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**RELATIONSHIP QUALITY AMONG COHABITING VERSUS
MARRIED COUPLES**

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Relationship Quality among Cohabiting versus Married Couples

Abstract

Using data from the nationally representative 2010 Married and Cohabiting Couples (MCC) survey of different-sex cohabiting and married couples, we compared the relationship quality of today's cohabitators and marrieds. Consistent with diffusion theory and recent conceptual work on the deinstitutionalization of marriage, we found that the relationship between union type and relationship quality is now bifurcated with direct marrieds reporting the highest relationship quality and cohabitators without marriage plans reporting the lowest marital quality. In the middle were the two largest groups: marrieds who premaritally cohabited and cohabitators with plans to marry. These two groups did not differ in terms of relationship quality. This study adds to the growing literature indicating that the role of cohabitation in the family life course is changing in the contemporary context.

Relationship Quality among Cohabiting versus Married Couples

The role of cohabitation in the family life course appears to be shifting. Roughly three-quarters of young adults have cohabited at some point and a majority of recently married couples premaritally cohabited (Manning & Stykes, 2015). Still, today's cohabiting unions are less likely to culminate in marriage and more likely to end through separation (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2011). Cohabitors less often report plans to marry their partner and serial cohabitation is on the rise (Vespa, 2014). Consequently, cohabitation should now be less selective, meaning those who cohabit are less distinguishable from those who do not cohabit in terms of both measured and unmeasured characteristics. Diffusion theory indicates that the selectivity of cohabitation is U-shaped, declining as cohabitation becomes more common and rising only when cohabitation becomes nearly universal, making those who do not cohabit highly selective or distinctive as a group (Leifbroer & Dourleijn, 2006).

The conclusion reached in prior studies that cohabitators tend to report poorer relationship quality than do married individuals (e.g., Brown & Booth, 1996; Nock, 1995; Skinner, Bahr, Crane, & Call, 2002) is now arguably outmoded. Indeed, these results came from data that are 25 years old (the 1987-88 National Survey of Families and Households), an era marked by relatively modest levels of cohabitation (Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin, 1991). As cohabitation has become more widespread the marriage advantage in well-being has dwindled with cohabitation now appearing to have beneficial effects similar to marriage on psychological well-being, health, and social ties (Musick & Bumpass, 2012). And, the well-established positive association between premarital cohabitation and divorce documented in an extensive body of research in the 1980s and 1990s no longer holds for more recent marriage cohorts (Jose, O'Leary, & Moyer, 2010; Manning & Cohen, 2012; Reinhold, 2010). Cohabiting and married couples may be more similar today in terms of relationship quality, too, reflecting not only the diffusion of

cohabitation across the population but also the deinstitutionalization of marriage (Cherlin, 2004; Leifbroer & Dourleijn, 2006).

Using newly available data from the nationally representative 2010 Married and Cohabiting Couples (MCC) survey, we compared the relationship quality of today's cohabitators and marrieds, distinguishing between cohabitators with versus without marriage plans and between those marrieds who cohabited premaritally versus married directly. The results from this study inform broader discussions about the contested terrain of U.S. families by elucidating the dynamics of cohabitation and marriage in the contemporary family life course.

Background

Cohabitation has increased rapidly in recent decades, rising from roughly 500,000 couples in 1970 to more than 7.7 million couples in 2010 and this growth is evident across racial and ethnic, education, and age groups (Lofquist, Lugaila, O'Connell, & Feliz, 2012). The sharp acceleration in cohabitation indicates that it has been diffusing widely across the population. At the same time, cohabitation is more broadly accepted. Cohabitation and marriage alike are more fluid and variable (Cherlin, 2009), blurring the boundaries between the two union types. Two-thirds of recently married couples lived together before marriage and fewer than half of cohabitators plan to marry (Manning & Stykes, 2015; Vespa, 2014), underscoring the importance of capturing variation among both cohabitators and marrieds.

Traditionally, research comparing cohabitation and marriage has relied on the incomplete institutionalization perspective to explain relationship quality differentials (Nock, 1995). Based on the premise that cohabitation is relatively rare and uncommon, the argument is that cohabitation remains an incomplete institution in which neither the roles nor expectations for partners are clearly defined and broadly shared (Cherlin, 2004; Nock, 1995). Cohabitators must

actively devise norms for their relationships and negotiate their partnership roles. This process can lead to conflict and disagreement, undermining overall relationship quality and heightening relationship instability (Brown & Bulanda, 2008; Halpern-Meekin, Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2013; Nock, 1995). Yet as cohabitation has become more common the strength of the incomplete institutionalization argument may wane. This is the core logic of diffusion theory, which stipulates that as cohabitation diffuses widely across the population, it is necessarily less selective, which in turn should “[lead] to a strengthening of [cohabitators’] unions” (Liefbroer & Dourleijn, 2006, p. 205).

