



Links between premarital cohabitation and subsequent marital quality, stability, and divorce: A comparison of covenant versus standard marriages [☆]

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Abstract

We extend prior research on the association between premarital cohabitation and marital outcomes by investigating whether covenant marriage, which entails more stringent requirements for divorce, minimizes the deleterious effects of cohabitation on subsequent marital quality and stability. Using a unique longitudinal data set of covenant and standard newlywed couples in Louisiana, we find that covenant marriage does not modify the effects of premarital cohabitation on marital instability, happiness, dependency, or divorce for either wives or husbands. In fact, once we control for sociodemographic characteristics, premarital relationship factors, and marital factors, the relationships between premarital cohabitation and marital outcomes reduces to non-significance, suggesting that selection factors largely account for the deleterious effects of premarital cohabitation on marital success.

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1. Introduction

Social welfare advocates and policymakers are placing great emphasis on developing public programs and legal reforms intended to encourage marriage formation, strengthen unions, and discourage divorce (Bogenschneider, 2000; Galston, 1996; Popenoe, 1999). The past decade has witnessed the federal Defense of Marriage Act (DoMA), revisions of welfare laws to promote marriage as a route out of poverty (Besharov and Sullivan, 1996), and many state and local initiatives to offer marriage communication education as a part of school curricula and marriage license application procedures (Bogenschneider, 2000; Hawkins et al., 2002). And some states, including Louisiana, have adopted covenant marriage laws designed to strengthen marriage and deter divorce.

These policy efforts come at a time when Americans are spending fewer years—both absolutely and proportionately—in the married state than at any other point in U.S. history (Casper and Bianchi, 2002; Espenshade, 1985). Age at first marriage is at an all-time high, divorce rates remain stable and high, and fewer persons remarry in the event of divorce (Casper and Bianchi, 2002; Cherlin, 1992). The corresponding increase in cohabitation is largely responsible for the delay in entry into first marriages and more than compensates for the decline in remarriage (Bumpass and Lu, 2000; Bumpass et al., 1991).

About one-half of cohabiting unions are formalized through marriage and cohabitation is now the modal path of entry into marriage (Bumpass and Lu, 2000; Bumpass et al., 1991). Moreover, the evidence is remarkably consistent that premarital cohabitation is associated with poorer marital quality and higher levels of marital instability and divorce (e.g., Booth and Johnson, 1988; Dush et al., 2003; Lillard et al., 1995; Smock, 2000; Teachman, 2003; Thomson and Colella, 1992).

Using a unique longitudinal data set on marriages contracted in the state of Louisiana during 1998–2000, we investigate whether a *covenant* marriage, which requires a stronger commitment to maintaining the marriage and involves substantial barriers to divorce, ameliorates the negative effects of premarital cohabitation on marital quality and stability or reduces the likelihood of divorce. That is, are the negative marital outcomes usually associated with premarital cohabitation nullified by a couple's decision to form a covenant versus standard marriage?

2. Premarital cohabitation and marital outcomes

Cohabitation has increased dramatically in the U.S., rising from 500,000 couples in 1970 to nearly 5 million in 2000 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2001). Among persons in their twenties and thirties, more than one-half have experienced cohabitation, suggesting that cohabitation is now a normative stage in the family life course (Brown, 2005; Bumpass and Lu, 2000; Smock, 2000). Cohabitation is often a prelude to marriage as about 75 percent of cohabitators report plans to marry their partners and the chief reason why cohabitators report living together is to test the relationship's viability for marriage (Bumpass et al., 1991).

Despite the popular and seemingly intuitive notion that cohabitation is a worthwhile testing ground for marriage that would therefore help couples avoid divorce, research has consistently shown that premarital cohabitation is associated with lower levels of marital quality and higher levels of marital instability and divorce (e.g., Bennett et al., 1988; Booth and Johnson, 1988; DeMaris and Leslie, 1984; DeMaris and MacDonald, 1993; DeMaris and Rao, 1992; Dush et al., 2003; Lillard et al., 1995; Teachman, 2003; Thomson and Colella, 1992).

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