), but no one is going to be doing a study where they randomly assign people to either live together or not, or have a baby or not before marriage, or have more or less sexual partners. Random assignment allows one to assess true causality about a behavior or path, but it's just not possible in this type of research. (It would make for quite a study consent form, though.) So, all research in this area is an attempt to get at what risk factors exist and how compelling or weak a case may be that one's behavior and choices matter. At the end of the day, most people really don't want to be told that their behavior doesn't matter at all. Frankly, although they do not say it this way, that's what a lot of researchers are really concluding. But even there, as we discussed in the webinar, selection risks can be strong and that still does not mean the risk is immutable. We mentioned this study briefly. It's a very rigorous, strong, random assignment study where relationship education wiped out the risks associated with cohabitation history for the treated group. It's worth pondering a lot.

It's pretty encouraging.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4461475/>