Early research established that cohabitators were less happy with their relationships, perceived lower levels of fairness, had more disagreements and greater conflict (and violence), and were less confident about the stability of their unions, on average, than marrieds (Brown, 2004, 2003; Brown & Booth, 1996; Nock, 1995; Skinner et al., 2002; Stafford, Kline, & Rankin, 2004; Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004; Thomson & Colella, 1992). The primary explanation for this union type differential supports a selection effect: cohabitation itself does not cause poorer relationship quality but rather the characteristics of individuals who cohabit versus marry drive these relationship quality differentials (Booth & Johnson, 1988; DeMaris & Leslie, 1984; James & Beattie, 2012; Stanley et al., 2004; Tach & Halpern-Meekin, 2009; Thomson & Colella, 1992; Woods & Emery, 2002). Of course most of these studies were based on data collected prior to the recent acceleration in cohabitation, reflecting the experiences of a smaller, more select group of cohabitators.

Similarly, older research indicates that the relationship quality of married individuals who cohabited premaritally was more similar to that of married individuals who did not cohabit than to cohabitators (Nock, 1995; Skinner et al., 2002; Stafford et al., 2004; Stanley et al., 2004). Yet,

the few contemporary studies that have focused on how premarital cohabitation is linked to subsequent marital quality identify an advantage for those who marry directly versus following premarital cohabitation. Longitudinal analyses show that women who married directly enjoyed higher marital quality, on average, than women who cohabited with their spouse prior to marriage (James & Beattie, 2012; Tach & Halpern-Meekin, 2009). A meta-analysis of a range of studies revealed that although there is an overall cohabitation effect, premarital cohabitation with only one's eventual spouse did not undermine marital quality (Jose et al., 2010).

This recent research (James & Beattie, 2012; Tach & Halpern-Meekin, 2009) is restricted to marrieds and does not capture relationship quality among cohabitators. Nor does it include men. Whether the relationship quality of today's cohabitators and marrieds differs remains unknown. It is also unclear how cohabitators' marital plans are linked to relationship quality. Research based on data collected over a decade ago indicates that cohabitators with plans to marry their partners did not appreciably differ from married individuals in terms of their relationship quality (Brown & Booth, 1996; Kline et al., 2004).

New evidence challenges these studies to provide a more contemporary examination that focuses on current patterns of cohabitation. Manning and Cohen (2012) found that among recently married couples there is no negative effect of premarital cohabitation on marital stability. This pattern is consistent with the diffusion hypothesis that as cohabitation becomes more widespread it is less selective. Shifting norms about cohabitation have coincided with reduced stigma, meaning that cohabiting relationships likely enjoy greater social support that ultimately buttresses their relationship quality (Liefbroer & Dourleijn, 2006).

Recent research comparing the relationship quality of today's marrieds and cohabitators is scarce, even though cohabitation has accelerated rapidly, diffusing widely across the population.

With fewer of today's cohabitators reporting plans to marry their partners than a decade ago (Vespa, 2014), marriage plans may be even more closely tied to cohabitators' relationship quality. Meanwhile, those who marry directly are now a more select group, and thus arguably distinctive from both marrieds who cohabited premaritally and cohabitators with marriage plans. And, the gap between the two types of cohabitators may be widening as those with marriage plans are a more select group, meaning cohabitators without marriage plans arguably have lower relationship quality than other cohabitators and marrieds. In sum, the diffusion of cohabitation coupled with the deinstitutionalization of marriage foregrounds the value of revisiting initial comparisons of the two types of unions that were conducted when cohabitation was a more selective, unusual experience.

The Present Study

In the present study, we draw on diffusion theory and the concept of the deinstitutionalization of marriage to examine whether cohabiting and married couples enjoy comparable levels of relationship quality. Our approach considers diversity among both marrieds and cohabitators, distinguishing among (1) those who married directly, (2) marrieds who premaritally cohabited, (3) cohabitators with plans to marry, and (4) cohabitators with no marriage plans. The lines between the two types of unions are arguably blurrier today. A majority of marriages are preceded by cohabitation even though fewer cohabitations eventuate in marriage than in the past (Manning & Stykes, 2015). With the growing popularity of premarital cohabitation and the increasing selectivity of having plans to marry among cohabitators (Vespa, 2014), we expect that those who cohabited before marriage may have similar relationship quality to current cohabitators with plans to marry. Those who married directly are a highly select group and thus they may report relationship quality that is significantly higher, on average, than either

marrieds who cohabited premaritally (cf. James & Beattie, 2012) or current cohabitators (regardless of marriage plans). Consistent with diffusion theory, we anticipate that cohabitators without plans to marry characterize their relationship quality as lower, on average, than cohabitators with marriage plans and both of the two types of married couples. Cohabitation without marriage plans is less normative than cohabitation with plans to marry, and thus the former group enjoys less support and likely experiences poorer relationship quality (Liefbroer & Dourleijn, 2006).

Several other features of the current investigation enhance its potential contribution to the field. First, we rely on new national data to examine a recent union cohort: those who have been in their relationship with their spouse or partner for no more than 10 years. This approach also ensures maximum comparability between the two types of unions since cohabiting relationships are rather short-lived, lasting just a year or two, on average, whereas the average marital duration is nearly 20 years (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2011; Payne & Gibbs, 2011). Early studies comparing the relationship quality of cohabitators and marrieds also used duration restrictions (Brown & Booth, 1996; Nock, 1995; Skinner et al., 2002).

