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Bowling Green State University

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The Role of Social Context

Wendy D. Manning
Department of Sociology and CFDR
Bowling Green State University

Jessica A. Cohen
Department of Sociology and CFDR
Bowling Green State University

Pamela J. Smock
Department of Sociology and Population Studies Center
The University of Michigan

Gayra Ostgaard
Department of Sociology and CFDR
Bowling Green State University

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Wendy D. Manning
Jessica A. Cohen
Pamela J. Smock*
Gayra Ostgaard

Department of Sociology and
Center for Family and Demographic Research
Bowling Green State University
Bowling Green, OH 43403
419-372-2850
wmannin@bgsu.edu

*Department of Sociology and Population Studies Center
The University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, MI 48106

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ABSTRACT

Young adults are increasingly cohabiting, but few studies have considered how their social context influences views of cohabitation. Drawing on 40 semi-structured interviews with dating respondents and their partners (20 couples), we explore the self-reported effects of partners, peers, and parents on evaluations of cohabitation. Peers are a key source of social influence, with respondents and their partners using the *vicarious trials* of their peer networks to judge how cohabitation would affect their own relationship. Family influence occurs through a variety of mechanisms, including parental advice, social modeling, religious values, or economic control. Our couple-based approach showcases how beliefs about cohabitation are formed within an intimate dyad and the importance of incorporating social context in studies of union formation.

Dating Couples' Views about Cohabitation: The Role of Social Context

The age at marriage in the United States is at a historic highpoint, 27.6 years for men and 25.9 years for women (U.S. Census Bureau 2009). As a result, young adults have more time to experience a range of premarital relationships. Indeed, the courtship process now includes cohabitation as the modal pathway to marriage, a process that often begins with dating, transitions into cohabitation, and culminates with marriage. Three-fifths (62.5%) of women, entering their first marriage between 1997 and 2001, cohabited prior to marriage (Kennedy and Bumpass 2008). The majority of young adults have cohabited. In 2002, 60% of men and women reported having cohabited (Chandra, Martinez, Mosher, Abma, and Jones 2005). Furthermore, most young adults have had some type of sexual relationship (Chandra et al. 2005). As a result, the premarital courtship process has become more complex and includes a broad range of options available to young couples (Cohen and Manning 2009, Lichter and Qian 2008).

The rapid increase in cohabitation continues to occur without adequate scholarly attention to the sources of influence that support such growing levels. Certainly, views of cohabitation do not emerge from a social vacuum. Indeed, both theoretical and empirical work suggests that social context determines the acceptability of cohabitation and subsequent cohabitation decisions. We expect young adults' views to be especially influenced by social context (e.g., partners, family, and peers), throughout emerging adulthood (Arnett 2000). While prior research has documented several "structural" (e.g., marriage markets, employment prospects, neighborhood disadvantage) and individual factors affecting young adults' decisions to cohabit and/or to marry (Teachman and Polonko 1990, Lichter et al. 1992, Thornton et al. 1995, Manning 1993, Xie et al. 2003, South and Lloyd 1992), there has been little attention to how social context may shape couples' cohabitation attitudes. Evidence from other countries

indicates that peer influence contributes to the growth in cohabitation (Rindfuss, Choe, Bumpass, and Tsuya 2004). However, no recent research in the United States has considered the influence of peers − or families or partners, for that matter − on dating young adults' self-reported attitudes and beliefs (and explanations of those beliefs) regarding cohabitation. Additionally, prior research on union formation and transitions often fails to examine the attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors of both members of a couple. Certainly, relationship decisions require the involvement of both members. Thus, we adopt a couple-perspective when examining young dating couples' attitudes toward cohabitation.

Informed by both social learning theory and Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective, we draw on data from in-depth interviews with dating couples to examine how they perceive the influence of social context on their views of cohabitation. We focus on dating couples because they are closest to making decisions about cohabitation, and their thoughts and perceptions are thus critical to our understanding of the courtship process. Scholars have mostly examined single (Bumpass, Sweet, Cherlin 1991), cohabiting, or married individuals (Smock, Huang, Manning, and Bergstrom 2006, Sassler 2004). We examine how attitudes toward cohabitation stem from adults' dating partners, as well as their family and peer networks.

BACKGROUND

Increasing acceptance of cohabitation is evidenced by the behavior of young adults and the more general rise of cohabitation in the U.S. (Kennedy and Bumpass 2008, Seltzer 2004, Bumpass and Lu 2000). Clues about future trends in cohabitation can be gleaned from attitudinal survey responses from teenagers, indicating that they are entering young adulthood with relatively positive views of cohabitation. The majority of high school seniors agrees that it is a good idea for a couple to live together before marriage − almost two-thirds of males and

slightly more than half of females (Thornton and Young-Demarco 2001). Data from the

National Survey of Family Growth confirm this endorsement with two-thirds of both teenage

males and females agreeing that it is "alright" to live together without being married (Flanigan

and Smith 2005). In terms of expecting to cohabit in the future, nearly three-fifths of teens

express moderate to strong expectations of doing so, while half expect to both cohabit and to

marry (Manning, Longmore, and Giordano 2007).

Previous qualitative research has adopted an individual orientation in its examination of

the reasons or motives for cohabitation. This work indicates that young adults endorse

cohabitation as a way to test compatibility with one's partner, spend more time together, and

reduce housing costs (Sassler 2004, Smock et al. 2006). While such studies have provided

scholars with a more complete understanding of young adult cohabitors' motivations or reasons

for cohabiting (Sassler 2004, Smock et al. 2006), they have characterized these beliefs as

individual oriented and largely ignored the importance of the romantic partners, family and peers

in the development of views of cohabitation. Our study does not revisit young adults'

motivations for cohabiting, but instead, takes prior research a step further by exploring whether

and how a couple's social context is linked to why couples might choose to live together.

Conceptual Framework

Our conceptual framework combines social learning theory with an ecological

perspective. Social learning theory posits that individuals model their behavior on the behaviors

of others in their social environments (Bandura 1976). Further, individuals do not simply absorb

their social environment, but are more likely to replicate behaviors they view positively and

avoid behaviors they view negatively. The initial and most fundamental socialization

environment is the family. Social learning operates through the process of parental socialization

and observing parental relationships. Children learn how to form and maintain relationships from their parents' experiences. Yet, young adults do not simply transport the beliefs of their parents and, as a result, may not simply act in accordance with parental views or parental behaviors from childhood. Instead, young adults also integrate the beliefs of their romantic partners and peers into their own attitudes toward cohabitation. These attitudes are also shaped by broad social changes (i.e., the rise of cohabitation and more varied relationship experiences) (Heinz 2002). We extend the notion of socialization beyond the family and suggest that as couples enter adulthood, they may be more apt to carve meaning about cohabitation from other social contexts, such as through their interactions with their romantic partners and with their peers.

