

# 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 conducted couple-level analyses to compare 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. 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). Increasingly, cohabitors are not only partners but also parents together. One in five births are to cohabiting parents and nearly half of children will spend some time in a cohabiting family (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2011). Cohabitation now appears 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).

These shifts portend change in the relationship dynamics of cohabiting couples. Prior work using nationally representative samples has shown that cohabitors tend to report poorer relationship quality than do married individuals (e.g., Brown & Booth, 1996; Nock, 1995; Skinner, Bahr, Crane, & Call, 2002), but these results came from data that are 25 years old (the 1987-88 National Survey of Families and Households). Cohabitation is now widely diffused among the U.S. population and is viewed as a normative event in the life course (Bogle & Wu, 2010; Manning, 2013). 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 (Leifbroer & Dourleijn, 2006). Consequently, the union type differences in relationship quality that were documented a couple of decades ago may have diminished as cohabitation has become more widespread, much as the marriage advantage in well-being seems to have dwindled (Musick &

Bumpass, 2012) and the negative influence of premarital cohabitation on marital stability has waned (Jose et al., 2010; Manning & Cohen, 2012; Reinhold, 2010).

Using newly available data from the nationally representative 2010 Married and Cohabiting Couples (MCC) survey, we conducted couple-level analyses to compare 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 findings from this study inform broader discussions about the contested terrain of U.S. families by elucidating the changing roles 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 (Lofquist, Lugaila, O'Connell, & Feliz, 2012). This growth is evident across racial and ethnic, education, and age groups. Cohabitation is arguably less selective today than in the past as it has spread widely across the population (Leifbroer & Dourleijn, 2006).

Although cohabitation has become more common, it 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).

Consistent with the notion that cohabitation is less institutionalized than is marriage, prior research has shown that cohabitators tend to have poorer relationship quality than their married

counterparts. Specifically, 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). This union type differential may reflect a direct causal mechanism, referred to in the literature as the cohabitation experience effect (Axinn & Thornton, 1992; Dush, Cohan, & Amato, 2003). Alternatively, it may in part reflect a selection effect since cohabitators with plans to marry their partners do not appreciably differ from married individuals in terms of their relationship quality (Brown & Booth, 1996; Kline et al., 2004). Still, it is unclear whether the formalization of a cohabiting union through marriage is associated with a significant improvement in relationship quality (Brown, 2004; Stafford et al., 2004). Recent work suggests few benefits for cohabitators transitioning to marriage across multiple indicators of psychological well-being (Musick & Bumpass, 2012).

There is mixed evidence concerning the relationship between premarital cohabitation and subsequent marital quality. Some research has shown 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). This finding suggests some institutional benefits associated with marriage or alternatively that the most stable, well-adjusted cohabitators get and stay married (i.e., a selection effect). But other research has found that premarital cohabitation is associated with lower marital quality and stability, in part because those who cohabited premaritally tended to be poorer marriage material (i.e., a selection effect) (Booth & Johnson, 1988; DeMaris & Leslie, 1984;

James & Beattie, 2012; Stanley et al., 2004; Tach & Halpern-Meehin, 2009; Thomson & Colella, 1992; Woods & Emery, 2002).

The negative association between premarital cohabitation and marital outcomes (including quality and stability) has been studied extensively over the past few decades, with the majority of the research reflecting the experiences of cohabitators in the late 1980s and early 1990s (i.e., the first two waves of the National Survey of Families and Households). There have been a few more recent studies, but here again the results are inconsistent. Both James and Beattie (2012) and Tach and Halpern-Meehin (2009) relied on the NLSY-79 to examine the role of premarital cohabitation in marital quality. Their studies were restricted to women and neither compared cohabitators with marrieds (rather, just married women who cohabited premaritally versus married directly). They found that those who married directly enjoyed higher marital quality, on average, than those who cohabited with their spouse prior to marriage. Similarly, Stanley et al. (2010) used a multistate sample from the 1990s to determine that premarital cohabitation without marriage plans was associated with poorer marital quality. Yet, a meta-analysis indicated that premarital cohabitation with the spouse prior to marriage did not seem to undermine marital quality or stability (Jose et al., 2010).