Second, we investigate both positive and negative indicators of relationship quality because prior research has established that one is not the inverse of the other (Johnson et al., 1986). Couples can score high (or low) on both positive and negative dimensions of relationship quality. To capture positive relationship quality, we use a measure of relationship happiness. Our measure of negative relationship quality is disillusionment, a well-validated indicator that captures perceived change in relationship qualities such as affection and love (Niehuis & Bartell, 2006; Niehuis, 2007). Disillusionment is positively associated with perceptions of relationship instability among cohabitators and marrieds (Niehuis, Reifman, & Lee, 2013).

Third, this study considers relationship quality among men and women who are in the same relationship rather than comparing men and women across relationships. Given the attention to gender distinctions in motivations to cohabit (Huang et al., 2012; Sassler & Miller, 2011; Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2006) and the importance of men's preferences for the future of the relationship and their economic prospects on marriage among cohabitators (Brown, 2000; Smock & Manning, 1997) a couple perspective on relationship quality is advantageous. Our approach includes not only individual- but also couple-level controls for factors related to union type and relationship quality. Additionally, we can assess various forms of couple heterogamy that are associated with union type and union outcomes.

To minimize the possibility that any differences detected among the union type groups is an artifact of selection, the models include controls for factors associated with both union type and relationship quality. These factors include education, age, race, and marital history (all measured at the individual level) as well as household income, relationship duration, and children (all couple level measures). Marrieds tend to be more highly educated than cohabitators (Manning, Brown, & Payne, 2014) and education is positively associated with relationship quality (Skinner et al., 2002). Cohabitators are typically younger than marrieds (Manning et al., 2014) and younger individuals are less sanguine about their relationships than older adults (King & Scott, 2005). The racial gap in marriage is larger than in cohabitation (Raley, 1996) and Blacks report poorer marital quality than either Hispanics or Whites (Bulanda & Brown, 2007) but there are no racial differences in cohabitators' relationship quality (Brown, 2003). Prior marital experience is positively associated with cohabitation (Bumpass et al., 1991) and negatively related to relationship quality (Brown & Booth, 1996). Marrieds tend to enjoy higher household incomes than cohabitators (Payne, 2011) and income is positively related to relationship quality

(Hohmann-Marriott & Amato, 2008). Cohabiting unions are of shorter average duration than marriages and relationship quality declines with duration (Brown, 2003; Skinner et al., 2002). Married couples more often reside with children than do cohabitators and the presence of children is negatively associated with relationship quality (Nock, 1995; Skinner et al., 2002). Patterns of homogamy may differ among cohabiting and married couples. Cohabitators tend to partner homogamously on achieved characteristics, such as education, whereas marrieds more often exhibit homogamy on ascribed characteristics, including age and race (Schoen & Weinick, 1993). Heterogamy is negatively associated with relationship quality among both cohabitators and marrieds (Brown, Sanchez, Nock, & Wright, 2006; Hohmann-Marriott & Amato, 2008).

Method

We used the 2010 Married and Cohabiting Couples (MCC) survey, a nationally representative data set that included 1,075 different-sex couples (752 married and 323 cohabiting). The data are publicly available through the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (National Center for Family and Marriage Research, 2011). The MCC provides unique information on contemporary married and cohabiting relationships. Individual- and couple-level measures capture multiple features of relationship dynamics, including relationship quality. Designed and funded by the National Center for Family and Marriage Research (NCFMR) at Bowling Green State University, the data were collected by Knowledge Networks (KN) in 2010 using a nationally representative online panel sample.

The KN panel is a randomly recruited probability-based sample that covers both the online and offline populations in the U.S. By employing a dual sampling frame—both random-digit-dialing (RDD) and addressed-based-sampling (ABS)—KN is able to include listed and unlisted phone numbers, telephone and non-telephone households, and cell-phone-only

households. Hardware and internet access are provided to panel members when needed. The KN panel has been widely used in social science research, including federally funded data collections on couples and families (Lichter & Carmalt, 2009; Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012; Sassler, Addo, & Lichter, 2012). The data quality of the KN panel is at least equivalent to and arguably exceeds that derived from RDD surveys (Chang & Krosnick, 2009).

To obtain the MCC sample KN first assigned the survey to 1,400 married men whose wives were also active panel members, of which 1,060 men responded (76%). The survey was then assigned to their wives, and 752 also completed the survey (71%), resulting in a married sample of 1,504 individuals or 752 married couples. Cohabiting couples were obtained in the same fashion. KN assigned the MCC survey to 266 cohabiting men whose female partners were also active panel members, of which 159 (60%) men and 108 of their female partners (68%) completed the survey. Then, KN identified active panel men who reported living with a different-sex unmarried partner, securing responses from an additional 170 men as well as contact information on their partners who were not panel members. From these 170 men KN received responses from an additional 31 female partners. To ensure adequate sample size, KN also recruited an additional 184 cohabiting couples from outside of the panel. The total cohabiting sample size was 646 individuals or 323 cohabiting couples. For this project, the analytic sample was restricted to couples who had been together for no more than 10 years, yielding 133 married and 231 cohabiting couples.