This approach is also consistent with Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner 1977, 1986). In our case, we apply his "nested" categorization of the social environment. First, the most proximal influence is the couple itself with their interactions influencing one another. The second level consists of groups of interrelationships and, in this paper, this level is comprised of families and peers. This general framework leads us to expect that partners, family, and peers will influence dating couples' views of cohabitation.

Romantic Partners

Dating partners' interactions and influence increase sharply as teenagers make the transition into adulthood (Giordano et al. 2008). Dating partners play a pivotal role in the formation, stability, and quality of romantic relationships (e.g., Sprecher and Felmlee 1997, Sprecher, Schmeeckle, and Felmlee 2006). However, this research has ignored how romantic partners influence views of cohabitation, a now common stage in relationship progression. Certainly, one's views about cohabitation are shaped by the beliefs and experiences of romantic

partners. Some couples may be directly engaging on this topic as they decide on the next step in their relationship. Several quantitative studies on cohabitation suggest that taking account of both cohabiting partners' perspectives is important and influences the transition to marriage (Brines and Joyner 1999, Carlson, McLanahan and England 2004, Manning and Smock 2002, Sassler and Schoen 1999, Smock and Manning 1997). In particular, Brown's (2000) work on cohabiting couple's relationship assessments and transitions to marriage provides substantive and empirical support for adopting a couple perspective. We extend her work by showcasing the value of using a couple's perspective among men and women who are in a dating relationship.

Family

A few studies have examined the association between family support and daters' relationship stability and quality (Felmlee 2001, Felmlee, Sprecher, and Bassin, 1990, Sprecher and Felmlee 1992). Dating college students indicate that perceived approval from family increases relationship stability (Felmlee 2001). Social network support of young dating couples over time was also consistently and strongly correlated with levels of couples' love, satisfaction, and commitment (Sprecher 1992). Overall, research suggests that the support of family members is beneficial to dating couples' relationships.

One way that families influence adult behavior is through socialization that supports specific types of families. While direct evidence of this type of socialization is generally lacking, empirical findings are consistent with this notion. Children raised in two biological parent families are more likely to marry and stay married than children from single-mother or divorced families (Amato 1996, Cherlin et al. 1995, McLanahan and Sandefur 1994, Wolfinger 2003). Findings such as these hold, even when scholars take economic circumstances into account, circumstances, which are also known to play a large role in union formation and

dissolution (e.g., Amato 1996, Axinn and Thornton 1992, South 2001, Webster, Orbuch, and House 1995, Wolfinger 2003). Evidence about cohabitation is less common; adolescents in cohabiting-parent families are more likely to expect to cohabit than their counterparts who never experienced parental cohabitation (Manning et al. 2007). Young adults whose parents cohabited have also been shown to have higher odds of cohabiting in adulthood than those whose parents did not cohabit (Lonardo et al. 2009; Sassler, Cunningham, and Lichter 2009).

There is some empirical support for the idea that families socialize their children by communicating approval or disapproval of cohabitation. Young adults are more likely to marry if their mothers have negative attitudes toward cohabitation compared to those whose mothers hold positive attitudes toward cohabitation (Axinn and Thornton 1993). Moreover, the effects of mothers' attitudes appear to operate independently of children's own views (Axinn and Thornton 1993). In settings where adult children are dependent on (coreside) parents into their late twenties (i.e., Italy), parental attitudes have a significant influence on adult children's union formation decisions (Billari and Rosina 2005, Rosina and Fraboni 2004).

Families may also influence cohabitation and marriage by providing or removing emotional and instrumental support for couples. A dating couple may make decisions about the progress of their relationship based on actual or expected responses of their parents. However, there are relatively few empirical studies on the topic. Cohabiting couples do not appear to enjoy the same *safety net* (e.g., social and instrumental support from parents) as married couples (Eggebeen 2005, Hao 1996, Marks and McLanahan 1993). One reason for the discrepancy may be that parents are less approving of the cohabiting relationships and may indirectly influence views of cohabitation by threatening or actually withdrawing support.

Religious doctrine is often passed down from parent to child and thus, is a form of family

socialization that establishes appropriate behavioral conduct for the child later in life. For example, studies have found that religious affiliation is significantly correlated with cohabitation and marriage entry. Adolescents' religiosity (e.g., frequency of attendance at religious services) is negatively associated with expectations to cohabit, and parental religiosity influences children's odds of cohabitation in adulthood (Lehrer 2000, Manning et al. 2007, Thornton et al. 1992). Even though cohabitation is a private arrangement (Cherlin 2004), it also signifies a sexual relationship outside the context of marriage, countering many religious doctrines about premarital sexual behavior. Consequently, a dating couple, or one partner, with a desire to uphold religious teachings (drawn from their parents) may feel internalized pressure to refrain from cohabitation, negatively assessing cohabitation because it goes against his or her own beliefs. Alternatively, one or both partners may refrain from cohabitation because of a fear of disappointing or alienating members of their established familial social networks.

Peers

While past research has recognized the importance of peer socialization in forming attitudes about and behaviors toward the opposite sex in adolescence (e.g., Brown 1999, Cavanaugh 2007, Collins et al. 1997, Connolly et al. 2000, Hartup, French, Laursen, Johnson, and Ogawa 1993), research on the peer influence among young adults is limited. Expected changes in relationships with peers deter men's desire to marry (South 1993), and among some subgroups (young African American males) peer groups may influence decisions regarding relationships (Anderson 1990). As discussed above, perceived approval from social networks (friends and families) is tied to heightened relationship stability and quality (Felmlee 2001, Felmlee, Sprecher and Bassin 1990, Sprecher 1992). In addition, peer socialization is a component of research focusing on how neighborhoods influence family behavior, often via

mechanisms such as contagion (peer influence) (Crane 1991, Leventhal and Brooks Gunn 2000, Jencks and Mayer 1990, Wilson 1987). The theoretical and substantive findings suggest that peers should have some influence on the nature and course of romantic relationships in early adulthood.

