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Union Type and Adult Self-Esteem*

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Abstract

This research investigates the relationship between union type and adult self-esteem. Using data from the National Survey of Family and Households (NSFH), we address whether union type affects self-esteem, paying special attention to the potential conditioning roles of socioeconomic status and social support. Our empirical analyses reveal that cohabitors have lower levels of self-esteem than do marrieds, which persist even after accounting for educational and economic differences between the two groups. In fact, it appears that the lower levels of social support available to cohabitors accounts for their lower levels of self-esteem. Specifically, cohabitors report higher relationship instability than do marrieds, which in turn undermines their self-esteem. Additional longitudinal analyses using the Heckman (1979) procedure reveal that selectivity of those with low self-esteem into cohabitation is minimal.

Union Type and Adult Self-Esteem

In this paper we examine two forms of unions, namely cohabitation and marriage. Although cohabitation has probably always existed in the United States, the numbers of cohabiting adults have increased dramatically since 1970. There were 500,000 cohabiting couples in the U.S. in 1970 (Bumpass and Sweet 1989), whereas today there are over 5 million cohabiting couples (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2000). Nevertheless, many sociological analyses of marriage and families do not include cohabitors. We examine the relationship between union type, that is, cohabitation versus marriage, and adults' self-esteem.

Few researchers have considered the significance of union type for psychological well-being and self-evaluations, yet an understanding of the psychological features of cohabitors versus marrieds would contribute to the growing literature on the consequences of union formation patterns among Americans (Brown 2000; Horwitz and White 1998; Ross 1995). We propose that marriage and cohabitation are unique relationship contexts and thus exert differential influence on self-esteem. As we argue in the following sections, we anticipate that marrieds enjoy higher levels of self-esteem than their cohabiting counterparts.

At first glance, examining adult self-esteem may seem too individualistic for a sociological analysis of union type. Indeed, the noted social psychologist, Morris Rosenberg, (1981:593) states that "nothing is more quintessentially psychological; an unequivocally subjective phenomenon, its home is located in the inner world of thought and experience." We argue, however, that self-esteem should be related to union type, which is indisputably a central notion for sociologists, in part, because the growth in nonmarital cohabitation has subsequent implications for relationship quality (e.g., Brown and Booth 1996; Nock 1995), child bearing (e.g., Manning 1993, 1995; Manning and Landale 1996), the declining rates of (re)marriage (e.g., Bumpass, Sweet, and Cherlin 1991), relationship stability (e.g., Bumpass et al. 1991), and the increasing age at first marriage (e.g., Bumpass et al. 1991). Scholars who study self-

esteem emphasize that self-esteem develops from experiences in different contexts including family life, work, and community (e.g., Gecas and Longmore forthcoming). We argue that these experiences may be conditioned by union type. Although an individual's self-esteem is experienced directly only by the individual, self-esteem is a product of social interaction and the individual's location in the social structure, including his or her union type. We argue that self-esteem is key to adult functioning because it pervades all realms of an individual's life via its effect on perception. Rosenberg (1979, p. 157) states: "…the person with low self-esteem [is] inordinately sensitive to any evidence in the experience of his/[her] daily life which testified to his indecency, incompetence, or worthlessness."

This paper, thus, examines a deceptively straightforward question: is there a relationship between union type and self-esteem? That is, do cohabiting and married individuals differ in their reported self-evaluations of esteem? To provide a theoretical background with which to address this question, the next section considers the nature of self-esteem, two processes of self-esteem formation, and the relationship between an individual's location in the social structure and self-esteem. We extend prior work on union type by examining its significance for psychological well-being, paying special attention to differences in social support and socioeconomic status characterizing cohabitors and marrieds, which in turn likely shape self-esteem.

We analyze data from both waves of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH). Although scholars have examined the effects of marriage on adult well-being (e.g., Gove, Hughes, and Style 1983; Gove, Style, and Hughes 1990; Hughes and Gove 1981; Lee, Seccombe, and Shehan 1991; Pearlin and Johnson 1977; Ross, Mirowsky, and Goldsteen 1991), to date, no study has examined union type and self-esteem using data from a large-scale national probability sample. We initially consider the cross-sectional association between union type and self-esteem to maximize our sample size. Supplemental analyses investigate the role of selection into cohabitation versus marriage using the Heckman (1979) procedure to determine whether those with lower levels of self-esteem are especially

likely to cohabit. To preview our findings, there is minimal evidence of selection effects.

BACKGROUND

The Nature of Self-Esteem

Self-esteem refers to perceptions of self-liking, personal virtue, and moral worth. There is an extensive

literature on self-esteem, and there is widespread recognition of its role in personal well-being. Of

particular importance is the motivational significance of self-esteem for subsequent behavior. Individuals

are motivated to maintain and/or enhance their self-esteem even if it requires perceptual distortion, denial,

rationalizing, minimizing the importance of negative information about the self, or the use of other

defense mechanisms (Gecas and Burke 1995; Gecas and Longmore forthcoming). Rosenberg (1965)

argues that the motive to maintain and/or achieve positive self-esteem is the most powerful in the entire

human repertoire.

General theoretical underpinnings for the assumption that union type (or any other indicator of

one's location in the social structure) might affect self-esteem may be attributed to Mead (1934) and

Cooley ([1902] 1970). Both scholars posited that the self is a social phenomenon; that is, it is a

phenomenon that develops and is maintained in social interaction. Mead (1934) viewed the self as a

cognitive structure (an organized set of concepts that the individual has about oneself) arising through

symbolic communication. The self is predicated on taking the perspective of others, and from the

perspective of others, viewing oneself as an object.