Dependent Variables

Relationship happiness was an individual-level measure of the respondent's rating of the relationship with the current spouse/partner on a 10-point scale ranging from 1 = *completely unhappy* to 10 = *completely happy*. *Relationship disillusionment* was an 11-item scale designed

to tap declines in positive perceptions and corresponding increases in negative perceptions of one's spouse/partner and relationship. Scored on a 5-point Likert scale, respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed with several statements such as (a) My marriage/relationship hasn't gone quite as perfectly as I thought it might, (b) I'm beginning to see my spouse/partner in a somewhat more negative light, and (c) My marriage/relationship is no longer as important to me as it used to be. Values on the scale ranged from 1 to 5 with higher values indicating higher levels of disillusionment. The scale yielded high internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.96 and an average individual item correlation of 0.85.

Focal Independent Variable

The focal independent variable, *union type*, differentiated among four types of couples: cohabiting couples without plans to marry, cohabiting couples with plans to marry, married couples who cohabited premaritally, and directly married couples (i.e., no premarital cohabitation) (reference). Nearly all (93%) cohabitators agreed on whether they planned to marry their partners. Thus, cohabiting couples were classified as having marriage plans only when both partners reported them.

Control Variables

Education was coded into three dummy categories: high school degree or less (reference), some college, and Bachelor's degree or higher. *Age* was a continuous variable coded in years. *Race* was dummy coded (1 = *White*, 0 = *non-White*). A binary variable captured *prior marital experience* (1 = *yes*, 0 = *no*). *Household income* reflected the income bracket of the household ranging from 1 = *less than \$5,000* to 19 = *\$175,000 or more*. *Relationship duration* was the number of years the couple has been together. It ranged from 0.08 to 9.92 years. *Children* was coded into three dummy categories: no children, biological children only

(reference), and stepchildren in the household. Four indicators captured various types of relationship heterogamy. *Educational heterogamy* was coded into three dummy categories: woman higher educational attainment than man, man higher educational attainment than woman, and homogamous educational attainment (i.e., woman and man report same education level) (reference). *Employment heterogamy* was coded into three dummy variables: traditional work arrangement (man working, woman not working), uncommon work arrangement (both not working or woman working and man not), and contemporary work arrangement (both working) (reference). *Age heterogamy* was coded into three dummy categories that are consistent with prior research (Booth & Edwards, 1992; Brown, 2000; Schafer, 2013): woman older (the woman was two or more years older than the man), man older (man was five or more years older than the woman), same age (woman was less than two years older than the man and the man was less than five years older than the woman) (reference). *Race heterogamy* was a dummy variable, coded to distinguish between couples in which 1 = *man and woman did not share the same race/ethnicity* and 0 = *man and woman shared the same race/ethnicity*. A correlation table showing how the study variables are related to one another is shown in the Appendix.

Analytic Strategy

We began by estimating the means (or proportions) of all variables used in the analyses by union type, testing for significant differences across the four union types. Next, seemingly unrelated regression (SUR) was used to estimate models of women's and men's relationship happiness and relationship disillusionment. This was an appropriate statistical technique because relationship quality was measured at the individual level but unmeasured factors (e.g., omitted variables or selection factors) are correlated within couples. SUR models allowed us to explicitly account for the correlated error terms within couples. By simultaneously estimating the

interdependent regression equations for men and women and accounting for the correlated errors, SUR models provide more efficient estimates than would OLS models (Greene, 2005). This is a common strategy in couple-level analyses (Brown et al., 2006; Carlson & McLanahan, 2006; DeMaris, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2010; Kalmijn & Bernasco, 2001; Wolfinger & Wilcox, 2008). For each measure of relationship quality, we estimated two models. The first model was a bivariate model that established the baseline relationship between union type and relationship quality. The second model introduced the controls to assess how much of the union type differential was an artifact of factors known to be associated with union type and relationship quality. Wald tests were conducted to determine whether gender differences in the association between union type and relationship quality were statistically significant.

Results

Descriptive Results

Table 1 shows the means or distributions for all variables used in the analyses. Our sample contained 63% cohabiting and 37% married couples. More specifically, 13% were direct marries, 24% were marries who premaritally cohabited, 33% were cohabitators with plans to marry, and 30% were cohabitators without marriage plans. Overall, 87% of the sample had some cohabitation experience. Among married couples, roughly one-third married directly and the remaining two-thirds cohabited prior to marriage, a pattern that aligns with other research (Manning & Stykes, 2015). Among cohabiting couples, just 52% planned to marry, which represents a considerable decline from 25 years ago when the share was estimated at roughly 75% with marriage plans (Brown & Booth, 1996). This decrease is consistent with Vespa's (2014) recent trend documented for the 2002-2010 period.