Given that cohabitation is an informal living arrangement and does not share the same strong societal supports as marriage, dating couples' attitudes toward cohabitation may be especially influenced by their peer networks. For example, empirical evidence on cohabitation suggests that peers do matter in Japan. A positive and direct link between knowing individuals who have cohabited with a respondent's positive attitudes toward cohabitation exists in Japan (Rindfuss et al. 2004). The authors assert that the high proportion of young adults who know cohabitors puts Japan on the cusp of major demographic change in union formation.

A more indirect way through which peers may influence cohabitation is through perceptions of peer experiences in cohabitation: Such perceptions may become "vicarious trials" for dating couples that are considering cohabitation (Nazio and Blossfeld 2003). Nazio and Blossfeld (2003) find that young German men and women rely on the experiences of peers (i.e., their same-age reference group) more so than they do on their parents' attitudes and behaviors. However, to date, little is known about the role of peers in shaping dating couples' views about living together. Our study will be the first to explore this issue in the United States.

CURRENT INVESTIGATION

Framed by social learning and ecological perspectives, we examine how social context influences noncohabiting, daters' views about cohabitation. Our primary focus is on understanding the self-reported influences of dating partners, families, and peers on dating couples' views about living together. Our contributions to the extant literature are three-fold.

First, while a few quantitative studies in other countries suggest that social networks play a pivotal role in the formation of attitudes toward cohabitation (Rindfuss et al. 2004, Nazzio and Blossfield 2003), our study examines how social networks influence perceptions of cohabitation in the United States. Second, researchers are beginning to make a concerted effort to examine couple-level data, not just one individual within a union. Our study extends this line of research by focusing on dating couples' attitudes, providing the perspective of both members within a dating union. Third, few studies have focused on adult dating couples, with relatively more attention being paid to adolescent dating experiences (or adult cohabiting or married couples). A focus on the attitudes of dating couples, those who are closest to making decisions about cohabitation, is informative about the sources of the rise in cohabitation and likely future trends in this living arrangement.

DATA AND METHODS

These data are drawn from the couple interviews of the Cohabitation and Marriage in America Project. Each member of a heterosexual couple was interviewed; for clarity, the pseudonyms we use for each member of a particular couple begin with the same letter (e.g. Mark and Mandy). Our sample consists of 20 dating couples or 40 individuals interviewed in 2005 and 2006. Participants were interviewed at a location of their choice, including a public location, such as a restaurant or library, or a more private venue, such as their home. Respondents and their partners were asked a variety of questions aimed to uncover attitudes regarding their acceptance of cohabitation (described below).

To qualify for the study, couples had to be dating for more than two months and less than three years. This criterion was used to ensure that couples had actually been together long enough for the relationship to be somewhat solidified but still able to answer questions

concerning the beginning of their relationship. Our flyers and advertisements called for dating couples, and since both members of the couple were required to participate, the sample is selective of those who mutually define themselves as in a dating relationship. Sexual exclusivity was not a requirement for the study and was not stated in the advertisements. Furthermore, none of the couples in the sample maintained "casual" or purely sexual relationships. All of the respondents who were interviewed also had a partner interview.

The respondents live in the general area of Toledo, Ohio. The population of Toledo is statistically similar to the distribution of the U.S. population in regards to race, marital status, education, and income. We recruited our sample through personal contacts, referrals, advertising in local newspapers, and by distributing flyers to local stores (i.e., laundry mats, grocery stores, discount stores, etc.). These recruitment techniques do not result in a random sample and are not representative of the population. As a result, our findings are not generalizable; however, the recruitment techniques did allow us to reach a broad range of participants and adult daters who are often absent in union formation studies. The respondent and their partner also received a total of $80.00 ($40.00 each) for their participation in the study.

Table 1 illustrates the demographic characteristics of the 40 dating individuals ranging in age from 19-35 years. Individuals are represented as part of a couple and then divided by gender. Thus, the couple, female, and male percentages are represented for age, race/ethnicity, education, school status, and personal income. For example, 55% of all the respondents and their partners interviewed in the sample (22 out of 40 individuals) were between the ages of 19-22, while 60% of the women interviewed (12 out of 20 female respondents) and 50% of the men (10 out of 20 of their male partners) were in the same age category during the time of interview. The average age for both male and females was 24 years old. Twenty percent of the sample

identified as black, 62.5 percent identified as white, 15 percent identified as Hispanic, and 2.5 percent identified as Native American. These percentages approximate the population of the city of Toledo where 23.41 percent of the population is black, 70.16 percent is white, 5.5 percent is Hispanic, and .36 percent is Native American. The majority of individuals earned less than $20,000 per year. While the same is true for the majority of female respondents, the majority of male partners earned $20-$40,000 per year. In terms of education, 42.5 percent of individuals had had some technical or college experience. Female respondents were more highly educated than their male counterparts. Interestingly, on average, females reported having been in their current relationship for two months longer than their male partners.

On average, these interviews lasted roughly an hour, and the average length of the interviews was about 54 single-spaced transcribed pages. We interviewed each member of the couple separately using semi-structured interview techniques. These techniques provide the same basic questions to each respondent, but allow the interviewer to pursue varied lines of inquiry and probe for more information. In-depth interviews are an excellent method for exploring perceptions, behavior, and cognitive justifications while providing a greater level of detail than closed-ended survey questions. In short, semi-structured interviews attempt to understand complex social behaviors, without imposing restrictive categories that may prematurely limit not only the inquiry, but also the answers (Fontana and Frey 1994).

