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Social Science Research 33 (2004) 1–19

Social
Science
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Moving from cohabitation to marriage: effects on relationship quality[☆]

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Abstract

Data from both waves of the National Survey of Families and Households are used to test whether marriage is associated with an improvement in the relationship quality of cohabitators. Cohabitators who marry report higher levels of relationship happiness as well as lower levels of relationship instability, disagreements, and violent conflict resolution than those who remain cohabiting, net of time one relationship quality and sociodemographic controls. Relationship fairness and interaction are not significantly associated with marriage. However, the one-third of long-term cohabitators who report marriage plans at reinterview enjoy levels of relationship quality that do not significantly differ from those of cohabitators who marry. Thus, marriage per se does not spur increases in relationship quality.

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Keywords: Cohabitation; Marriage; Relationship quality; Union dynamics

1. Introduction

American families have undergone considerable change in recent decades (e.g., Casper and Bianchi, 2002; Cherlin, 1992). The growth in nonmarital cohabitation

[☆] An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meetings of the American Sociological Association, August 16–20, 1996. This research was supported in part by the Center for Family and Demographic Research, Bowling Green State University, which has core support from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (R21-HD042831-01). The author thanks Paul Amato, Alan Booth, Alfred DeMaris, and Wendy Manning for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

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has significantly altered family formation patterns, contributing to the delay in marriage as well as continued high rates of unmarried childbearing. In fact, cohabitation is now a normative event in the life course (Smock, 2000). A majority of people in their 20s and 30s have cohabited and cohabitation is the modal path of entry into marriage (Bumpass and Sweet, 1989). In 1970, there were 500,000 cohabiting couples in the US. Recent estimates from the 2000 Census indicate that there are over 5 million cohabiting couples in America today (US Bureau of the Census, 2001).

The dramatic increase in cohabitation over the past few decades suggests the importance of understanding the nature of cohabitation, that is, the meanings and implications of these relationships, particularly for the well-being of the individuals involved (e.g., Ross, 1995; Smock, 2000). Nearly 75% of cohabitators report plans to marry their partner although slightly fewer than one-half of cohabitators actually tie the knot (Bumpass and Lu, 2000). The purpose of this study is to determine whether moving from cohabitation to marriage is associated with a positive change in relationship quality, or if relationship quality is primarily a function of relationship-specific variables. These findings will contribute to the broader literature on marital status and well-being (e.g., Gove et al., 1983; Ross, 1995; Ross et al., 1991), which documents that marital quality is more central to individual well-being than is marriage per se (Gove et al., 1983). Gains in relationship quality among cohabitators following marriage would thus have larger implications for their well-being more generally. I use data from waves one (1987–1988) and two (1992–1994) of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) to examine changes in relationship quality among cohabitators over a five year interval and test whether marriage at some point during this interval alters relationship quality.

Research on cohabitation has emphasized its role in marital success and stability (Axinn and Thornton, 1992; Bennet et al., 1988; Booth and Johnson, 1988; DeMaris and MacDonald, 1993; DeMaris and Rao, 1992; Lillard et al., 1995; Schoen, 1992; Teachman and Polonko, 1990). Cohabitation contributes to marital instability, poor marital quality, and divorce (Booth and Johnson, 1988; Bumpass and Sweet, 1989; Thomson and Colella, 1992), although the higher incidence of divorce among people who cohabited premaritally appears to be largely a function of selection (Lillard et al., 1995). The present study begins one step earlier in this process by investigating the dynamics of unions which began as cohabitations. Rather than analyzing the effect of premarital cohabitation on *marital* stability, I evaluate whether marriage is associated with an improvement in the quality of *cohabiting* relationships. This strategy permits a focus on the cohabiting population. Given the dramatic rise in cohabitation over the past few decades coupled with the declining proportion of cohabitators formalizing their unions through marriage (Bumpass and Lu, 2000), it is imperative that researchers move beyond studies that evaluate the impact of premarital cohabitation on other outcomes to investigations that focus on the relationship dynamics experienced by cohabitators (Smock, 2000). This paper examines the implications of these trends by comparing the relationship quality dynamics of cohabitators who marry with those who remain cohabiting.

In Section 2, I briefly review the literature comparing the relationship quality of cohabitators and marrieds, which offers a starting point for the present analysis. Then,

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