[Table 1 about here]

Relationship quality varied by relationship type for both women and men. Among women, those who married directly reported the highest levels of relationship happiness, on average, followed by marrieds who premaritally cohabited and cohabitators with plans to marry (the two groups did not differ), and finally cohabitators without marriage plans. Among men, the two types of marrieds did not significantly differ from each other in terms of relationship happiness nor did they differ from cohabitators with plans to marry. Cohabiting men without marriage plans reported the lowest average levels of relationship happiness of any of the four groups. There were no significant gender differences in relationship happiness across any of the four union types. That is, within union type, women and men reported being similarly happy in their relationships.

Among women, relationship disillusionment was lowest among the two types of marrieds, regardless of premarital cohabitation experience. Marrieds were less disillusioned than cohabiting women with marriage plans, who in turn fared better than cohabiting women without marital intentions. For men, relationship disillusionment was comparable among direct marrieds and cohabitators with plans to marry. Married men who premaritally cohabited reported higher levels of disillusionment than cohabiting men with plans to marry, but lower levels than cohabiting men without marriage plans. This latter group had the lowest relationship quality. The only within union type gender difference that emerged was among cohabitators with plans to marry: men were significantly more disillusioned than their partners ($p < .01$, not shown).

The individual, couple, and heterogamy measures differed by union type in the expected directions. Women and men who married directly had the highest average levels of education whereas the other three groups were generally similar to one another. Cohabitators without marriage plans tended to be older, on average, than other cohabitators and marrieds. And,

cohabitators without plans to marry were disproportionately previously married, which was consistent with prior research suggesting that cohabitation operates as an alternative to marriage among those with prior marital experience. Household income was higher for married couples (regardless of premarital cohabitation experience) and lower for cohabiting couples (regardless of plans to marry). Similarly, relationship duration was about 2.5 years longer for married than cohabiting couples. Those who married directly were most likely to have biological children, followed by those who were married and cohabited premaritally, those cohabiting with plans to marry, and finally those cohabiting without marriage plans. Stepchildren were rare among couples who married directly, but similarly prevalent among the other three types of couples. There were negligible differences in educational and age heterogamy by union type. Couples who married directly were disproportionately in traditional employment arrangements in which only the husband was working outside of the home. Cohabitators without marriage plans were most likely to have had an uncommon work arrangement with either just the woman working or neither partner working.

Multivariate Results

Turning now to the SUR models that account for unmeasured factors that are correlated within couples, Model 1 in Table 2 displays the bivariate association between union type and relationship happiness. Model 2 in Table 2 shows the full model including all controls. The associations between union type and relationship happiness documented in the bivariate model (Model 1) persisted in the full model for both women and men (Wald test, n.s.). Among women, those who married directly enjoyed significantly higher levels of relationship happiness than either married women who cohabited premaritally or both types of cohabiting women. Notably, women who were cohabiting without marriage plans were less happy in their relationships than

their counterparts cohabiting with marriage plans. And, they were less happy than married women who premaritally cohabited. There was no difference in the relationship quality of married women who premaritally cohabited and women cohabiting with plans to marry. This pattern of findings is consistent with our expectations. Few of the controls were significantly associated with women's relationship happiness. Education had a modest ($p < 0.10$) inverted U-shaped association with happiness. Relationship duration appeared to be ($p < .10$) negatively related to women's relationship happiness. And, the absence of children was associated with greater relationship happiness. Finally, the presence of stepchildren was marginally ($p < .10$) positively related to women's relationship happiness.

[Table 2 about here]

For men, there was less variation in relationship happiness by union type. Relative to men who had married directly, both married men who premaritally cohabited and cohabiting men with plans to marry reported comparable levels of relationship happiness, which did not align with our expectations. Our other two hypotheses were supported. Cohabiting men with no marriage plans were less happy, on average, than men in all other union types. And, married men who premaritally cohabited and cohabiting men with plans to marry were similarly happy in their unions. None of the control variables were significantly associated with relationship happiness among men.

Relationship disillusionment varied by union type in unique ways for women and men (Wald test, $p < .001$). The bivariate results (Model 1) actually became more pronounced in the full model (Model 2) and new differences emerged. Relationship disillusionment was lowest among directly married women, followed by married women who premaritally cohabited, then cohabiting women with marriage plans, and finally cohabiting women without plans to marry,

net of the control factors as shown in Model 2. This pattern of findings largely aligned with our expectations although was not consistent with the hypothesis that marrieds who premaritally cohabited and cohabitators with plans to marry would report comparable levels of relationship disillusionment. This hypothesis was supported in the initial model, but not the full model. Again, few covariates were significantly associated with disillusionment. The absence of children and the presence of stepchildren in the household were both negatively related to women's disillusionment.

Among men, as shown in Model 2 those who married directly were less disillusioned, on average, than those who married following premarital cohabitation. Direct marrieds were also less disillusioned than cohabiting men without plans to marry, however, directly married men were only marginally ($p < .10$) less disillusioned than cohabiting men with marriage plans, which was surprising. Cohabiting men with plans to marry also reported similar levels of disillusionment as married men who cohabited premaritally. Here again, cohabiting men with no plans to marry reported lower relationship quality than men in all other three union types. The inclusion of the control variables did not reduce the magnitudes of the union type coefficients from the bivariate Model 1. Having no children in the household was negatively associated with men's relationship disillusionment. Men with an uncommon work arrangement were marginally ($p < .10$) more disillusioned, on average, than their counterparts in which both partners (spouses) were employed.