We proceeded with coding by utilizing a list of categories that were already derived from responses gathered from past qualitative interviews and focus groups from the project. We used a computer program, Atlas/ti, to aid in our data management and analyses. The program assists with coding and analysis of qualitative data (Weitzman, 1999) and provides tools to manage, store, extract, compare, explore, and reassemble meaningful pieces of data flexibly and

systematically. A key part of our analysis was the development of our coding scheme; it was

Age	Couple Percent	Female Percent	Male Percent
19-22	55	60	50
23-26	20	20	20
27-30	13	15	10
31-35	13	5	20
Race/Ethnicity			
Black	20	15	25
White	63	70	55
Hispanic	15	15	15
Native American	3	0	5
Education			
Less than High School	13	0	25
High School or G.E.D	30	25	35
Technical or Some College	43	60	25
College Graduate	15	15	15
School Status			
Attending school and working full-time	18	30	5
Attending school and working part-time	10	15	5
Not attending school, but working full-time	28	15	40
Not attending school, but working part-time	23	10	35
Attending school and unemployed/not in labor force	10	15	5
Not Attending school and unemployed/not in labor force	13	15	10
Personal Income			
Unemployed/Not in Labor Force	20	30	10
Less than $20,000	45	55	35
$20,000-$40,000	25	10	40
More than $40,000	8	5	10
N/A	3	0	5
Average Reported Monthly Duration of Relationship		18	15
Prior Cohabitation Experience		30	35
N	40	20	20

Table 1. Socio-demographic Characteristics of Male and Female Daters

intensive and interactive. Coding applies a meaning or interpretation to textual data from the

interviews. We created coding categories and marked segments of the data with these codes. A

single paragraph or sentence may have one code or several, and these may be overlapping with

other text segments. We initially set up a coding scheme based on the interview and guide and

then revised the scheme based on content from the interviews. Each author read a subset of

transcripts, coding them independently. We then examined *intercoder reliability* by discussing

and comparing the interviews we coded individually. Although we had few interpretive

disagreements, we explored and discussed the meaning of minor discrepancies in our interpretations, eventually generating a coding scheme capturing our consensus on the issues.

Our analyses involved searching for responses to queries about how couples felt family and friends influenced their dating relationship, as well as their views of cohabitation. For example, couples were asked what family and friends thought of their relationship, whether and in what ways their family pressured them to marry, and the types of emotional or financial support from family or friends. To explore how couples' view cohabitation, they were also asked why they do or do not "think cohabitation is a generally a good idea for couples?" We documented the connections couples made between their views of cohabitation and the beliefs or behaviors of their partner, family, and peer networks. We organize our results around several emergent themes regarding different aspects of social networks (family and peer socialization) and how they influence evaluations of cohabitation. We provide representative quotations to illustrate each theme. The reported partner influence on views of cohabitation is included in each section as couple data are presented.

RESULTS

Family

The influence of family, particularly one's parents during childhood, has a profound influence on a young adult's view of cohabitation. Approximately 43% of respondents reported that their older family members influenced their attitudes toward cohabitation (8 men and 9 women). Respondents were influenced by their family through the following four ways: direct communication, social modeling, familial religious beliefs, and parental economic support.

Some respondents report that their parents communicated to them the "right" way of maintaining relationships. For example, Sylvia, a 20-year-old woman, who has been dating

Sebastian for about a year and a half, believes that cohabitation is not an adequate substitution for marriage and has discussed how she feels about cohabiting with Sebastian. She states, "[We talked about] umm, umm, how we can really get to know each other, wake up in the morning with each other, go to sleep with the person." For Sylvia, cohabitation is a step closer to the "highest level," which is marriage. She reports, "By you getting married, you giving your life to the other person. And you can live with a person all you want to without ever making a big commitment like that—like, to vow to love each other forever and just doing it the right way." Sylvia says that she learned the "right way of doing things" from her "mama." She explains that her mother did not marry Sylvia's father, and as her mother got older, she instilled in Sylvia her own religious belief that "it [marriage] is the right way." Sylvia's mother taught her that cohabitation is not a substitute for marriage; therefore, she would only cohabit with an expectation of eventually marrying her partner. When asked why her mother feels this way about cohabitation, Sylvia states, "'Cause she's a Christian, and she believes it's fornicating if you're not married. So, the best way to do it is to get married." Sylvia is clearly aware of her mother's beliefs and will comply with her wishes.

Sylvia's boyfriend Sebastian also feels that cohabitation is a good way to learn about one's partner and see if a couple is compatible. He wants to marry one day. Sebastian states, "I mean, you can see what it's like to live with somebody, and maybe you might not want to live with nobody no more. You probably just want to live with yourself." When asked if he knows anyone who has cohabited, Sebastian continues, "See they [Sebastian's friends] will move in with 'em [their girlfriends], but they will have an argument and be told to get out, but they come back. So it's like they argue, but they make up. And then they argue, but then they make up." Although Sylvia and Sebastian have similar opinions regarding cohabitation, they cite different

sources of influence. While Sylvia relies on her mother's advice, Sebastian relies on his peers' experiences (discussed in more detail below).

Allan is 27 years old and has been dating his girlfriend Anne for almost a year. When asked whether he thinks cohabitation is a good idea, he states, "Oh yeah, definitely." Allan explains that something his great-grandmother said always "stuck" with him throughout his life:

"My great grandma said you got to test drive the car before you buy it. So, cohabitation is a good way to really get to know someone. You know? 'Cause you're not just seeing 'em a few times a week. You're seeing 'em on a daily basis and all the little, all the little things come out."

Anne has cohabited with three men prior to dating Allan and is worried that her negative experiences may affect her future cohabitation plans. She explains that she is "afraid" to cohabit with Allan because "what if he turns out to be completely different once you live with him? I'm afraid that maybe all my other relationships have t[a]inted me, you know, made me too cautious. Maybe I read into it too much. You know? It's like that one time he'll leave something on the floor. I'll be like, I'm not picking up after you all the time." Even though Anne does have reservations about cohabiting again, she does not refer to family as a source of influence on her views. She agrees with Allan that cohabitation is the best way to learn about one's partner and states, "How are you going to find a life mate if you don't live with that person?" Her beliefs are based on her past personal experience.

Tammy is 19 years old and has been dating her boyfriend Tyler for about nine months. The couple lived together temporarily during the summer before the interview. Although Tammy had no qualms about cohabiting with Tyler for a short time (until he could move into his other apartment), both families' influences have made her somewhat leary about cohabiting for the long-term. Tammy states, "If I were to permanently move in with him [Tyler], we would have to definitely know each other for a couple years… I don't think my parents would [have

approved]… I don't think his parents would have approved. I don't think his mother would have [approved]. Tyler confirms that his mother is disapproving about cohabitation. When asked how his mother reacted to him living with Tammy for a summer, Tyler replies, "Well, actually my mom really didn't know… I know if my mom probably knew if we were living together, I'd have to hear something from her." He asserts that his mother's religious beliefs prompted him to keep his short-term cohabitation from her. Tyler continues, "my mom's like religious… I'd have to go through that. And I really didn't want to hear it this summer." Tyler reports that his mother's beliefs have influenced his behavior and he is careful about what he tells her about Tammy. Both Tammy and Tyler feel that cohabitation is a big commitment that may happen for them sometime in their distant future, but for now, they prefer to respect their parents' wishes.