This mixed pattern of findings is consistent with the deinstitutionalization of marriage (Cherlin, 2009, 2004). Coinciding with the emergence of what Giddens (1992) termed “the pure relationship,” today’s era of individualized marriages is marked by an emphasis on self-fulfillment, more flexible roles for husbands and wives, and greater spousal communication. In short, marital expectations and roles are less prescribed. Although Cherlin (1978) and Nock (1995) suggested that new family forms such as remarriage and cohabitation, respectively, would be more institutionalized as they became more widespread, these predictions have not been

realized. Instead, marriage and cohabitation alike are more fluid and variable (Cherlin, 2009). Consequently, it is important to consider variation among both cohabitators and marrieds. 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. Not only is cohabitation now more common but it is also more broadly accepted. The vast majority of young adults experiences cohabitation and most cohabit with their spouse prior to marriage. However, fewer of today's young cohabitators report plans to marry their partners than a decade ago (Vespa, 2014), suggesting the role of marriage plans in cohabitators' relationship quality might have changed, too.

We also shed new light on the inconsistent findings concerning whether those who marry directly enjoy better marital quality than those who cohabit with their spouse prior to marriage. And, we assess whether the findings from early studies showing that cohabitators with marriage plans enjoy relationship quality comparable to marrieds whereas cohabitators with no plans have poorer quality still characterizes today's larger, more diverse (and thus less selective) population of cohabitators.

The diffusion of cohabitation coupled with the deinstitutionalization of marriage foregrounds the importance of revisiting initial comparisons of the two types of unions that were conducted when cohabitation was a more selective, unusual experience (Jose et al., 2010). Indeed, several recent studies illustrate that the linkages among cohabitation, marriage, and well-being may be changing. For instance, a new study shows cohabitation and marriage have comparable effects on individual well-being, health, and social ties, suggesting that the marriage advantage has weakened (Musick & Bumpass, 2012). Moreover, the well-established positive relationship between premarital cohabitation and subsequent divorce is not evident among recent

marital cohorts. Manning and Cohen (2012) found that among those married since 1996, there was no significant effect of premarital cohabitation on the risk of divorce. The positive association persisted for earlier marital cohorts. This pattern of findings is consistent with diffusion theory, which posits that the effect of premarital cohabitation on marital instability is U-shaped, falling as cohabitation becomes more widespread and rising only when cohabitation becomes nearly universal and thus those who do not cohabit are highly selective (Leifbroer & Dourleijn, 2006). Not only was this theory supported by recent data for the U.S., but also for European countries (Leifbroer & Dourleijn, 2006) and Australia (Hewitt & DeVaus, 2009).

### **The Present Study**

In the present study, we build on this framework by examining whether cohabiting and married couples enjoy comparable levels of relationship quality. Our approach considers diversity among both marrieds and cohabitators, distinguishing among those who married directly, those who cohabited prior to marriage, cohabitators with plans to marry, and 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, 2013). With the growing popularity of premarital cohabitation and the increasing selectivity of having plans to marry among cohabitators, 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). We anticipate that cohabitators without plans to marry characterize their



relationship quality as poorer, on average, than cohabitators with marriage plans and both of the two types of married couples.

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). Rather, 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 relationship disillusionment, a well-validated indicator of relationship instability (Niehuis & Bartell, 2006; Niehuis, 2007).

Third, this study considers both members of the couple's views in assessments of relationship quality. 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. We move beyond prior work by examining reports of relationship quality from men and women who are in the same relationship.

Finally, a key advantage of relying on couple data is that we can include 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. Individual level factors include education, age, race, and marital history. Education is positively associated with relationship quality (Skinner et al., 2002), younger individuals are less sanguine about their relationships than older adults (King & Scott, 2005), 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), and prior marital experience is negatively related to relationship quality (Brown & Booth, 1996).

Couple level factors are household income, relationship duration, and the presence of biological, step, or no children. Income is positively related to relationship quality (Hohmann-Marriott & Amato, 2008), relationship quality declines with duration (Brown, 2003; Skinner et al., 2002), 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. Early research indicated that cohabitators and marrieds used different criteria to select partners. Cohabitators tended to partner homogamously on achieved characteristics, such as education, whereas marrieds more often exhibited homogamy on ascribed characteristics, including age, race, and religion (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 data from 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 data capture multiple features of relationship dynamics, including relationship quality and stability, role strain, and work-family conflict. The data set also includes demographic characteristics. 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 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**

**Individual characteristics.** *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*).

**Couple/Household characteristics.** *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. *Children* was coded into three dummy categories: no children, biological children only (reference), and stepchildren.

**Couple heterogamy.** 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: 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*.

### **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 individual- and couple-level 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.

## **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 marrieds, 24% were marrieds 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, 2013). 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 were happiest, 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 were 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 poorest 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. Cohabitors 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 predicting relationship quality, Model 1 in Table 2 displays the bivariate association between union type and relationship happiness. 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.