Discussion

As cohabitation has become more widespread in the U.S, its role in the family life course appears to be shifting. Fewer cohabitators plan to marry their partners. Cohabitation is now less likely to culminate in marriage, it increasingly serves as a context for childbearing, and it is no

longer a risk factor for divorce among recent marriage cohorts. Our study took advantage of a recent, national sample of cohabiting and married couples to examine whether the union type differentials in relationship quality that were documented a few decades ago persist or have diminished.

Drawing on diffusion theory and conceptual work on the deinstitutionalization of marriage (Cherlin, 2009; Leifbroer & Dourleijn, 2006), we proposed three hypotheses about the linkages between union type and relationship quality all of which were largely supported by our data. First, we posited that couples who married directly would report higher relationship quality than married couples who premaritally cohabited, cohabiting couples with plans to marry, and cohabiting couples without marriage plans. Those who married directly enjoyed the lowest levels of relationship disillusionment and, among women, the highest levels of relationship happiness. For men, direct marriage was not associated with a happiness advantage. Direct married men were only marginally happier than married men who premaritally cohabited and no happier than cohabiting men with plans to marry. In short, there is mixed evidence on the benefits of direct marriage for men. Nevertheless, for women, direct marriage is clearly linked to higher relationship quality. This relationship quality advantage associated with direct marriage is consistent with other recent research that showed premarital cohabitation is associated with lower marital quality among women (James & Beattie, 2012; Tach & Halpern-Meekin, 2009). It is contrary to much of the early literature that indicated few differences in the quality of marriage by premarital cohabitation experience (Nock, 1995; Skinner et al., 2002). Thus, the diffusion of premarital cohabitation in recent decades has coincided with greater distinctiveness among the shrinking share of couples who marry directly without cohabiting premaritally.

The second hypothesis was that the relationship quality of marrieds who premaritally cohabited would not significantly differ from that of cohabitators with plans to marry. This hypothesis was entirely supported for men and partially supported for women. Although the two groups of women were comparable in terms of relationship happiness, cohabiting women with plans to marry were more disillusioned by their relationships, on average, compared with married women who cohabited premaritally. Perhaps some of the cohabiting women with plans to marry are disillusioned because they have not yet transitioned to marriage. Cohabiting women may experience declines in relationship disillusionment once they realize their marriage plans. The comparable quality of marriages preceded by cohabitation and cohabiting unions in which the couple plans to marry underscore broader shifts in cohabitation and marriage in contemporary America. At the same time marriage is less institutionalized and more flexible, cohabitation with plans to marry is now more selective, weakening the boundaries between the two groups.

Finally, we anticipated that cohabitators without marriage plans would report lower relationship quality than all three other groups. This hypothesis was fully supported for women and men alike. The lowest levels of relationship happiness and the highest levels of relationship disillusionment were reported by cohabitators without marriage plans, supporting earlier research by Brown and Booth (1996). The persistence of relatively low relationship quality among cohabitators without marriage plans may mask variation within this potentially diverse group. It is likely that a modest share of cohabitators without marriage plans are nevertheless committed but ideologically opposed to marriage. However, most cohabitators in this group are probably not desirous of a long-term relationship; cohabiting unions continue to be very short-lived in the U.S.

context, averaging just a couple of years in length before ending either through separation or, less often, marriage.

The results from this study demonstrate the utility of differentiating among the four union types, providing new evidence of a bifurcation of relationship quality among cohabitators and marrieds. On the one hand, those who married directly (especially women) enjoy particularly high relationship quality. On the other hand, cohabitators without marriage plans are in unions characterized by relatively low relationship quality. Most couples though fall in the middle: marrieds who premaritally cohabited and cohabitators with plans to marry. These two groups not only comprise the majority of co-resident couples, they also are largely indistinguishable in terms of their relationship quality. As plans to marry become less common among cohabitators (Vespa, 2014) and increasing shares of married couples premaritally cohabit (Manning & Stykes, 2015), the two groups are blurring together in terms of relationship quality which aligns with diffusion theory.

Building on early studies that compared the relationship quality of cohabitators and marrieds in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Brown & Booth, 1996; Nock, 1995; Skinner et al., 2002; Thomson & Colella, 1992) as well as more recent work that focused on the role of premarital cohabitation in shaping women's marital quality (ignoring men and cohabiting couples) (James & Beattie, 2012; Tach & Halpern-Meehin, 2009), our study uncovers new patterns of variation by union type that reflect the ongoing diffusion process of cohabitation. Direct marriage is an increasingly selective experience and for this reason it is not surprising that this group is now distinguished by relatively high relationship quality. The boundaries have blurred between marrieds who premaritally cohabited and cohabitators with plans to marry. But cohabitators without marriage plans remain uniquely disadvantaged. This nuanced pattern of

findings provides new insights on contemporary co-residential unions and attests to the importance of differentiating by premarital cohabitation experience among marrieds and plans to marry among cohabitators.