Patricia has been dating Peter for almost a year and has reservations about cohabitation. Her reservations stem, in part, from how she has been raised and the lack of success she sees in cohabiting relationships of family and friends. When asked about her evaluations of cohabitation, Patricia states, "I really don't know, because on the one hand I've been told for my whole life that it's not [a good idea]. On the other hand, it doesn't seem to be like it's a bad thing." Patricia reports that cohabitation is "the benefit of marriage without being married" and that most of the cohabiting couples she knows "maintain separate checking accounts, separate everything," but still "live together and just enjoy sex." Patricia says that she is just "not that way" and is not sure that she could cohabit. Patricia acknowledges that she knows family and friends who have cohabited … mostly… I mean eighty percent of the time it doesn't work out for them." Patricia is an excellent example of an adult exerting her own independence by not following the religious guidelines set forth by her family. Patricia knows that her father would never accept her cohabiting with Peter because of their religion, but Patricia still wants to

cohabit. She states, "I mean, we'd have to know exactly somewhere down the line why we're doing this [cohabit] for. You know? 'Cause if it's just for the convenience that it'll be cheaper to live, no. I'm not gonna do that. It's for something, you know, that possibility of we're gonna be together forever and, you know, get married and yada, yada." She reports that cohabitation is the next step in her relationship with Peter, and it would bring them closer to marriage. When asked if he would consider cohabiting with Patricia, Peter replies, "It probably wouldn't happen because I think her perception would be, okay we've moved in together and now we're gonna get married. So, it probably wouldn't be the best option at this point." While religion plays an important part in Patricia's views about cohabitation, Peter is not religious and says nothing about religion affecting his desire (or lack of desire) to cohabit with Patricia. Thus, the influence of religion may be complex and even though parents hold strong religious beliefs that do not support cohabitation, young adults often decide to make their own decisions.

Parental divorce seems to be related to *respondents c*oncerns about divorce. Out of the 20 dating couples, only two couples were both raised by their biological parents. Respondents who experienced a parental divorce often articulated deeper anxieties regarding their future marriages and concerns that they might follow in their parents' footsteps. Some daters were so negatively affected by their parents' divorce they reported never wanting to marry, one respondent stating, "…without marriage, you don't have divorce."

Kevin and Kelly are an example of a couple whose partner's fear of divorce and marriage has seriously influenced their future together. Kevin is 29 years old and has been dating Kelly for over three years. Kevin admits that his severe fear of divorce has lead to major problems in the couple's relationship. We interviewed the couple shortly after Kevin asked Kelly to move out of their apartment; however, the couple did not break up, and continue to date. Kevin states,

"That [my parent's divorce] has really left quite a lasting effect on me. It's really affected how I feel about relationships. I'm pretty crazy about her [Kelly], and I love her. But on the other hand, the institution of marriage leaves a very, very sour taste in my mouth." Although Kevin clearly connects his parent's divorce to his anxieties about marriage within his current relationship,

> "I guess my reservations still come from the fact that I came from a family that was just very, very dysfunctional… when you constantly have negative reinforcement after negative reinforcement after negative reinforcement of the idea of marriage - and especially family… that's another big issue. Marriage and children are the two issues that I have got very negative associations with."

He also cites the influence of his social networks on why part of him does not want to marry. He states, "Also just because of the fact that I know very few happily married people."

While Kelly's parents are still together, they are unhappy and fight constantly. Yet according to Kelly, neither parent feels divorce is an option in their relationship. Kelly has taken her parent's negative marital experience and refusal to divorce and has applied it to her relationships with men. She states,

> "They're [Kelly's parents] always arguing or they're not talking to each other. Well if you're not happy, leave. What kind of quality of life do you have if you're with somebody that you can't stand and you feel like you're just stuck with this person? That's not living to me. That's not being happy, when you feel like you're stuck with somebody. You should want to be with the person that you're married to. I truly think that. I don't see divorce as a bad thing at all. You know? It's just, it didn't work out."

Since Kelly does not see divorce as implicitly negative and is sure about her feelings for Kevin, she viewed her cohabitation with him as a step toward eventual marriage. Kelly states, "I'm not…living with, like, I didn't just live with Kevin to test it out. I lived with him because I knew he was gonna move away, and if we didn't make some kind of a decision like that that we would lose each other." Obviously the influence of this couple's family and concerns about divorce

have had a serious effect on their lives, attitudes, decisions, behaviors, and most likely their future together.

A more common response to parental divorce is the notion that one can learn from their parent's mistakes. Indeed, most daters who experienced a childhood divorce want to marry and do everything in their power to create happy and long-lasting marriages. For example, Natasha, a 22-year-old woman, who has been dating Nick for slightly over a year, says that her parent's divorce taught her an important life "lesson" about marriage and how to make her future marital relationship successful. She states,

> "…I think that the whole divorce, the whole separation of my parents taught me how and what to do and what not to do in my relationship. I see it as a kind of lesson… I'm not saying they ruined my childhood or anything. Like, that's their life. That was their decision. But, I know what I'm not gonna do in my marriage, you know. Like, I think that helped me a lot. Like, actually their failure of marriage is probably gonna help me to maintain my marriage."

Natasha reports that cohabitation "should be something that every couple should do before they get married" and explains that cohabitation is "kinda practice being married." She continues, "You're not married yet. You don't have that big commitment yet, like the thing on the paper and all. But, we [Nick and I] pretty much live like a married couple, you know. Like, we have, we share everything."

Nick's parents never divorced, but his close friend and ex-girlfriend's parents did divorce. Nick says that knowing these people's experiences make him "more careful about stuff and about situations, [but] it's not like I walk on egg shells. Nick's friend used to "give him speeches all the time" about how "marriage doesn't work and everything" and how "marriage is such a disposable thing now anyways." But Nick refutes his friend's opinion by stating that "if people care about [their partner] as much as I care about her [Natasha], I guess they should

[marry]. There's not too much to worry about… It's just, it's not a big worry. I don't worry that

I'm ever gonna get divorced if we get married." When asked about cohabitation, Nick responds,

> "I don't think there's any sense in really getting married if you've never even lived together. It's like signing a lifelong lease and never having checked out the place…. It's [cohabitation] a step towards marriage. It's a step that I think people should take."