Cooley ([1902] 1970:184) emphasized the evaluative aspect of the self in his description of the

"looking-glass self:"

As we see our face, figure, and dress in the glass, and are interested in them because they are
ours, and pleased or otherwise with them according as they do or do not answer to what we should like
them to be; so in imagination we perceive in another's mind some thought of our appearance, manners,
aims, deeds, character, friends, and so on, and are variously affected by it.

Relevant to this study, union type may affect self-esteem if individuals feel unsupported, socially

marginalized, or constrained in their behavior because of the type of union in which they live. Moreover,

union type may be associated with differences in socioeconomic status. An important question, however, concerns how these self-feelings develop. Sociologists who study self-esteem, including Rosenberg and colleagues (Rosenberg 1965; 1979; Rosenberg and Pearlin 1978; Rosenberg and Simmons 1972), Gecas (1982; 1989; Gecas and Longmore forthcoming; Gecas and Schwalbe 1983) and others (e.g., Hoelter 1982; 1986; Hughes and Demo 1989; Schwalbe 1985), suggest that the social psychological processes of reflected appraisals and self-attributions affect self-esteem.[1]

Processes of Self-Esteem Formation

As we indicated, an important source of self-esteem is the reflected appraisals an individual perceives from significant others. Following Cooley ([1902] 1970), the process of reflected appraisals refers to the relationship between the individual's perceptions of others' views toward him or herself and a subsequent self-feeling that ranges from pride to feelings of shame. Feeling supported or feeling that one matters to significant others are indicators of positive reflected appraisals.

Self-attributions compose another key process of self-evaluation formation. Everyday successes and failures influence self-esteem by providing individuals with feedback about the quality of their behavior. Bem (1972:5) suggests that: "Individuals come to 'know' their own attitudes, emotions, and other internal states partially by inferring them from observations of their own overt behavior and/or the circumstances in which this behavior occurs." Especially in the realm of competence, individuals judge their abilities based on the same evidence used to judge the abilities of others, and such self-judgments affect self-esteem. Scholars note that socioeconomic status, in particular, might affect self-attributions of competence (e.g., Gecas and Schwalbe 1982; Hughes and Demo 1989).

Have relationships between union type and self-esteem been examined? The short answer is no,

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[1] Other key processes that affect the development of self-evaluations include social comparisons, which suggest that individuals come to know themselves by making comparisons with others (Festinger 1954; Pettigrew 1967; Rosenberg and Simmons 1972; Rosenberg 1979) and psychological centrality, which refers to a selectivity process in which activities and statuses are imbued differentially with significance for self-esteem (Faunce 1982; 1989).

although scholars have examined relationships between other social structural variables and self-conceptions. This literature is instructive in suggesting potential relationships and in laying out guidelines for understanding why social structure may influence personality characteristics such as self-esteem. Much of the contemporary work on self-concept focuses on the relationship between social structural variables such as socioeconomic status and self-conceptions. Rosenberg and Simmons (1972) and House (1981) emphasize that the important task is to specify how a social structural variable such as socioeconomic status or union type affects the immediate interpersonal interactions and experiences of individuals in ways that enhance, maintain, or damage self-evaluations. In this vein, then, our questions include the following: (1) What are the relevant experiential consequences of union type; (2) How could these affect self-esteem formation; (3) Do they affect self-esteem; and (4) Do individuals with lower self-esteem select into cohabitation? Prior research to be reviewed in the next section shows that two experiential consequences of union type include socioeconomic status and perceptions of supportive relationships. We argue that because socioeconomic status and social support differ by union type, these differences may affect the processes by which reflected appraisals and self-attributions occur, and subsequently influence adult self-esteem. In the next section, we review in more detail the significance of union type in contemporary American society and experientially how it differs from marriage.

The Significance of Union Type

Family scholars generally agree that the singular focus on marriage should be widened to include nonmarital cohabitation (Bumpass et al. 1991; Landale and Fennelly 1992; Smock 2000). This emerging consensus concerning the significance of cohabitation in the family life course coupled with its dramatic increase in recent decades suggests that an examination of marriage to the exclusion of cohabitation is simply misguided. Rather, social scientists ought to consider the significance of *unions* for individual well-being and, more specifically, the relative benefits of the two types of unions: marriage versus cohabitation (Ross 1995).

Cohabitation is arguably a normative event in the contemporary American life course. More than one-half of Americans in their twenties and thirties have experienced cohabitation and the modal path of entry into marriage is through cohabitation (Bumpass and Sweet 1989). The rapid growth in rates of cohabitation since 1970 has prompted researchers to investigate not only the antecedents of cohabitation, but its consequences as well. For instance, considerable attention has been devoted to understanding the positive relationship between premarital cohabitation and subsequent divorce, which appears to be largely a function of selection of the divorce-prone into premarital cohabitation (Axinn and Thornton 1992; Bennett, Blanc, and Bloom 1988; Booth and Johnson 1988; DeMaris and MacDonald 1993; DeMaris and Rao 1992; Lillard, Waite, and Brien 1995; Seff 1995). More recently, researchers have begun to evaluate the significance of cohabitation itself, namely, what is the nature and meaning of cohabitation for cohabitors (for a summary, see Smock 2000).

A focus of recent sociological research concerns how cohabitation compares to marriage. Research documents poorer outcomes for cohabiting relative to married individuals with respect to a variety of indicators. In other words, cohabitation does not appear to confer the same level of benefits as does marriage. Cohabitors report poorer relationship quality, on average, as well as weaker relationships with their own parents and higher levels of depression (Brown and Booth 1996; Brown 2000; Nock 1995). Cohabitors also experience more conflict and violence in their relationships than do marrieds (DeMaris 2000; Stets 1991). And, cohabitors report more accepting attitudes toward divorce (Axinn and Thornton 1992).