A notable advantage of this study was that we were able to draw on couple reports of relationship quality, meaning that we assessed gender distinctions for men and women in the same relationship. There was very little evidence of “his” and “her” unions in that relationship quality did not differ for any of the four union types with one exception. Among cohabiting couples with plans to marry, men reported greater relationship disillusionment than women. There was no happiness gender gap for any couple type. Today’s couples tend to appraise their relationships quite similarly, reinforcing our analytic approach using seemingly unrelated regression models.

Although this study extends prior research on relationship quality in co-residential unions, it also has a few shortcomings. For example, the MCC survey is composed of a sample of couples, which is ideal for examining relationship quality and dynamics. Nonetheless, a couple-based sample introduces some selection concerns as participation by both members of the couple may have biased the results toward couples with stronger relationships and greater relationship quality. Also, this study was cross-sectional so we cannot speak directly to how movement into marriage might influence relationship quality. We also were not able to directly address differential selection into cohabitation versus marriage. Certainly, those who are cohabiting may be doing so precisely because their relationship is of poorer quality and not marriage material. There are other ways to classify couples according to union type and plans for marriage. For example, another approach would be to differentiate between married couples who cohabited with marriage plans and those who cohabited without marriage plans. Prior work

shows that married women who cohabited with initial plans to marry had greater stability than those who cohabited without plans to marry (Manning & Cohen, 2012; Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2006). Our project illustrated the utility of considering both positive and negative indicators of relationship quality but a study that included additional measures of relationship quality might have suggested a somewhat different pattern of findings. Finally, a larger sample would have permitted the exploration of subgroup differentials in relationship quality by race and ethnicity as well as social class. Prior work documents variation in the meaning of cohabitation for racial, ethnic, and social class groups (Manning, 2004; Manning & Smock, 1995; Miller & Sassler, 2012).

Our study adds to a growing literature indicating that the role of cohabitation in the family life course is changing. Today's cohabitators with marriage plans and marrieds who premaritally cohabited report similar relationship quality, illustrating the blurring boundaries between cohabitation and marriage in the contemporary context. At the same time, the remaining two groups are bifurcated with cohabitators who have no plans to marry suffering from comparatively low relationship quality whereas the increasingly selective group who directly married without premarital cohabitation enjoy rather high relationship quality. This variation attests to the importance of distinguishing among cohabitators by marital intentions and marrieds by premarital cohabitation experience in future research on co-residential relationship dynamics.

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Table 1. Descriptive statistics (means (M), percentages and SE)

	Direct married (n = 45)				Married w/cohabitation (n = 88)				Cohabitation w/ plans to marry (n = 121)				Cohabitation, no plans (n = 110)			
	Women		Men		Women		Men		Women		Men		Women		Men	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
<i>Dependent variables</i>																
Relationship Happiness (M)	9.09 ^{abc}	0.22	9.00 ^c	0.16	8.45 ^{*c}	0.19	8.61 ^c	0.18	8.55 ^{*c}	0.14	8.83 ^c	0.11	7.41 ^{***ab}	0.21	7.75 ^{***ab}	0.17
Relationship Disillusionment (M)	1.57 ^{bc}	0.10	1.55 ^{ac}	0.10	1.76 ^{bc}	0.09	1.85 ^{*c}	0.09	1.96 ^{**ac}	0.08	1.68 ^c	0.06	2.37 ^{***ab}	0.10	2.28 ^{***ab}	0.09
<i>Individual-level factors</i>																
Education																
High school degree or less	15.6%	0.05	15.6% ^{abc}	0.05	19.3%	0.04	30.7% [*]	0.05	15.7%	0.03	35.5% ^{**}	0.04	23.6%	0.04	31.8% [*]	0.04
Some college	24.4% ^{abc}	0.06	28.9% ^{abc}	0.07	46.6% ^{**}	0.05	34.1%	0.05	52.9% ^{***}	0.05	39.7%	0.04	51.9% ^{***}	0.05	40.9%	0.05
Bachelor's degree or higher	60.0% ^{abc}	0.07	55.6% ^{abc}	0.07	34.1% ^{**}	0.05	35.2% [*]	0.05	31.4% ^{***}	0.04	24.8% ^{***}	0.04	24.4% ^{***}	0.04	27.3% ^{**}	0.04
Age (M)	30.51 ^c	1.22	32.96 ^c	1.28	32.82 ^{bc}	0.93	34.01 ^c	0.89	29.31 ^{ac}	0.83	32.13 ^c	0.95	35.86 ^{**ab}	1.15	38.42 ^{**ab}	1.16
White	75.6%	0.06	80.0% ^b	0.06	79.6% ^b	0.04	84.1% ^{bc}	0.04	66.9% ^a	0.04	62.0% ^{*a}	0.04	75.5%	0.04	69.1% ^a	0.04
Previously married	11.1% ^{abc}	0.05	20.0% ^c	0.06	23.9% ^{†c}	0.05	33.0% ^c	0.05	24.0% ^{*c}	0.04	25.6% ^c	0.04	36.4% ^{***ab}	0.05	45.5% ^{***ab}	0.05
<i>Couple-level factors</i>																
Household Income (M)	12.73 ^{bc}	0.51			11.98 ^{bc}	0.44			10.80 ^{**a}	0.37			10.53 ^{**a}	0.44		
Relationship duration (M)	6.54 ^{bc}	0.31			6.62 ^{bc}	0.23			4.00 ^{****a}	0.22			4.08 ^{****a}	0.27		
Children																
No children	31.1% ^{bc}	0.07			44.3% ^{bc}	0.05			62.0% ^{***ac}	0.04			77.3% ^{***ab}	0.04		
Biological child(ren) only	64.4% ^{abc}	0.07			37.5% ^{**bc}	0.05			19.0% ^{***ac}	0.04			7.3% ^{***ab}	0.02		
Stepchild(ren)	4.4% ^{abc}	0.03			18.2% ^{**}	0.04			19.0% ^{**}	0.04			15.5% [*]	0.03		
<i>Heterogamy factors</i>																
Education																
Same educational attainment	57.8%	0.07			50.0%	0.05			52.1%	0.05			47.3%	0.05		
Man more education	22.2% ^b	0.06			18.2%	0.04			10.7% ^{†c}	0.03			22.7% ^b	0.04		
Woman more education	20.0% ^b	0.06			31.8%	0.05			37.2% [*]	0.04			30.0%	0.04		
Employment																
Both working	48.9%	0.08			58.0%	0.05			48.8%	0.05			52.7%	0.05		
Man works, woman does not	40.0% ^{abc}	0.07			25.0% ^{†c}	0.05			25.6% ^{†c}	0.04			14.6% ^{**ab}	0.03		
Uncommon work arrangement	11.1% ^{bc}	0.05			17.1% ^c	0.04			25.6% [*]	0.04			32.7% ^{****a}	0.04		
Age																
Same age	68.9%	0.07			59.1%	0.05			63.6%	0.04			57.3%	0.05		
Man older	22.2%	0.06			21.6%	0.04			25.6%	0.04			26.4%	0.04		
Woman older	8.9% ^a	0.04			19.3% ^{†b}	0.04			10.7% ^a	0.03			16.4%	0.04		
Different race/ethnicity	20.0%	0.06			19.3%	0.04			24.0%	0.04			23.6%	0.04		