[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 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.

The associations between union type and relationship happiness persisted in the full model with the inclusion of individual- and couple-level factors as well as the indicators of heterogamy. Among women, those who directly married enjoyed a distinct advantage in terms of

relationship happiness, followed by married women who premaritally cohabited and cohabiting women with plans to marry (who did not differ), and lastly cohabiting women with no marriage plans. Among men, cohabitators without marriage plans stood out as least happy, on average. Few factors were significantly associated with relationship happiness (none among men). Education had a modest ( $p < 0.10$ ) inverted U-shaped association with happiness for women but there was no discernable pattern among men. 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 among women. Additionally, the presence of stepchildren was marginally ( $p < .10$ ) positively related to women's relationship happiness, although living with stepchildren is a rare scenario for women so this result should be interpreted with caution.

Relationship disillusionment also varied by union type in unique ways for both women and men. Our expectations were largely supported. Among women, relationship disillusionment was higher, on average, among cohabitators with and without marriage plans relative to those who married directly. Cohabiting women without marriage plans were more disillusioned about their relationships than women in all other three union types. And married women who premaritally cohabited and cohabiting women with plans to marry reported comparable levels of relationship disillusionment. The one finding that was contrary to our expectations was that married women who premaritally cohabited did not differ from women who married directly in their disillusionment.

Among men, 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 did not significantly differ from 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 poorer relationship quality than men in all other three union types.

The bivariate results actually became stronger in the full model 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. For men, the direct married were least disillusioned, followed by cohabiting men with marriage plans ( $p < .10$ ), married men who premaritally cohabited, and lastly cohabiting men without plans to marry. The inclusion of the control variables did not reduce the magnitudes of the union type coefficients. Again, few covariates were significantly associated with disillusionment. The absence of children and the presence of stepchildren were both negatively related to women's disillusionment. Having no children in the household was also 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, increasingly serves as a context for childbearing, and 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 relationship quality of today's cohabiting and married couples also follows new patterns or if the differentials documented roughly 25 years ago persist.

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. Net of controls for individual, couple, and heterogamy measures, women and men 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 greater happiness than cohabitation with plans to marry; the two groups reported comparable relationship happiness. Married men who premaritally cohabited were marginally less happy ( $p < .10$ ) than direct married men. Thus, there is mixed evidence on the benefits of direct marriage for men. Nevertheless, for women, direct marriage is clearly linked to higher relationship quality. The relationship quality advantage associated with direct marriage is consistent with other recent research that showed premarital cohabitation is associated with poor marital quality (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)

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 did not differ 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. A question for future research is whether cohabiting women experience declines in the relationship disillusionment once they realize their marriage plans.

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 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 especially 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, 2013), the two groups are blurring together in terms of relationship quality.

Building on early studies that compared the relationship quality of cohabitators and marrieds in the late 1980s and early 1990s that used data from the National Survey of Families and Households (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 marital quality (ignoring cohabiting couples) (James & Beattie, 2012; Tach & Halpern-Meehin, 2009), our study uncovers new patterns of variation by union type. Cohabitation is now widely