More generally, cohabiting unions are significantly less stable than marital unions, which is detrimental to individual well-being. The typical cohabiting relationship persists for fewer than two years (Bumpass and Sweet 1989). Some researchers maintain that the instability of cohabiting unions reflects the fact that cohabitation is an incomplete institution (Nock 1995; Cherlin 1978). That is, as a society we do not have clear guidelines or expectations for appropriate roles and behaviors making it a family form

that is difficult to sustain.

A consideration of the composition of the cohabiting population suggests that cohabitors will have poorer self-esteem than their married counterparts. Several studies have documented the poorer socioeconomic profile of cohabitors relative to marrieds as well as perceptions of weaker social supports reported by cohabitors, as described below. These two factors, socioeconomic status and social support, are consequential for adults' self-esteem. Thus, we anticipate that cohabitors will report lower levels of self-esteem that will be partly a function of their lower socioeconomic status and weaker social supports. Moreover, union type may interact with socioeconomic status or social support in its effects on self-esteem such that low socioeconomic status or perceiving less social support are especially detrimental to the self-esteem of cohabitors.

Socioeconomic status

The dramatic growth in cohabitation has been led by those of lower socioeconomic status. Both historically and currently, cohabitation is most common among people with the lowest levels of education and earnings. Men and women with fewer economic resources or who have not yet completed their education are more likely to enter a cohabiting than a marital union (Clarkberg 1999). For some groups, cohabitation may serve as a "poor man's marriage" (Landale and Fennelly 1992). The economic circumstances of cohabiting families with children are especially precarious. Despite having two potential earners, cohabitors with children more closely resemble single-mother than married couple families in terms of income and poverty status (Manning and Lichter 1996). Similar to the association observed among marrieds, fewer economic resources (especially from the male partner) contribute to union instability (Smock and Manning 1997).

These union type differences in socioeconomic status are expected to influence self-esteem. An adult's socioeconomic status can be viewed as an achievement or accomplishment (Rosenberg and Pearlin 1978). Thus low socioeconomic status might result in low self-esteem via the social

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psychological process of self-attribution. Specifically, socioeconomic status is relevant for making self-attributions of competence. Individuals with higher socioeconomic status, that is, those having higher levels of education, and higher incomes, typically can feel good about their socioeconomic success (Gecas and Seff 1989; Gecas and Seff 1990).

As noted above, scholars have found differences in socioeconomic status by union type (e.g., Clarkberg 1999), as well as relationships between adult socioeconomic status and self-esteem (e.g., Rosenberg and Pearlin 1978). However, scholars have not examined the relationship between socioeconomic status and self-esteem, conditional on union type. That is, whether the influence of low socioeconomic status on self-esteem is especially detrimental for cohabitors (relative to marrieds) has not been tested empirically.

Social Support

Cohabitors perceive less social support than their married counterparts. We define social support as the degree to which a person's basic social needs are gratified by interacting with others (Kaplan et al. 1977). We would assume that one's spouse or partner would be a primary source of support. Yet with regard to cohabitation this does not seem to be the case. On average, cohabitors report lower levels of happiness and fairness in their relationships, and higher levels of disagreements, conflict, and instability (Brown and Booth 1996; Nock 1995). As we indicated earlier, cohabitors experience more aggression and violence in their relationships than do married individuals, which Stets (1991) concludes is a result of social isolation. In contrast, Ross (1995) finds little difference between cohabitors and marrieds in her analysis of marital status as a continuum of social attachment. However, the lack of significant differences between cohabitors and marrieds is equivocal due to the small sample size of cohabitors (N=56). We argue that the use of a larger, representative sample will provide greater understanding of differences between cohabitors and marrieds with respect to measures of well-being such as self-esteem.

Indeed, recent research showing that cohabitors are more depressed than marrieds net of a variety

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of sociodemographic characteristics provides strong evidence that cohabitors experience lower levels of social support (Brown 2000). The higher depression scores of cohabitors are explained by the instability of their unions. Cohabitors perceive the future of their unions as highly uncertain, which exacerbates depression. This association is acute particularly among cohabitors with children. To the extent that depression and self-evaluations are related positively to one another (e.g., Gecas and Longmore forthcoming, Longmore and DeMaris 1997), these findings suggest that cohabitors also may suffer from lower levels of self-esteem. We note, however, that although scholars have examined the relationship between social support and self-esteem, as well as the relationship between union type and social support, to date, scholars have not examined the relationship between social support and self-esteem, conditional on union type.

The Present Study

Given the focus on differences in socioeconomic status and differences in perceptions of social support associated with union type, we begin by examining how these two variables influence our dependent variable, self-esteem. Prior studies as well as theoretical explanations for the development of self-esteem have emphasized its relationship to reflected appraisals including reflected appraisals of social support and a sense of mattering to significant others (Elliott, Kao, and Grant 1995; Rosenberg and McCullough 1981). Studies and theoretical discussions for the development of adult self-esteem also have emphasized its socioeconomic underpinnings (e.g., Gecas and Longmore 1989; Gecas and Seff 1990; Hughes and Demo 1989; Rosenberg and Pearlin 1978), however, because of the very nature of intimate relationships, it is possible to de-emphasize the importance of socioeconomic status. We argue, however, it is perhaps more difficult to de-emphasize the centrality of social support. Prior to examining the significance of union type for individuals' self-esteem, we add to the theoretical and empirical literature on how social structure influences self-esteem by examining the effects of social support and socioeconomic status on self-esteem. We hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 1a: Socioeconomic status and social support affect self-esteem, net of other demographic variables.

Hypothesis 1b: Social support, compared with socioeconomic status, will have a greater effect on self-esteem, net of other demographic variables.