Significantly different from those who married directly, † p <0.1, * p <0.05, ** p <0.01, *** p <0.001

Superscripts identify significant differences (p < .05) by relationship status: a = married with premarital cohabitation, b = cohabitation with plans to marry, c = cohabitation no plans to marry.

Variable	Relationship Happiness				Relationship Disillusionment			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Relationship Status								
Married w/ cohabitation	-0.69 *	-0.39	-0.77 *	-0.48 †	0.19	0.30 *	0.27 † ^b	0.37 *
Cohabitation with plans to marry	-0.54 †	-0.17	-1.04 **	-0.46	0.39 **	0.13	0.65 *** ^a	0.27 †
Cohabitation no plans to marry	-1.68 *** ^{ab}	-1.25 *** ^{ab}	-2.07 *** ^{ab}	-1.56 *** ^{ab}	0.80 *** ^{ab}	0.73 *** ^{ab}	1.09 *** ^{ab}	0.90 *** ^{ab}
Direct married (reference)								
Individual-level factors								
Education (H.S. or less, ref.)								
Some college			0.44 †	-0.17			-0.16	0.10
College			0.44	-0.08			-0.11	-0.04
Age			-0.01	0.00			0.01	0.00
White			-0.26	-0.15			0.01	0.00
Previously married			-0.04	-0.09			-0.05	0.04
Couple-level factors								
Household income			0.01	-0.02			0.00	0.02
Relationship duration (centered)			-0.08 †	-0.03			0.03	0.01
Children (biological children only, ref.)								
No children			0.68 **	0.48			-0.46 ***	-0.24 *
Stepchildren			0.55 †	0.40			-0.36 *	-0.17
Heterogamy factors								
Education (same education, ref.)								
Man more education			-0.40	0.20			-0.04	-0.11
Woman more education			-0.23	0.13			0.13	-0.08
Employment (both working, ref.)								
Man works, woman does not			-0.28	0.01			0.15	0.06
Uncommon work arrangement			-0.31	-0.28			0.15	0.2 †
Age (same age, ref.)								
Man older			-0.19	-0.11			0.02	-0.07
Woman older			-0.23	-0.09			0.11	-0.17
Different race/ethnicity			0.20	-0.01			-0.09	-0.09
Constant	9.09 ***	9.00 ***	9.40 ***	9.31 ***	1.57 ***	1.55 ***	1.55 ***	1.41 ***
R^2	0.09	0.10	0.18	0.12	0.09	0.11	0.16	0.14
χ^2	36.80 ***	38.42 ***	80.17 ***	51.38 ***	34.91 ***	42.73 ***	69.41 ***	60.69 ***

†p < .10, *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