Only four respondents mentioned that their parents had cohabited, thus parental

cohabitation was a relatively uncommon occurrence for this dating sample. However, for those

who had cohabiting parents, they usually had positive relationships with their parents' cohabiting

spouse. Wynona is a 19-year-old woman whose parents divorced when she was a child. During

her childhood, Wynona's father remarried, while her mother lived with her boyfriend and had a

child with him. Wynona states, "She [Wynona's mother] had, a boyfriend who lived here—

which is my little sister's father. And he moved out not too long ago—about eight years. Well, I

guess it is a while ago, about eight years ago. And, umm, I mean I loved him too. He's still like

family, even though we're not together." Similarly, Olivia is 20 years old and has been dating

23-year-old Oliver for four months. Olivia reports that when she was 16, her mother cohabited

with her stepfather for a short time before the couple married. She states,

> "I wasn't happy about that. Because she [Olivia's mother] kind of, she's always been kind of strict mom. And I always thought she would look down upon something like that [cohabitation]. And so when she did that, it really pissed me off. 'Cause, you know, she was always so strict with me about how, you know, you go to school, you pay attention, you get good grades, you go to college, then you get a good job, then you get married, and stuff like that."

Olivia asserts that she did not realize cohabitation was an option in her own life until her mother

lived with her stepfather before marriage. Olivia states, "I guess I grew up thinking that there

was only one way. Until I've gotten older, and I've realized that not everybody grew up like I

did {LAUGH}." Although, it is obvious that Olivia's views of cohabitation were affected by her

mother's cohabitation, overall, parental cohabitation experiences were not often mentioned when

respondents discussed their own cohabitation plans. Parental divorce, not cohabitation, seems to be the poignant family transition.

Some respondents were raised in religious households, thus their religious beliefs have been passed down to them from their parents. These respondents have internalized these religious beliefs and as a result, do not feel cohabitation would have a positive affect on their dating relationships. For example, Bella, a 23-year-old woman who has been dating 33-year-old Bobby for over three years, states that she would not cohabit before marriage because "…it's just Bible principles. I believe in marriage as being an institution, as what you should do." Bella's partner Bobby acknowledges Bella's religious beliefs and says, "I think it would really impart on her beliefs. You know what I mean, on how people should live and stay and get along before they're married, you know. She believes you shouldn't live together. I support that. I'm kinda believing her too." Thus, Bobby's religious justification for not cohabiting is weaker than Bella's; however, her views appear to carry more weight, consequently influencing his views of cohabitation.

Even though respondents are adults, their parents' religious views matter and are cited as a reason for not cohabiting, despite their own religious beliefs. For example, Jenna and James have been dating for approximately three years, and neither will cohabit because of their parents' religious values. Jenna states that she and her boyfriend do not consider cohabiting with one another because "we both feel that it's a family belief thing, you know, get married and then live together. I know his parents are Baptists and so are mine, so it's the belief that mixes in too." Similarly, James says, "I'm not a religious person, but I certainly respect that idea. Umm, and I know her parents are religious. My parents are somewhat religious. So, umm, just to keep things kosher is seems like a good idea just with our parents. Umm, so yeah." Religion can be

the reason that families do not support cohabitation, and even if a couple does not embrace the family norm, they may respect their family's views and avoid cohabitation. Jenna respects her parent's beliefs, and James refers to their beliefs in his own responses about cohabiting with Jenna.

Although it was not commonly stated, parental instrumental support can effect whether or not cohabitation is a viable option for a couple and their evaluation of cohabitation. One way that parents can influence their children's decisions to cohabit is through economic control. Lukas, a 20 year old, has dated Linda for over three years. During his interview, Lukas expresses apprehension regarding what Linda's parents think about the couple cohabiting and worries that they would pull their daughter's financial support. Lukas states, "Her parents don't really agree on it [cohabitation], and they're paying for her schooling. So, if she goes against them, they might say, well we're not paying for schooling. And then she's stuck paying for it." Linda corroborates Lukas's interpretation of the situation, "we really don't stay together that much for that reason."

Peers

As cohabitation increases, the existence and increasing visibility of this group has an effect on daters' perceptions of cohabitation. Three-fourths (17 men and 13 women) of the dating couples refer to their peer networks' cohabiting experiences as a way to help them shape their own opinion of cohabitation. Dating couples often describe a connection between recalling the positive or negative cohabitation experiences of friends and acquaintances and their own assessments of cohabitation. For example, Randy is 22 years old and has been dating 26-year-old Robin for almost seven months. Randy reports that his cousin and his cousin's girlfriend "got their own place" and "so far they're doing good and everything." Randy wants to cohabit in part

because of the example his cousin has set for him. Randy states, "I want to be where they're at. You know what I mean? I want to have my own place and all my own stuff." Although Randy is an example of a respondent who is obviously influenced by the positive cohabitation experience of one of his peers, this is not a typical response. While forty percent of respondents (ten men and six women) knew friends or same-age family members who were currently or previously in cohabiting relationships that they described positively (i.e., high quality, low conflict, stable, or currently married), they did not reference these relationships when describing their views of cohabitation.

A more common narrative is for respondents to focus on and apply their peers' negative experiences with cohabitation when considering cohabitation in their current dating relationships. We characterize dating couples' responses to their friends' relationships in two ways: observe the negative consequences of cohabitation in their friends' relationships and decide not to cohabit or observe negative relationships and learn from their mistakes. While some couples share similar views of cohabitation, there is not always concordance in their assessments of cohabitation.

For example, Fiona and Frank have witnessed their friends' enter cohabiting relationships and generally agree that there are negative consequences connected to cohabitation. Fiona and Frank have been dating for roughly two years. Both Fiona and Frank have known people in bad cohabiting relationships and draw from those experiences to illuminate their current cohabitation decisions. When asked whether cohabitation has worked out for the people she knows, Fiona states, "Not really that good. I think I'm like the only one that's with my boyfriend, like my daughter's dad. The other ones, they'd fight and argue and not get along anymore." The interviewer probes by asking Fiona if such experiences influence her relationship with Frank.

Fiona responds, "I think about it. I think that I don't want to go through that. I try and make the best out of it so we stay together." Fiona reports that such negative cohabitation experiences even influence how she interacts with her boyfriend. "I try not to argue so much. I try to get along with him, stuff like that. Basically, I just try to stay together by not arguing as much, 'cause that makes most people split up out of the relationship..." Frank reports a similar outlook on cohabitation in his interview. He says that he knows "a lot of people" who cohabit, "mostly friends," and all of those relationships have worked out "for the worst." When asked how these experiences influence his relationship with his girlfriend, Frank states, "It makes me not want to run right out and do the same thing [cohabit]. 'Cause I'm looking to better my life, not to argue and fight and nitpick all day long."