Building on Brown's (2000) research, and our prior theoretical discussion, we also expect that union type will affect self-esteem due to its associations with socioeconomic status and social support. With few exceptions (e.g., Brown 2000; Horwitz and White 1998), researchers have not examined union type and adult self-evaluations or reports of well-being. The studies that have examined these kinds of relationships typically have not examined self-esteem. Moreover, most of the prior research is not theoretically guided, and thus, does not provide adequate explanation for the processes by which union type influences dimensions of self-evaluations. Additionally, some of the most theoretically guided studies are based on relatively few cohabitors (e.g., Ross 1995).

Our research question with which we began this paper asks: "Does union type influence self-esteem?" Based on the literature on social psychological processes associated with the development of self-esteem, and the literature on the significance of union type, we hypothesize the following relationships:

Hypothesis 2: Cohabitation (versus marriage) will be negatively associated with self-esteem. Moreover, the relationship between union type and self-esteem will be reduced by socioeconomic status and perceptions of social support. And, Hypothesis 3 states:

Hypothesis 3a: The impact of union type is moderated by socioeconomic status, such that cohabitors with the lowest socioeconomic status levels suffer the lowest self-esteem.

Hypothesis 3b: The impact of union type is moderated by social support, such that cohabitors with the perception of lowest social support suffer the lowest self-esteem.

Finally, we consider the role of selection in the union type and self-esteem relationship, explicitly

testing the following:

Hypothesis 4: Individuals with lower levels of self-esteem are selected into cohabitation.

A Note on Selection

Although researchers have provided convincing evidence that the positive association between marriage and individual well-being is not due to the selection of psychologically healthy persons into marriage (Gove et al. 1983; Gove et al. 1990; Lee et al. 1991; Pearlin and Johnson 1977; Ross et al. 1991), there is conflicting evidence concerning selectivity into cohabitation. Horwitz and White (1998) document selection into cohabitation of individuals who are more depressed and have alcohol problems. However, their findings are equivocal at best since they come from data on 25-, 28-, and 31- year-olds residing in New Jersey and the response rate was below 50 percent. Brown's (2000) analysis of both waves of the National Survey of Families and Households data revealed no statistically significant selection effect operating on the relationship between depression and union type.

Still, cohabitation has been characterized as a selective experience, particularly with regard to divorce; the positive association between premarital cohabitation and subsequent divorce appears to be a function of selection (Booth and Johnson 1988; Lillard, Waite, and Brien 1995). We rely on cross-sectional analyses to examine the association between union type and self-esteem because it not only affords a considerably larger sample but also permits generalizations about the entire cohabiting population. Additional analyses evaluate the significance of selection using both waves of data. We believe that it is reasonable to assume that union type influences self-esteem (rather than the reverse); moreover, it is theoretically consistent with the approach of sociologically trained social psychologists who note that what distinguishes our approach from that of psychologically trained social psychologists is the emphasis on how social structural factors influence self-conceptions (e.g., House 1981). A majority of young people experience cohabitation and the most common pathway to marriage is through cohabitation (Bumpass and Sweet 1989), leading us to expect minimal selection effects.

DATA AND METHOD

We use data from the two waves of the National Survey of Families and Households (1987-88 and 1992-94), a multistage probability sample of 13,007 adults in the noninstitutionalized U.S. population. One adult per household was selected randomly as the primary respondent for face-to-face interviewing. Several subpopulations were oversampled, including unmarried cohabitors, recently married couples, single-parent families, families with stepchildren, and households whose heads were African American, Mexican American, or Puerto Rican (see Sweet, Bumpass, and Call 1988 for further description of the data). These data are ideal for this study as they contain a large sample of cohabitors and a well-known measure of self-esteem as well as detailed information on social support and socioeconomic status. Data were collected from 678 main cohabiting and 6,877 main married respondents. Additionally, data on the respondent's partner's earnings were collected from the main respondent, allowing the main respondents to be retained regardless of whether they have partner data available.

We restrict our analyses to respondents in unions of no more than ten year's duration because most cohabiting unions are short-lived relative to marriages. About 90 percent of cohabiting unions either are formalized through marriage or dissolve within five years of their inception (Bumpass and Sweet 1989). This restriction maximizes the number of cohabiting and married individuals in unions of comparable duration and has been employed by others in research on cohabitation and marriage using NSFH data (e.g., Brown 2000; DeMaris and MacDonald 1993; Nock 1995; Thomson and Colella 1992). After deleting cases in which union duration is greater than ten years, there are 646 cohabiting and 3,086 married respondents.

We use both waves of the NSFH data to examine the role of selection. Specifically, we compare the time 2 values of self-esteem for respondents who are either married or cohabiting at time 2 and who were never married and had never cohabited at (or before) time 1, controlling for their time 1 (i.e., pre-union) levels of self-esteem. We employ Heckman's (1979) two-stage estimator to correct for any

selection effect associated with entry into cohabitation or marriage. This procedure was used in Brown's (2000) analysis of union type and depression with NSFH data. Although this strategy is ideal for evaluating the significance of selection effects, it reduces our sample size considerably. Restricting our focus to those with no union experience at time 1 who were married or cohabiting at time 2 results in 389 marrieds and 131 cohabitors for analysis. Despite the relatively small sample size, the longitudinal analyses support the cross-sectional findings.

Measures

The means and standard deviations (by union type) for all variables used in the analyses are shown in Table 1. We briefly describe each variable below.