diffused across the population. 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 were also 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. 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 indicates potential differences 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 the poorest relationship quality whereas the increasingly selective group who directly married without premarital cohabitation enjoy the highest 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 <sup>abc</sup>	0.22	9.00 <sup>c</sup>	0.16	8.45 <sup>*c</sup>	0.19	8.61 <sup>c</sup>	0.18	8.55 <sup>*c</sup>	0.14	8.83 <sup>c</sup>	0.11	7.41 <sup>***ab</sup>	0.21	7.75 <sup>***ab</sup>	0.17
Relationship Disillusionment (M)	1.57 <sup>bc</sup>	0.10	1.55 <sup>ac</sup>	0.10	1.76 <sup>bc</sup>	0.09	1.85 <sup>*c</sup>	0.09	1.96 <sup>**ac</sup>	0.08	1.68 <sup>c</sup>	0.06	2.37 <sup>***ab</sup>	0.10	2.28 <sup>***ab</sup>	0.09
<i>Individual-level factors</i>																
Education																
High school degree or less	15.6%	0.05	15.6% <sup>abc</sup>	0.05	19.3%	0.04	30.7% <sup>*</sup>	0.05	15.7%	0.03	35.5% <sup>**</sup>	0.04	23.6%	0.04	31.8% <sup>*</sup>	0.04
Some college	24.4% <sup>abc</sup>	0.06	28.9% <sup>abc</sup>	0.07	46.6% <sup>**</sup>	0.05	34.1%	0.05	52.9% <sup>***</sup>	0.05	39.7% <sup>***</sup>	0.04	51.9% <sup>***</sup>	0.05	40.9%	0.05
Bachelor's degree or higher	60.0% <sup>abc</sup>	0.07	55.6% <sup>abc</sup>	0.07	34.1% <sup>**</sup>	0.05	35.2% <sup>*</sup>	0.05	31.4% <sup>***</sup>	0.04	24.8% <sup>***</sup>	0.04	24.4% <sup>***</sup>	0.04	27.3% <sup>**</sup>	0.04
Age (M)	30.51 <sup>c</sup>	1.22	32.96 <sup>c</sup>	1.28	32.82 <sup>bc</sup>	0.93	34.01 <sup>c</sup>	0.89	29.31 <sup>ac</sup>	0.83	32.13 <sup>c</sup>	0.95	35.86 <sup>***ab</sup>	1.15	38.42 <sup>***ab</sup>	1.16
White	75.6%	0.06	80.0% <sup>b</sup>	0.06	79.6% <sup>b</sup>	0.04	84.1% <sup>bc</sup>	0.04	66.9% <sup>a</sup>	0.04	62.0% <sup>*a</sup>	0.04	75.5%	0.04	69.1% <sup>a</sup>	0.04
Previously married	11.1% <sup>abc</sup>	0.05	20.0% <sup>c</sup>	0.06	23.9% <sup>†c</sup>	0.05	33.0% <sup>c</sup>	0.05	24.0% <sup>*c</sup>	0.04	25.6% <sup>c</sup>	0.04	36.4% <sup>***ab</sup>	0.05	45.5% <sup>***ab</sup>	0.05
<i>Couple-level factors</i>																
Household Income (M)	12.73 <sup>bc</sup>	0.51			11.98 <sup>bc</sup>	0.44			10.80 <sup>**a</sup>	0.37			10.53 <sup>**a</sup>	0.44		
Relationship duration (M)	6.54 <sup>bc</sup>	0.31			6.62 <sup>bc</sup>	0.23			4.00 <sup>***a</sup>	0.22			4.08 <sup>***a</sup>	0.27		
Children																
No children	31.1% <sup>bc</sup>	0.07			44.3% <sup>bc</sup>	0.05			62.0% <sup>***ac</sup>	0.04			77.3% <sup>***ab</sup>	0.04		
Biological child(ren) only	64.4% <sup>abc</sup>	0.07			37.5% <sup>**bc</sup>	0.05			19.0% <sup>***ac</sup>	0.04			7.3% <sup>***ab</sup>	0.02		
Stepchild(ren)	4.4% <sup>abc</sup>	0.03			18.2% <sup>**</sup>	0.04			19.0% <sup>**</sup>	0.04			15.5% <sup>*</sup>	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% <sup>b</sup>	0.06			18.2%	0.04			10.7% <sup>†c</sup>	0.03			22.7% <sup>b</sup>	0.04		
Woman more education	20.0% <sup>b</sup>	0.06			31.8%	0.05			37.2% <sup>*</sup>	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% <sup>abc</sup>	0.07			25.0% <sup>†c</sup>	0.05			25.6% <sup>†c</sup>	0.04			14.6% <sup>***ab</sup>	0.03		
Uncommon work arrangement	11.1% <sup>bc</sup>	0.05			17.1% <sup>c</sup>	0.04			25.6% <sup>*</sup>	0.04			32.7% <sup>***a</sup>	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% <sup>a</sup>	0.04			19.3% <sup>†b</sup>	0.04			10.7% <sup>a</sup>	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 † <sup>b</sup>	0.37 *
Cohabitation with plans to marry	-0.54 †	-0.17	-1.04 **	-0.46	0.39 **	0.13	0.65 *** <sup>a</sup>	0.27 †
Cohabitation no plans to marry	-1.68 *** <sup>ab</sup>	-1.25 *** <sup>ab</sup>	-2.07 *** <sup>ab</sup>	-1.56 *** <sup>ab</sup>	0.80 *** <sup>ab</sup>	0.73 *** <sup>ab</sup>	1.09 *** <sup>ab</sup>	0.90 *** <sup>ab</sup>
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
$\chi^2$	36.80 ***	38.42 ***	80.17 ***	51.38 ***	34.91 ***	42.73 ***	69.41 ***	60.69 ***
†p < .10, *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001								