While Fiona and Frank agree that cohabitation has rarely produced happy couples within their social networks, Mandy and Mark have differing experiences and opinions regarding the people they know who have cohabited. Mandy is 20 years old and has been dating 22-year-old Mark for almost four months. She attributes her negative view of cohabitation to the unfavorable experiences of the cohabitors she has known. Mandy asserts that she would only cohabit once she was married. "Everyone that I've seen that is divorced, like most of them lived together before they were married. It just seemed like it hurt their relationship and I would never do it." Mandy further explains her view by stating,

> "Yeah, I think in the interest of the relationship, I do think that it [cohabitation] is not [a good idea]. It just seems like, from what I've seen, to usually be a bad idea. Because I just, I've never seen anyone come out of it better than they went in."

Mandy's boyfriend Mark reports knowing two couples who have both had positive experiences with cohabitation, in that both couples are still "in love." In addition, Mark feels that cohabitation can act as a testing ground for one's marriage. However, Mark's personal

experience with cohabitation was very negative and seems to be a factor in his consideration of cohabitation in the future. Like Mandy, who would only cohabit once she was married, Mark expresses a desire for commitment from his partner before cohabiting again. When Mark is asked if he would cohabit with Mandy, he replies,

> "I just couldn't do it [cohabitation] without, again anyway… I would have to know that there's a chance that this could be forever before I did something like that… it was so hard to get away from it the last time. If I ever had to do it again… I don't want to go through that [my prior cohabitation] again."

Mark's statements suggest that he views cohabitation as both a way to test his relationship and as a union he would avoid if he did not consider it as the first step toward marriage. Without this "chance of forever," Mark would not consider cohabiting with Mandy. Both members of the couple are quite wary about cohabitation; Mark's views stem from his own personal experiences, while Mandy's views seem to be based on her observations of how cohabitation has influenced relationships.

Some respondents, especially those who have not experienced cohabitation themselves, fear what cohabitation will be like and how their partner will react to such a living situation. These respondents are especially reliant on the experiences of the people in their social networks who help them form opinions about cohabitation. For example, Wynona and William are 19 years old and have dated "off and on" for almost four years. Wynona recalls the experience of her best friend who was living with her boyfriend. Wynona describes her friend's cohabiting relationship:

> "They were all in love at first. But they got tired of each other. She would go to work and go to school, and then just come back to seeing him. They'd be there all day together, and they got tired of each other and annoyed with each other and frustrated. And they fight all the time now. I mean, but they love each other. But I guess, I don't know. It's just that they need their space in a way."

Wynona describes her friend's decision to cohabit with her boyfriend as "so early" in their

relationship and credits the couple's relationship difficulties to them not knowing "how to really do that [cohabit]." Wynona is pessimistic about the eventual outcome of her friend's relationship, "It's like its getting old. So I think they're gonna break up too." Furthermore, Wynona indicates that her friend's experience scares her. She states, "I don't want to live with William and then, I don't know, he gets tired of me because he's like, oh this isn't what I signed up for." While Wynona reports strong misgivings regarding cohabitation with William due to her friend's experience, William does not know anyone who has cohabited, thus reporting no negative cohabitation experiences within his social network. William very much wants to live with Wynona and his only prerequisite to doing so is his desire to find a job before renting an apartment.

Some daters respond to negative peer influences with more optimism and form opinions about the conditions under which cohabitation will work. Helen and Harry, who have been dating for almost nine months, both agree that the duration of their current relationship is a major factor in their eventual cohabitation plans. Helen reports that she has a friend who is cohabiting and pregnant. Helen feels that if her friend had waited and not rushed the relationship, perhaps things could have been different in her life. Helen states,

> "I think if they [a couple] take it slow. Like if they first meet and they move in together, I don't think that's gonna work out. I mean, it could. But it's not likely. If they take time to get to know each other and when they move in together they just take it gradually, then I think it's good that they do that."

When asked to define "slow" in the context of a dating relationship, Helen responds, "Slow to me is like waiting like six months to move in together… [six months] from the moment you start dating." Harry, a 20-year-old man, only knows one friend who cohabited and that cohabitation "worked out." He echoes many of the thoughts and feelings that Helen has in regards to the duration of a dating relationship and cohabitation. Harry states, "It depends on how far they [a

couple] are in the relationship. They shouldn't like, like as soon as they start dating, a week later just move in. 'Cause that's like way too fast." Harry continues by describing his own relationship as the ideal context for cohabitation. Harry states, "…like I said, for us as an example, it's pretty good 'cause nine months is definitely long enough to know if you know the person well enough. That's okay to move in. But if it's like the next day or the week, then it's a little too crazy and it's not gonna last." Although Helen and Harry see the benefits of cohabitation (when done in a proper time frame) and wish to cohabit, they chose not to because the costs of the cohabitation surpassed the perceived benefits.

Another way dating couples learn from their friends' relationships is through their friends' divorce experiences.   Knowing friends who have divorced has influenced some daters' perceptions of cohabitation. Wynona is an example of a dater who looks at the people in her peer networks, sees her friends divorcing, and wants to take steps to ensure that her relationship with William will not end with a similar outcome. To Wynona, cohabitation, if done in the proper context (as a precursor for marriage), can be an effective step in preventing divorce. Wynona's parents divorced, but since she was so young at the time, she reports that it never really affected her. However, when she is asked if knowing divorced couples has affected her, she responds,

> "Yeah. I want to live with him [William] before I even get there [marriage]. I want to live with him and be together for a while—which we have. Live together, see how each other are, you know what I'm saying, on a day-to-day basis. And, what to expect in the future and get used to…I mean, we've been together for a long time now. I have known him for a long time or whatever. But when you live with somebody, it's a whole different ballgame. I'm afraid of what could happen. When I get married, I want it to happen one time, once. That's it. I just want to do it one time. I don't want to be divorced and looking for another one and going through all that. No. I don't want to do that. I just want to do it the one time, the perfect guy, and that's it."

William is aware of the risk of divorce, "I seen what divorce do to people. And that ain't a cute

sight." William believes cohabitation with Wynona would strengthen their relationship and reduce conflict surrounding their trust and infidelity issues. Cohabitation will not be a test of their relationship but build their relationship because "we'll always be together."