   The dependent variable. We measure *self-esteem* using the following four items. Respondents were asked the extent to which they agreed with the following items: (1) I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others; (2) On the whole, I am satisfied with myself; (3) I am able to do things as well as other people; and (4) I have always felt pretty sure my life would work out the way I wanted it to. The first three items are based on Rosenberg's (1979) well known self-esteem scale. Each item was followed with a five-level response format ranging from "strongly agree" (5) to "strongly disagree" (1). Following procedures outlined by others using similar social psychological scales (e.g., Longmore et al. 2001; Longmore and DeMaris 1997; Glass and Fujimoto 1994), we constructed a self-esteem score for every respondent who scored at least 75 percent (three out of the four) of the items. We calculated the scale score as the mean of the items, multiplied by 4; this score ranged from 4 to 20, with 20 indicating the highest level of self-esteem. The reliability of the scale in the current sample is 0.63.

   The independent variables. The focus variable in the current study is *union type*, which is a dummy variable coded 1 for respondents in cohabiting unions and 0 for respondents who are married.

   Socioeconomic status is captured using two measures. First, we include a measure of the respondent's *education*, which is coded in years. Second, we measure *total couple earnings*, which is the

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sum of the respondent's and the partner's earnings (as reported by the main respondent). We log this sum to minimize the skewness characterizing this measure. A nontrivial proportion (12 percent) of this sample is missing on our measure of total couple earnings and thus for these cases we assign the mean and create a dummy variable to flag the imputation. All analyses initially included a dummy variable indicating cases originally missing on income, but the effect of this dummy flag variable was not significant and hence it is not shown in our tables.

Social support is measured at two levels. *Perceived availability of social support* is measured at the meso, or group, level by three items. Respondents are asked: (1) "Suppose that you had an emergency in the middle of the night and needed help. Who would you call?" (2) "What if you had to borrow $200.00 for a few weeks because of an emergency. Who would you ask?" and (3) "Suppose you had a problem, and you were feeling depressed or confused about what to do. Who would you ask for help or advise?" Response categories include: no one; friends, neighbors, co-workers; sons or daughters; parents; brothers and sisters; and other relatives. We constructed a social support score for every respondent who answered at least two of the items. Scores ranged from zero (for those who answered no one on each of the items) to 3 (for those who had at least one source of social support for each of the three hypothetical situations). We note that this social support scale is the same as that used by Stets (1991) in her study of social integration. It is also similar to the measure of social support that Ross (1995) used in her analysis of marital status as a continuum of social attachment. The reliability of the scale in the current sample is 0.46. We also tap social support at the couple-level using a measure of *relationship instability* to gauge intimate social support, a strategy also employed by Stets (1991). Respondents were asked to appraise the likelihood that their relationship would dissolve. Responses range from very unlikely (=1) to about even (=3) to very likely (=5). Stets (1991) employed this item as a measure of ties to one's spouse or partner.

Control variables. We control for other factors associated with self-esteem specifically and well-being more generally, including the respondent's age, gender, race, and prior union experience. *Age* is

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related to well-being, and thus we include it in our analyses. It is coded in years. Women report lower

levels of self-esteem than men (Gecas and Longmore forthcoming). *Sex* is coded 1 for females and 0 for

males. Nonwhites report higher levels of self-esteem than whites (Hughes and Demo 1989). The *race*

variable is coded 1 for nonwhite and 0 for white. Prior union experience is associated negatively with

well-being (Brown 2000; Kurdek 1991). We include indicator variables for *prior marital experience* as

well as *prior cohabiting experience*. And, since children are linked to individual well-being and appear to

have unique effects on the well-being of cohabitors and marrieds (Brown 2000), we control for the

presence of *biological children* and *stepchildren*. We also control for the *duration* of the current

relationship, coded in months, as the meaning of intimacy might vary across time for cohabitors and

marrieds alike (Brown 2000).

Statistical Analysis

We conducted analyses with OLS regression. We begin by testing hypotheses 1a and 1b using data from

wave one to examine the relative significance of socioeconomic status versus social support for self-

esteem. We examine the unique effects of socioeconomic status and social support and then evaluate

their relative effects (relying on the standardized betas to make comparisons) by including them together

in one model. Similarly, in our test of hypothesis 2, we use wave one data to examine the linkages

between union type and self-esteem. We first examine the relationship between union type and self-

esteem, net of control variables. Then, we add the measures of socioeconomic status. Finally, we include

each of the measures of social support. With respect to hypotheses 3a and 3b, we evaluate the interactive

effects of socioeconomic status and union type by individually testing the influence of *union type x

education* and *union type x total couple earnings*. Then, we examine the moderating effects of social

support on the relationship between union type and self-esteem via the cross-product terms *union type x

social support* as well as *union type x relationship instability*, each of which is examined individually.

Supplemental models evaluate the significance of selection with a Heckman (1979) two-stage estimator

that corrects for selectivity associated with entry into cohabitation versus marriage using a lambda coefficient. After fitting a model that predicted union formation between waves to generate the lambda coefficient, we estimate self-esteem among those who formed a union between waves, net of pre-union self-esteem measured at wave one, the lambda coefficient, and sociodeomographic controls. This strategy enables us to correct for any influence of *pre-union* self-esteem on subsequent union formation and self-esteem. Lastly, all analyses are weighted using the National Survey of Families and Households individual-level weight to correct for the oversampling of certain subject populations.

<div align="center">RESULTS</div>

As shown in Table 1, cohabitors report significantly lower levels of self-esteem than do marrieds, on average. Moreover, the sociodemographic characteristics of cohabitors suggest a greater risk for low self-esteem relative to marrieds. As expected, cohabitors have lower average levels of socioeconomic status, as evidenced by their fewer years of education and smaller earnings, than marrieds. Cohabitors and marrieds do not significantly differ in terms of social support, which is consistent with Stets's (1991) findings from the same data. However, cohabitors do report greater relationship instability than do marrieds, supporting findings from earlier research (Brown 2000a; Brown and Booth 1996).

<div align="center">[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]</div>

Multivariate Analyses

Our empirical results support hypothesis 1a, which states that our indicators of social support and socioeconomic status are significantly associated with self-esteem, net of demographic control variables. We first review the relationship between the demographic variables and self-esteem. As shown in Model 1 of Table 2, some of the demographic control variables are significantly related to self-esteem. Self-esteem is positively associated with age. But prior marital experience, relationship duration, and the presence of stepchildren are all negatively associated with self-esteem. The addition of the socioeconomic measures (Model 2 of Table 2), including education and total couple earnings,

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significantly improve the fit of the initial model (□F=5.02, □df=2, p < 0.01). Higher levels of education are associated with higher levels of self-esteem. Although total couple earnings are not significantly associated with self-esteem, the coefficient is in the expected direction (i.e., positive) and approaches significance (p=0.08). Model 3 of Table 2 reveals that inclusion of the measures of social support also significantly improves the fit from the original model (□F=12.83, □df=2, p < 0.001). The perceived availability of social support enhances self-esteem whereas relationship instability undermines self-esteem. We conclude that our models show support for hypothesis 1a.

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

We test hypothesis 1b by estimating a model of self-esteem that includes both socioeconomic status and social support, shown in Model 4 of Table 2. A comparison of the standardized betas to assess the relative importance of these two mediating factors (result not shown), reveals that relationship instability has the largest influence on self-esteem (∃=-0.20). Education is also related to self-esteem, although the effect is not as large (∃=0.12). Ultimately, it appears that socioeconomic status is less important than social support as the fit of Model 4 is not significantly improved over that of Model 3 (□F=1.33, □df=2, n.s.). Taken together, these results provide support for the proposed hypothesis that social support rather than socioeconomic status is more closely tied to self-esteem.

Our examination of hypothesis 2 is designed to evaluate whether cohabitors report lower levels of self-esteem than do marrieds. As noted above in the discussion of the univariate statistics, there is a significant bivariate association between union type and self-esteem that is in the expected direction. Indeed, this association persists even after we introduce the demographic controls, as shown in Model 1 of Table 3. Cohabitors report lower levels of self-esteem than do marrieds, net of several sociodemographic factors that are related to union type and self-esteem. The addition of two socioeconomic status measures, education and total couple earnings, attenuate the influence of union type on self-esteem, although the coefficient remains statistically significant (see Model 2 of Table 3). As

anticipated, both of these factors are associated positively with self-esteem. Finally, we consider the role of social support. As shown in Model 3 of Table 3, the inclusion of our two social support measures fully account for the relationship between union type and self-esteem. The respondent's report that s/he has someone to rely on for help in various situations enhances self-esteem. In contrast, relationship instability, which taps uncertainty about the current partnership or marriage, undermines self-esteem. Supplemental analyses (not shown) reveal that it is the greater relationship instability characterizing cohabiting unions that explains their lower levels of self-esteem. This is consistent with Brown's (2000) finding that cohabitors' higher levels of depression relative to marrieds are a function of their greater relationship instability.

Although correlated, self-esteem and depression are conceptually different, and have different consequences for behavior (e.g., Longmore et al. 1999). However, given the association between union type and depression (Brown 2000), our finding of lower self-esteem among cohabitors may be an artifact of their higher average levels of depression. Consequently, we re-estimated our models in Table 3 including depression as a control variable. None of the coefficients changed (although depression was positively associated with self-esteem, as expected), suggesting that the results documented here are additional evidence that the well-being of cohabitors is lower than that of marrieds, on average. Cohabitors report higher levels of depression and lower levels of self-esteem than do marrieds.

[TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

Our next set of hypotheses involves possible interaction effects between socioeconomic status, social support, and union type. Hypothesis 3a is not supported; neither education nor total couple earnings significantly interacts with union type in its effects on self-esteem (result not shown). Apparently, the detrimental effects of low socioeconomic status are similar for both cohabitors and marrieds.

We do find evidence that social support operates differently according to union type, which

supports hypothesis 3b. As shown in Model 4 of Table 3, the perceived availability of social support has

greater protective effects for marrieds. Whereas social support is positively associated with self-esteem

among marrieds, it is negatively associated with self-esteem among cohabitors. Thus, having potential

sources of social support appears to be beneficial for marrieds only. Relationship instability does not

significantly interact with union type in its effects on self-esteem, indicating that intimate social support

enhances the self-esteem of cohabitors and marrieds alike.

A Test for Selection

To test our last hypothesis, we use data from both waves of the NSFH to investigate whether cohabitation

is selective of individuals with lower levels of self-esteem. That is, we examine whether the negative

association we document between cohabitation and self-esteem is simply an artifact of lower levels of

self-esteem that preceded union formation or actually represents a "true effect" of cohabitation on self-

esteem. We analyze those cases in wave 1 of the NSFH who have no prior union experience and are not

currently in a union but, by wave 2, have formed either a cohabiting (N=131) or marital (N=389) union.

From our estimation of the probability of forming a union between interview waves (which included all

respondents at wave one who had no prior union experience and were not currently in a union, regardless

of whether they formed a union between waves (N=2,051)), we generated a lambda coefficient value for

each respondent. We used this coefficient in our model that predicts self-esteem at wave 2, net of union

type, self-esteem at wave 1, and several demographic controls to determine whether selection may

account for some of the observed negative association between cohabitation and self-esteem in the cross-

sectional analyses presented above. As shown in Model 1 of Table 4, union type is not related to self-

esteem at wave 2; cohabitors and marrieds do not significantly differ in self-esteem. The lambda

coefficient is statistically significant, indicating that there is some selection operating in the decision to

cohabit versus marry. However, once we add the socioeconomic status measures in Model 2 of Table 4,

the lambda coefficient fails to achieve statistical significance, which suggests that the selection process

undergirding union formation largely reflects the influence of educational and monetary factors in decisions to cohabit versus marry. The significance of these socioeconomic factors in the union formation process has been amply documented (Clarkberg 1999; Oppenheimer, Kalmijn, and Lim 1997; Smock and Manning 1997; Smock 2000). Note that we do not need to include our measures of social support; the lambda coefficient does not achieve significance when we introduce the two measures of socioeconomic status. These findings demonstrate that the selection associated with entry into cohabitation is minimal. As shown in other research on cohabitation, persons who cohabit rather than marry tend to have lower levels of education and lesser earnings. These two factors appear to account both for the selectivity of cohabitation as well as the lower levels of self-esteem they report. Recall that neither of these measures significantly interacts with union type and thus it seems that for those with more education and higher earnings, the decision to cohabit will not undermine one's self-esteem.

[TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE]

DISCUSSION

We used data from both waves of the National Survey of Families and Households to examine the linkages between union type and self-esteem. We discussed two processes that shape self-esteem: (1) reflected appraisals, which refer to our imaginations of how others see us and (2) self-attributions, which refer to the formation of a conception of self from observing our own behavior. These processes can be used to understand relationships between union type, differing experiences with respect to social support and socioeconomic status conditional on union type, and self-esteem. The rapid increase in nonmarital cohabitation coupled with a growing consensus that cohabitation is a family living arrangement prompted our investigation of the influence of union type on self-esteem. Although researchers have paid considerable attention to the association between marital status and well-being, comparatively few have included cohabitors in such analyses. Our paper contributes to the emerging literature on the significance of union type for adult well-being (Brown 2000; Horwitz and White 1998) by examining self-esteem.

Our empirical results largely confirm our hypotheses. As anticipated, both socioeconomic status and social support are significantly related to self-esteem. Yet, social support is more strongly associated with self-esteem than is socioeconomic status. Cohabitors report lower levels of self-esteem than do marrieds, and this difference persists even after controlling for demographic factors as well as socioeconomic status. The level of social support, especially the respondent's report of relationship instability, accounts for the effect of union type on self-esteem. Cohabitors report particularly high uncertainty about the future of their relationship, which in turn undermines their self-esteem. Notably, relationship instability, an indicator of intimate social support, has similar positive effects on the self-esteem of marrieds and cohabitors. Although socioeconomic status and union type do not interact in their effects on self-esteem, there is a significant interaction between the perceived availability of social support and union type. The perception that social support is available has a much more ameliorative effect on the self-esteem of marrieds than cohabitors. We are confident that these cross-sectional findings are not merely a function of selection. Longitudinal models estimated using Heckman's (1979) two-step procedure to correct for selectivity indicate minimal selection effects (any effects appear to be driven by socioeconomic status differentials between cohabitors and marrieds).

Thus, our findings emphasize the importance of perceptions of social support. Moreover, an important expression of positive reflected appraisals, one of the key social psychological processes associated with the development of self-esteem, is social support. To the extent that individuals perceive that others are willing to help them with financial and emotional needs, we can infer that reflected appraisals are more positive than if they do not receive such support. Interestingly, Durkheim made much the same point over a hundred years ago. According to Durkheim ([1897] 1950), the traditional and stable rules of conduct of socially cohesive groups give members a sense of integration, certainty and purpose in living. In particular, social integration protects the person against the uncertainty and despair that may lead to disordered functioning. The implication is that social support, as the result of social

integration, should affect individuals' self-esteem. Cooley ([1902] 1970) also emphasized that self-esteem mirrors the view of ourselves as communicated by significant others with whom we interact. Individuals who perceive that significant others care about them come to think of themselves as individuals worthy of self-esteem. Self-esteem is thus viewed as an outcome of interaction with supportive others. Gecas and Seff (1990) have found relationships between social support and self-esteem among welfare recipients. In fact, supportive, interpersonal relationships are viewed by many as the primary means for tackling barriers associated with self-esteem and poverty (e.g., Stack 1974; Wilson 1987).

Our study demonstrates that union type, an indicator of one's location in the social structure, does shape our self-evaluations. Taken together with Brown's (2000) finding that cohabitors are more depressed than marrieds, our results showing that cohabitors have lower levels of self-esteem than marrieds provides clear evidence that union type matters. Cohabitors and marrieds experience unique relationship contexts that do not confer equal benefits. There is minimal evidence that these differences are an artifact of selection. Rather, the lower levels of socioeconomic status and the perceived levels of social and intimate support undermine cohabitors' self-esteem. As more Americans experience cohabitation, it is imperative that we continue to unravel the mechanisms underlying the poorer self-evaluations characterizing cohabitors.

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Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of Variables Used in the Analyses

	Cohabiting		Married	
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
Time 1 Variables[a]				
Self-Esteem	14.558***	2.354	15.108	2.160
Controls				
Age	30.431***	9.468	32.868	10.078
Female	0.519	0.499	0.505	0.498
Nonwhite	0.277***	0.266	0.183	0.400
Prior Marital Experience	0.441***	0.474	0.320	0.472
Prior Cohabiting Experience	0.218***	0.230	0.465	0.500
Biological Children	0.119***	0.324	0.500	0.497
Step Children	0.283***	0.464	0.156	0.398
Duration	29.904***	27.239	57.783	32.592
Socioeconomic Status				
Education	12.395***	2.699	13.250	2.726
Total Couple Earnings (logged)	9.483***	2.054	9.890	1.907
Social Support				
Perceived Availability of Support	2.740	0.621	2.726	0.582
Relationship Instability	1.993***	1.068	1.449	0.792
Time 2 Variables[b]				
Pre-union self-esteem	15.173*	2.805	15.243	2.278
Post-union self-esteem	15.453	2.646	15.726	2.137