Similarly, Kevin would never marry someone without cohabiting first. However, it is very important for him to test his compatibility with his partner before marriage. In an attempt to illustrate his point, cites the marital relationship of a friend:

> "I had a friend who got married right out of high school… They were this nice Christian couple and everything, so they did what other Christian horny teenagers do and they got married. That was the only way they could consummate, you know, get the rocks off. So they did; they moved in, but they didn't live together prior. And within three years, sure enough, it blew up in their face… I'm just saying you have to know what you're getting into and if you're compatible before you actually marry somebody."

As discussed above, Kevin knows few happily married couples and his views of cohabitation are based in part on the negative experiences of his friends and family.

DISCUSSION

Young adults exert independence in their own romantic relationships and form their own attitudes about their future union formation options. However, as the results of this study show, individuals in dating unions do not exist in a social vacuum and partner, family, and peer influences in their day-to-day interactions matter. Consequently, social networks clearly influence the formation of daters' attitudes towards cohabitation. This investigation identifies the specific social networks that have the greatest influence on daters' views of cohabitation, and more importantly, allows daters themselves to explain how these networks have affected their perceptions.

Even though our sample consists of young adults, the interviews reveal the powerful influence of family on adult daters' views of cohabitation. We find that family socialization can occur through a variety of mechanisms, which include parental advice to a child, communicated

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parental values, parental financial control, or simply through a child's concern that their marital union will end in dissolution, like their parents before them.

Religious socialization is closely linked to family influence, and out of respect for their parents' religious beliefs (i.e., negative views of cohabitation), many respondents avoid cohabitation regardless of their own personal views. However, one complication to family socialization is that young adults do not always follow their parents' views and form their own opinions regarding cohabitation outside their familial network. Furthermore, the couple interviews reveal how one partner's religious beliefs about marriage or cohabitation can influence the attitudes and views of the other partner. In a sense, if one partner felt strongly about cohabitation (i.e., strong negative feelings rooted in religion), their views seemed to carry more weight in the dating relationship. Thus, simply knowing the religious views of one member of a couple may not be sufficient to fully understand how religion influences a couple's attitudes.

A widely stated source of influence is peers. Respondents appear to use the *vicarious trials* of their peer networks to judge whether cohabitation will help or hurt their own relationship. The failings of other peer relationships are an often-cited reason to not cohabit, but typically, couples seem optimistic about their relationship prospects and are inclined to create an exception for their own "unique" situation. Couples feel that their dating relationship or situation differs from that of their peers because they plan to enter cohabitation after a long period of getting to know one another or because they plan to marry. Thus, these dating couples think that their cohabitations will result in a happy and stable marital union. By not repeating the perceived mistakes of their peer networks (i.e., cohabiting too soon or living together for reasons other than mutual affection or eventual matrimony), their relationship outcomes will differ as

well.

A pervasive theme throughout this study is a concern about divorce, and we observe it operating specifically through both family and peer socialization. We find parental divorce can create awareness about the vulnerability of marriage and generate powerful anxieties within a child that follow him/her into adulthood. These anxieties can prevent a young dater from seeing marriage and family in a positive light. Instead of viewing marital commitment as stable and secure happiness, some respondents view it as being trapped in an unhappy union, or worse, being happily married for a short time before an inevitable divorce. These respondents enter the courtship process filled with trepidation. Cohabitation can be a way to assuage these fears, at least for a short time. On the other hand, some children of divorce see their parents' mistakes as lessons-learned on how "not to act" in a marital union and look optimistically upon their future marriages. They also are positively disposed toward cohabitation as a way to practice or prepare for marriage.

While the influence of the parental divorce is deep, the influence of peer divorce is broad. It simply reinforces what some daters already think. Divorce can be bad, it hurts everyone it touches, and it is ubiquitous. Therefore, daters ask themselves, what are these people doing and what can I do differently? Some daters see a positive correlation between cohabitation and divorce in the peer networks that surrounded them, while others still maintain that cohabitation is a practical way to protect against divorce. Thus, young adults look at the world around them for guidance on how to conduct their own relationships.

This study illustrates the importance of considering the couple perspective. Dating partners do influence one another's perceptions of cohabitation; however, there are not numerous specific and direct reports of this influence. The small number of reports suggests there are

selection processes operating where similarly minded respondents and partners choose one another as a boyfriend or girlfriend. At the same time, as the relationship progresses, each member's views about cohabitation emerge. We find dating partners' desires to *not* cohabit seem to trump more ambivalent feelings about cohabitation. Respondents' views and plans for cohabitation can be conditioned by their dating partner or are relationship-specific. In other words, they may not cohabit with this partner, although they would with someone else. Even when couples share similar views, the reasons and sources of their views may vary (i.e., stem from negative peer associations or from negative personal experiences).

Our results suggest that social context influences daters' views of cohabitation and, by extension, their views of marriage and divorce. Although in-depth interviewing techniques provide insight into how social networks affect couples' attitude formation, these results may not be generalized to the entire U.S. population because they are based on a sample of 20 respondents and their partners. Additionally, the sample may be biased because couples with extremely negative relationship dynamics may have been reluctant to participate. However, a number of dating couples discussed very distressing aspects of their union, including infidelity concerns and doubts regarding the future of their relationship. Even though our findings are limited to couples' experiences in one metropolitan area, we expect that the importance of social influence may be similar in other cities and among a broader spectrum of couples. These qualitative data provide both theoretical and measurement contributions to further research on cohabitation and more broadly, research on union formation and relationship stability. The findings of this study contribute to Bronfenbrenner's approach by presenting the ways or mechanisms through which context could potentially influence behavior. Our work also address the need to extend social learning theories by recognizing that individuals are not totally passive

when embedded within their social networks. Couples interpret and form meaning through their interactions with others. Thus, we find that individual-based theories and methods may be limited. Our couple interviews showcase the importance of a partner's personal views about cohabitation. This partner influence stems, not only from their role in the current relationship, but also from partners bringing their own biographies and experiences into the relationship. Prior empirical studies in the United States seldom directly consider social context in their work; our findings, along with studies based in other countries on social influence, suggest that large-scale surveys should incorporate new measures aimed to capture the potential influence of social context on attitude formation. We hope this paper is one of many studies on young adults in relationships, those closest to forming co-residential unions, to help move our understanding of union formation forward.

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