***Mean values significantly different (p < 0.001, two-tailed test).
  *Mean values significantly different (p=0.05, two-tailed test).
Note: N=3,155; analyses are weighted using the NSFH sample weight
[a]Measured at first interview (i.e., NSFH1)
[b]Measured at second interview (i.e., NSFH2)

Table 2. OLS Models Predicting Self-Esteem (unstandardized coefficients shown)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Controls				
Age	0.020***	0.021***	0.014**	0.15**
	(3.94)	(4.07)	(2.85)	(2.99)
Female	-0.028	-0.021	-0.073	-0.063
	(-0.35)	(-0.26)	(-0.93)	(-0.80)
Nonwhite	-0.006	0.163	0.121	0.269**
	(-0.06)	(1.62)	(1.24)	(2.71)
Prior Marital Experience	-0.415***	-0.350***	-0.301**	-0.246*
	(-3.74)	(-3.16)	(-2.76)	(-2.26)
Prior Cohabiting	-0.053	-0.0816	0.008	-0.021
Experience	(-0.66)	(-1.02)	(0.10)	(-0.27)
Biological Children	0.104	0.137	0.049	0.082
	(1.05)	(1.40)	(0.51)	(0.85)
Step Children	-0.234*	-0.176	-0.254*	-0.202
	(-1.95)	(-1.48)	(-2.17)	(-1.73)
Duration	-0.004**	-0.004***	-0.004**	-0.005***
	(-2.75)	(-3.36)	(-2.88)	(-3.44)
Socioeconomic Status				
Education		0.099***		0.091***
		(6.75)		(6.25)
Total Couple Earnings		0.037		0.035
		(1.73)		(1.65)
Social Support				
Perceived Availability of			0.161*	0.130*
Support			(2.40)	(1.94)
Relationship Instability			-0.529***	-0.512***
			(-11.45)	(-11.16)
Intercept	14.760***	13.017***	15.279***	13.745***
	(84.91)	(41.00)	(55.83)	(37.10)
F (df)	4.73 (8)	9.75 (10)	17.56 (10)	19.09 (12)
Adj-R2	0.009	0.027	0.050	0.064

*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001 (two-tailed tests)

N=3,155; analyses are weighted using the NSFH1 sample weight; t-values are shown in parentheses

Table 3. OLS Models Predicting Self-esteem, Net of Union Type (unstandardized coefficients shown)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Cohabiting (A)	-0.600***	-0.531***	-0.214	1.129*
	(-5.29)	(-4.71)	(-1.76)	(2.23)
Controls				
Age	0.016***	0.018***	0.014**	0.014**
	(3.27)	(3.72)	(2.79)	(2.79)
Female	-0.022	-0.001	-0.064	-0.067
	(-0.30)	(-0.02)	(-0.83)	(-0.87)
Nonwhite	-0.056	0.109	0.275**	0.277**
	(-0.59)	(1.14)	(2.77)	(2.79)
Prior Marital	-0.364***	-0.314**	-0.228*	-0.224*
Experience	(-3.50)	(-3.02)	(-2.08)	(-2.05)
Prior Cohabiting	-0.117	-0.134	-0.056	-0.061
Experience	(-1.49)	(-1.72)	(-0.69)	(-0.75)
Biological Children	-0.005	0.044	0.052	0.047
	(-0.06)	(0.46)	(0.53)	(0.48)
Step Children	-0.252*	-0.189	-0.202	-0.202
	(-2.22)	(-1.67)	(-1.73)	(-1.73)
Duration	-0.004***	-0.006***	-0.004***	-0.005***
	(-3.90)	(-4.54)	(-3.68)	(-3.71)
Socioeconomic Status				
Education		0.099***	0.090***	0.089***
		(7.03)	(6.17)	(6.17)
Total Couple Earnings		0.040*	0.033	0.033
		(1.99)	(1.57)	(1.57)
Social Support				
Perceived Availability			0.130*	0.209**
of Support (B)			(1.95)	(2.87)
Relationship Instability			-0.495***	-0.493***
			(-10.54)	(-10.52)
A x B				-0.494**
				(-2.73)
Intercept	15.118***	13.291***	13.852***	13.649***
	(87.07)	(42.9)	(36.90)	(35.70)
F (df)	7.99 (9)	12.62 (11)	17.87 (13)	17.16 (14)
Adj-R2	0.018	0.0351	0.065	0.07

*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001 (two-tailed tests)
N=3,155; analyses are weighted using the NSFH1 sample weight; t-values are shown in parentheses

Table 4. Longitudinal OLS Models Predicting Self-esteem (unstandardized coefficients shown)

	Model 1	Model 2
Cohabiting	-0.113	0.016
	(-0.49)	(0.07)
Time 1 Variables		
Self-Esteem	0.313***	0.295***
	(7.87)	(7.34)
Controls		
Age	0.027	0.003
	(0.86)	(0.04)
Female	-0.161	-0.212
	(-0.86)	(-1.11)
Nonwhite	-0.422	-0.386
	(-1.86)	(-1.67)
Children[a]	-0.455*	-0.492*
	(-2.20)	(-2.33)
Duration	0.002	0.004
	(0.42)	(0.93)
Socioeconomic Status		
Education		0.044
		(0.35)
Total Couple Earnings		-0.028
		(-0.98)
Lambda	-2.982**	-2.460
	(-2.98)	(-0.89)
Intercept	13.834***	13.699***
	(14.83)	(5.05)
F (df)	13.72 (9)	10.51 (10)
Adj-R2	0.173	0.168

*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$ (two-tailed tests)
N=486; analyses are weighted using the NSFH2 sample
weight; t-values are shown in parentheses
[a]Due to small sample size, biological and step children
are grouped together